

Every Nigger Is a Star: Reimagining Blackness from Post–Civil Rights America to the Postindependence Caribbean

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Abstract

In 1974 the film Every Nigger Is a Star, produced in Jamaica by Caribbean-born blaxploitation star Calvin Lockhart and shot by noted African American filmmaker William Greaves, was released in Kingston and in Nassau, Bahamas. This article explores this lost film's production, distribution, disappearance, and unexpected but extensive transatlantic afterlives through the work of visual artists Dave Smith, Barkley L. Hendricks, Nelson Stevens, and Jae Jarrell. Produced in the ideological crosshairs of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, post–civil rights debates in the United States around the signification and resignification of the word nigger, blaxploitation filmmaking, and the distribution of these films in the postindependence Caribbean, records indicate the film was a sincere attempt by Lockhart to document black creativity in expansive ways. While the film failed to live up to its producer's expectations, I argue that the photography, paintings, and music drawn from its creation, exhibition, and infectious soundtrack performed the political and cultural work within the diaspora that the film perhaps could not.

Popular Culture and the Democratization of Blackness

The 1970s was a decade where the meaning of blackness was democratized. No longer were race leaders from the respectable black middle class seen as the defining voices of blackness in America, and no longer did black power belong to a precious few. Instead, those who claimed and chose to define blackness as well as embody it moved in and through “the talented tenth,” transcending class and geographies, while riding an unprecedented

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and powerful wave of access to popular culture in order to fashion a broader spectrum of blackness. Beyond “Negro” and “Colored,” “Black” offered something unquantifiable and powerful: the power of authorship; the power of self-making and self-actualization; the power of visibility expressed in art, language, and the performance of black style.

This power to shift, remake, and expand signification seemed, for a time, to stop short at the word *nigger*. To some, *nigger* is an intransigent word. It is a word that newly declared black folk in the Black Arts Movement *seemed* unable to resignify in the same way as “bad” and “black.” Over time and space, it had arguably come to represent the ultimate objectifier—a word that dehumanized and enacted “thingness”—a conceptualization that fixed a racialized dichotomy between subject and object in ways no other word could.

As an art historian, I have always been fascinated by Martin Heidegger’s discussion of “thingness” or “thingification” in relation to fine art¹ as well as Roland Barthes’s well-known theorization of signification, but *nigger* seemed to be a bloated word that existed just beyond these philosophical approaches to art and visual culture.² The word, like the violence it enacts, reenacts, or echoes, resists representation. However, as the artist Barkley L. Hendricks reminded me, in 1970s black America there was an important difference between the enunciated and written word *niggah* and *nigger*.³ What Hendricks points to is a feature of the word where, drawing on the work of David Joselit on the surrealism of Marcel Duchamp, we can think of the word *nigger* as a kind of readymade—a word with power to affect objecthood that can be literally turned on its head and remade as *nigga*. The remade readymade can be seen as embodying power through its condition as “a paradoxical object locked in a perpetual oscillation between its status as a thing and its status as a sign.”⁴ That is to say the word *nigga* or *niggah* as performed and deployed by blacks in the 1970s did not allow the word to rest or ossify the way its readymade referent once did. As an oscillating form it became a word that constantly, powerfully, and simultaneously occupied and activated a space of difference and deferred meaning.⁵

In the 1970s, the use of this oscillating term played a fundamental role in an (un)conscious effort by visual and performing artists in Black America and the Caribbean to not only resignify and redeploy the word *nigger* in relation to the black body, but at the same time to acknowledge its troubling history and defuse its dehumanizing power in fine art and popular culture.⁶ This article explores this all too brief moment when visual art, film, music, and photography converged to attempt the impossible. Through an analysis of the visual archive and afterlives of a single film, *Every Nigger Is a Star* (1974), this article is an attempt to grapple with a period that is too often reduced in scholarship to narrow readings of blaxploitation film and culture, a post-civil rights crisis in black masculinity, and a turning inward of American

blacks away from diaspora.⁷ This article considers the circumstances of the film's production and its place in the fledgling, US-based, early 1970s, post-civil rights black consciousness arts movement and the postindependence Caribbean film and music industries, each of which sought, in different ways to detonate the word *nigger* and the history embodied by it in relation to the political and cinematic desires of the period.

Though the film *Every Nigger Is a Star* disappeared shortly after its release, its complex and extended transatlantic afterlives in the work of visual artists Dave Smith and Barkley L. Hendricks, and songs by recording artists Billy Paul, Boris Gardiner, Big Youth, Frankie Paul, Supercat, and rapper Kendrick Lamar, suggest a generative black Atlantic modernism that code-switches within the African diaspora. While the film arguably failed to live up to its producer's expectations when it was first released, the photography, paintings, and music drawn from its creation not only performed the political and cultural work within diaspora over time that the film perhaps could not, but articulated something that refused to be contained within singular, linear histories, discourses, and media.

This essay is an attempt to deepen our engagement of the 1970s, a decade of intense movement, creativity, and ideological shifts across the African diaspora that has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. It is also admittedly an attempt to decenter the conversation of blackness away from a contained US narrative. What is possible when we imagine blackness from various vantage points in the 1970s? And what might a lost film and its disruptive title and afterlives unmoor and in the process contribute to growing scholarship on this period? In the manner of Édouard Glissant, I seek to explore the possibilities of visioning from different points of departure, which the engagement of a discursive diaspora makes possible.⁸

Every Nigger Is a Star

In 1974 the artist Dave Smith was on his regular drive around Nassau, Bahamas, photographing movie and drive-in theater marquees that he would later incorporate into paintings that interrogated rapid changes that were occurring in the Bahamas and the broader Caribbean at the time. Drive-in movie theaters had always captured Smith's attention and interest. When he was growing up in England, they did not exist and, as a result, had "something of a novelty value" for him.⁹ Smith had studied commercial design at art school before turning to painting during the rise of British and American pop art. As a result, "signage" was well established on his radar. Though the theater marquees displayed commercially manufactured letters, Smith noted how their placement and composition revealed almost uncanny combinations

of titles and lettering styles and sizes, such as “Mr. Mean” and “5 Angry Women” and “Superdude,” or what he describes as “the stream-of-consciousness poetry of “KILL ORBE KILL & KILLANDKILLAGAIN” or “KILL AND KILL AGAIN AND BAMBOO GODS AND IRON MEN” (figs. 1, 2, and 3). Sometimes it was the misspelling in the marquee, as in “To the Devil a Daughter,” “Where the Lillie Bloom,” or missing letters as in “Robert Dine o in Aging Bull” or “Hig Velocity,” that captured his attention (fig. 4). But the aspect of the marquees that held his interest was the use of differently sized letters within the same word or title, which immediately brought to mind the creative typography reminiscent of early twentieth-century modernism pioneered by Dada artists and the Italian Futurists, Russian Suprematists, and Constructivists. Despite the spatial and temporal disjuncture between Europe and the Caribbean, the unintended formal echoes and aesthetic intentions were compelling and illuminated a path for the artist in organic ways. In the Bahamas, the arrangements of lettering were often less angled and ordered, and exhibited more play and curve in the mixed font sizes. Words were spelled in ways that seem to anticipate text messaging, and expressed the creative freedom of the unknown artisans to communicate as best as they could, given the limitations.



Figure 1. Dave Smith, *Marquee from Outside Carmichael Drive-In Theatre in Nassau, Bahamas* (c. 1976). Photograph printed in 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Dave Smith, *Marquee Near Wulff Road Theatre in Nassau, Bahamas* (c. 1981). Photograph printed in 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Dave Smith, *Kill and Kill Again & Bamboo Gods and Iron Men* (1983, acrylic on canvas, 34 x 50 inches). National Collection of The Bahamas. National Art Gallery of The Bahamas. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Dave Smith, *Marquee from outside Carmichael Drive-In Theatre in Nassau, Bahamas* (c. 1976). Photograph printed in 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

That November, the marquee on the Carmichael Drive-in Theatre in Nassau announced a double bill, *Every Nigger Is a Star* and *A Man Called Horse*, starring British actor Richard Harris, a Bahamian resident at the time (fig. 5). Based on a short story by American writer Dorothy M. Johnson, *A Man Called Horse* told the farcical tale of a British aristocrat captured by the Sioux. First mocked as a prisoner in the original story and the subsequent film, the Englishman soon learns to respect Sioux culture and be respected by the nation, eventually rising to become the group's leader. The film rests firmly in the genre of American western that constantly placed the white male in a position of domination and leadership, naturalizing his position and making inevitable, his move from slave to leader in two hours.

The film *Every Nigger Is a Star* was released in November of 1974 in Kingston, Jamaica, and in the capital city of the recently independent Bahamas, Nassau. Shot in Jamaica, the film was produced by and starred Calvin Lockhart, and filmed by William Greaves. Lockhart had made a name for himself as the first black member of the Royal Shakespeare Company in London and later as the slick-talking Reverend Zeke O'Malley in the film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). Greaves was then best known for his experimental film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* (1968), the television program *Black Journal* (1969–1977), and his early work in African American documentary film. Of Bahamian and Jamaican descent respectively, and following on the



Figure 5. Dave Smith, *Marquee* (1974). Photograph printed in 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

heels of the successful release of Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1972) the year before, the decision of the New York City-based Lockhart and the Hollywood-based Greaves to make and release this independent film in the Caribbean did not come as a surprise. What was a surprise was its complete rejection by Caribbean audiences, whose tastes centered less on experimental film and cinema verité and more on films that drew on the narrative arc of the American western and what became known the world over as blaxploitation. This disjuncture, or simply the failure of the film to connect with its intended audience, was reflected in the visceral responses of viewers during its Kingston premiere.

Its title and the involvement of Calvin Lockhart in the production suggested that *Every Nigger Is a Star* would be a film shot in the vein of blaxploitation. The word *nigger* was often used in the titles of films during the early 1970s, perhaps to add a certain edge to them, and playing edgy characters had made Lockhart famous.¹⁰ However, this film was a completely different enterprise. Even though it has been completely forgotten and appears to be lost, what is known of the film's content reflects Lockhart's political perspective and abiding respect for the kind of diasporic dialectical imagination he saw expressed in Jamaican music and arts during this time.

Calvin Lockhart began living for long stretches of time in Jamaica in 1972. Arriving first to take a leading role in the play *The Beautiful Caribbean* by

Barry Beckford, Lockhart quickly immersed himself in the Jamaican theater and film scene.¹¹ When interviewed by *The Gleaner* about his work and rising fame as a Hollywood actor shortly after his arrival on the island, Lockhart noted that his vision for his work and the impact it could have was much larger than what it had been to that point, declaring, "I don't want to be a glossy black glamour boy. . . . I want to make a constructive contribution to the progress of black people in every sphere."¹² By the time *Every Nigger Is a Star* went into production in 1974, Lockhart's string of successes in Hollywood had been lengthened by starring roles in films such as *The Beast Must Die* (dir. Paul Annett, 1974), *Uptown Saturday Night* (dir. Sidney Poitier, 1974), and an appearance on the television show *Get Christie Love!* (1974). In retrospect, Lockhart was at the peak of his career. His famous role as Biggie Smalls would follow in the hit film *Let's Do It Again* (1975), directed by Poitier.¹³

In the early 1970s, Lockhart's thoughts seemed precise and his public voice loud and clear. He firmly believed that the time had come for black actors to take a bigger stake in Hollywood, not just as actors but in terms of having an impact on the industry, what gets produced, distributed, and seen, stating,

I think if we can understand what is actually going on, and control the economics of the situation we can really be bigger than we are at the moment. But as long as we have to go outside ourselves to ask for money, we are going to be in the same condition. It's like everything else. It's like if you're a farmer and don't own the land and don't own the seeds that you plant, how can you reap the crop and call it yours? If you own the means of production and distribution of production, then you control the thing and until we black United States actors can do just that; we can't begin to talk about our conditions, or future in acting. We have to control it.¹⁴

Lockhart was a politically and socially engaged actor and voracious reader. Well aware of diasporic politics and the democratic socialism espoused in Jamaica at the time by the government of Michael Manley, he entered a creative world sympathetic not only to Manley's political deployment of culture, but also to marginalized Rastafarian culture. Lockhart no doubt hoped to capitalize on the perceived power of the word *nigger* and his reputation within blaxploitation to get the film noticed. Perhaps the film really was originally intended to be a live-action opus like Henzell's *The Harder They Come*, but at this point in his career cinematographer William Greaves was not interested in live action in the way one might have expected Lockhart to be, and it would appear, at least for this project, neither was Lockhart.

In 1974 Lockhart returned to Jamaica to star in the locally produced film *The Marijuana Affair* (1974), also shot by Greaves, and decided that he

would use the time to develop his own projects.¹⁵ *Every Nigger Is a Star* was his first film and indicative of the kind of work he wanted to do beyond what was being offered to him in Hollywood.

The film premiered on Wednesday, November 13, 1974, at the Carib, Palace, and Tropical Theaters in Kingston. Clearly anticipating a transnational audience for the film, just two months before it was released, Lockhart publicly lamented his inability to get a US film distributor to handle it.¹⁶ Every distributor he approached had turned it down. A sympathetic reporter from *The Gleaner* suggested that perhaps Lockhart's difficulties were comparable to what the producers of the *Nigger Charley* film series, starring former football star Fred Williamson, faced before they went on to market success. Though limited by distribution issues, Williamson's vehicle had become one of Paramount's highest-grossing films of 1972, and a similar trajectory was predicted for Lockhart's film.¹⁷

In an attempt to build excitement for the project, the film's soundtrack, with its suggestive album cover, was released months before the film. Its provocative title, look, and sound promised the excitement of this series, or at the very least, Lockhart's Silky Slim (fig. 6).¹⁸ The style of the album cover placed it in direct conversation with the album cover for *The Harder They Come*. Drawing on the same comic book aesthetic used for the earlier film's soundtrack, but affecting a more comedic sensibility, *Every Nigger Is a Star's* cover was a field of unmediated bright yellow, with a band of muted ocher along its lower edge. Boris Gardiner, who wrote and eventually recorded all of the album's tracks, is rendered from his shoulder up, and placed in the center. He is depicted wearing a neat "Jim Kelly" afro and a beaming smile. Though Gardiner's head is the largest single component on the cover, it does not determine the album cover's narrative or affect in any meaningful way. His decapitated body is stilled by the yellow, and though his face appears animated, because his gaze is directed away from the viewer and off to the right side of the composition, the centered head performs like the hands of a clock, shifting visual focus away from him to the activity around him. A caricatured figure of an "Obeah man" is presented to the left of the frame. Barefoot, wearing aqua-blue and pink robes, a feathered "African" mask, and carrying a spear, he is rendered midstride, engaged in a kind of spirited dance. In the lower right corner, a man who appears to be a sly Rasta with new dreadlock buds jauntily looks out at the viewer, his body levitating midstride in a gravity-defying bop.

Just off center, in the lower quadrant of the album cover, a caricature of Calvin Lockhart wearing what appears to be pimp attire dominates. A vision to behold, he is outfitted in striped aquamarine bell-bottom pants, a polka-dot shirt, a light neon-green floor-length overcoat, a broad-brimmed white hat and matching white platform shoes and dark shades, and wields a red

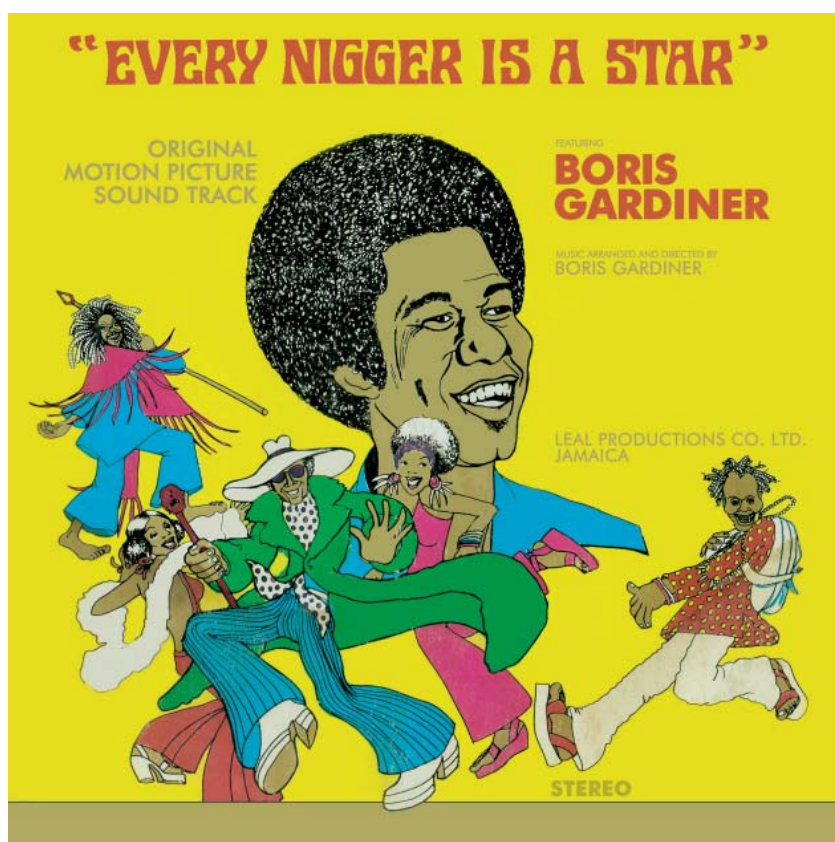


Figure 6. Album cover of the soundtrack to *Every Nigger Is a Star*, (1973), Leal Productions. Image courtesy of Jazzman Music (UK). © Boris Gardiner.

scepter. Lockhart's outfit is arguably completed by the presence of two black women. Also nattily dressed, the woman on his left wears a halter jumpsuit, accentuated with a white boa and heels. Her hairstyle resembles the white-black lines of a skunk, though in this case, one can surmise that the white sections are intended to suggest "shine." The woman on Lockhart's right is similarly attired in a pink halter jumpsuit, matching pink high-heeled sandals and earrings. Her shiny afro-wig, secured with a lavender headband, recalls Pam Grier's Foxy Brown.¹⁹ Like the "Obeah Man," Lockhart and the women also appear to be engaged in a kind of ecstatic "Soul Train" dance. Here, Lockhart does not affect the suave, cool pose and controlled movements of the cinematic pimps he was known for, though in all other respects, he certainly looked the part.

To complete this discordant, compositional mash up of heads and dancing bodies, the film's title appears in red caps above it all: "EVERY NIGGER IS A STAR." In this context, the cover suggests that the film will turn towards the comedic antics of Lockhart's recent film *Uptown Saturday Night*, rather than the electric drama of *The Harder They Come*, and the Carib Theater audience, knowing that the picture had been shot in Jamaica, no doubt thought it would be a version of that story in a local context. Their presence at the premiere, packed houses at all three venues, indicated great expectations.²⁰

However, while in Jamaica, Lockhart had immersed himself in grassroots culture and had grown to admire local music, particularly reggae. Greaves was completing a transition from experimental filmmaking and a formalist approach to film, to a more activist expression that drew heavily on the realism and truth that characterized cinema vérité, but transferring these principles to black representation in the context of documentary filmmaking.²¹

Instead of the wild, cartoonish characters depicted on the album cover, the film's poster indicates that it featured musicians such as the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari and its leader King Ossie, Boris Gardiner and his band The Happening, Big Youth, and Rastafarian leader Mortimer Planno (fig. 7). It also featured songstress Cynthia Schloss, the playwright Alfred Fagon, and other early reggae ambassadors such as the Inner Circle band. Though these figures were not widely known beyond Jamaica at the time, and arguably not fully appreciated and respected in Jamaica, they would eventually become giants in their fields, shaping the cultural history of the nation and, in some respects, impacting the world.

Alfred Fagon was a Jamaican playwright of growing renown in England at the time. Today a statue of him stands in recognition of his work in Bristol, England. His papers reside in the theater collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the eponymous Alfred Fagon Prize is awarded annually to a British writer of Caribbean descent. Mortimer Planno was a Rastafarian leader who led Jamaican delegations to Africa in the 1960s to discuss repatriation of Rastafarians to the continent and greeted Emperor Haile Selassie at the airport during Selassie's April 1966 visit to Jamaica. He also famously brought Bob Marley into the bosom of Rastafari and served for a time as his spiritual advisor, encouraging him to promote his music internationally in order to spread the message of Rastafari to the world. The young Cynthia Schloss would go on to become the preeminent Jamaican songstress before her death in 1999 at age fifty. The great King Ossie and Mystic Revelation of Rastafari's spoken word poetry and drumming are recognized today as the foundation, the groundation of reggae music.²² And finally the film recorded the work of then relatively unknown young musicians who would eventually



Figure 7. Film poster for *Every Nigger Is a Star* (1974). Image Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of the Calvin Lockhart Estate.

join Marley and take reggae music to the world: Inner Circle, Big Youth, and future members of the group Third World.

Because of the focus and style of the film, and the precarious status of Rastafarians in Jamaican society at the time, after its release *Every Nigger Is a Star* was immediately tagged derisively as a “reggae film.” The best description of the work comes from Billy Paul, who Lockhart initially invited to Jamaica to record the film’s theme song instead of Boris Gardiner. Paul arrived to record at Ken Khouri’s Federal Studios in Kingston in April 1974. At the time, he was coming off a Grammy win for his number one hit “Me and Mrs. Jones” (1972).²³ In a May 1974 interview, he recalled that the film showed the island’s beauty and ghettos but focused also on the life of Rastafarians in Jamaica, thus reflecting Lockhart’s desire to get some of the music that was being made in Rasta camps at the time recorded. He described the film as a “documentary travelogue,” certainly not the shoot-em-up, pimped-out, action film the title, Lockhart’s presence, and the soundtrack’s album cover conjured at the time.

It appears that Lockhart’s attempt to lead with one concept and deliver another failed miserably. When interviewed in 2009, Boris Gardiner reflected, “It did not turn out how it had been conceptualists [*sic*]. They did not really have a strong movie. It came out like a documentary in the long run. Carib packed to capacity, waiting for something to happen. People were very disappointed.”²⁴ Was the film deemed disappointing because it was a documentary or because the expectation was for a certain kind of film and through it a certain kind of blackness deployed through American cinema and drawn upon for useful articulations in the Caribbean? I posit that it was a little of both. The very sight of black people, kicking ass, often, though not exclusively, white ass, titillated the senses of those who could recall the days of oppression and repression—or in postindependence Jamaica, felt that they were still living in them. This audience was arguably not overly concerned with the political context of the American films they consumed, though their historical contours were surely known. The commodification process allowed the image to be stripped down and released from important but not easily transferrable sociopolitical contexts in ways where audiences could more easily identify the experiences of the characters with their own in imaginative ways.²⁵

In the Jamaican media *Every Nigger Is a Star* soon became known as the film with “the shortest (and most violent) run” in Jamaican film history as “fans rioted to get their money back from Hollywood star Calvin Lockhart’s strange documentary.”²⁶ Though its premiere run quickly ended at the three main theaters in Kingston, it is notable that the film was later dispatched to small country theaters across Jamaica where it was still being shown and seen two years after its initial release.²⁷

Shiny Niggas or Niggers Shine

In *Every Nigger Is a Star* Calvin Lockhart attempted to record and share creative work emerging from Rastafarianism, then a marginalized group, and Jamaica generally, by deploying a term that signified differently between diasporic spaces and within them. Barkley L. Hendricks and author Randall Kennedy both note that even in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s the word *nigger* was used broadly to describe a host of things and situations. Recognizing the capacity of the word to oscillate depending on who turned the phrase, if one spoke of the stylings of James Brown through use of the term *bad nigger*, one understood those words as the ultimate compliment, but also that this may not always be the case.²⁸ Put another way, many blacks could hear and comprehend when the word shifted in sound, performance, and signification.

Art historian Michael Harris has explored processes of recontextualization and reappropriation of popular and fine art objects and images, along with the word *nigger*, in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*.²⁹ He argues in part that despite attempts by blacks to resignify words, images, and objects that have historically denigrated black people, these things' histories in the context of American racism can never be completely overcome.³⁰ However, black people were exploring multiple meanings of "overcoming" during this time, understanding the shadow of racism, and choosing to act because of political urgency and a belief in their power to determine meaning. Power did not always mean completion or inversion; it could also be manifest through disruption, resignification, and expansion.

Calvin Lockhart's attempt to signify on the word *nigger* across American and Caribbean geographies in the film was strongly aligned with the Black Arts Movement. By 1974, the movement had made significant headway resignifying the words *bad* and *black* after making the destabilization of these terms central to their political work. Amiri Baraka's recollection is useful to note in this respect:

We linked the common Eurocentric distortion of Black Arts as an evil magic, as a mystic pursuit, a power used to transform reality. We had long before understood the twisted racism of Europe and America when referring to Black. That everything Black was bad. But we was Bad; in fact, we was trying to get Badder dan Nat. We was trying to get outright "terrible." Understanding, in various degrees, that "to turn their Evil backward is to Live!"³¹

After a time, "bad" and "black" ceased being just "bad" in America. Though the words carried their history and etymology, they assumed multiple

meanings according to the ways the words were performed, vocalized, or activated. This was not a simple inversion but became something to aspire to. Black did not cease to be evil and mystical in a negative sense, but it could now also be seen as beautiful—an indicator of a broad spectrum of ideas and values. Black transcended time and space and weaved temporal and geographical distances through notions of pan-African consciousness and the practice of diaspora.³²

Every Nigger Is a Star was created at the nexus of the Black Arts and Black Power movements, blaxploitation, and the politics of post-civil rights black (in)visibility, and postindependence movements in the Caribbean at the time. In other words, connections between aesthetics, representation, visibility, and power were being negotiated in the United States at the very same time that majority black nations were being formed in the Caribbean. Both groups looked to popular culture—often the very same forms—to articulate post-civil rights black American identities, and in the Caribbean, postindependence national identities in the wake of colonialism. The disillusionment David Scott speaks of in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, where he argues for the “exhaustion and collapse” of “the social and political hopes that went into the anti-colonial imaginary and postcolonial making of national sovereignties” in the 1980s, had already started to congeal but had not yet erupted.³³

Art historian Krista A. Thompson’s evocative work on “shine” and “sonic light,” in relation to hip-hop aesthetics and the black body is useful in framing a conversation around the word *nigger* and black aesthetics in the interdiscursive American and Caribbean context in which *Every Nigger Is a Star* was made. To tease out aspects of the symbolic and aesthetic maneuvers at play in the film’s concept and use of the term, I want to think of Thompson’s exploration of these ideas in relation to theories of the surface and race put forward in the work of Anne Anlin Cheng, Christopher Pinney, and the ideologies emerging from AfriCOBRA.³⁴ In the period the film was made, these concepts became central to the diasporic imagining of AfriCOBRA, who described the activation of “shine” and “sonic light” in relation to black bodies as *expressive awesomeness*.

AfriCOBRA set the stage for what might be described as a heightened level of black aesthetics, expression, and subjectivity that for many became encoded by the word *nigger*. This entanglement was articulated both inside the movement but also outside of it in the work of artists like Barkley L. Hendricks. It is within these temporal crosshairs, woven together in the emergent cultural and political contexts of the period of production, that we can perhaps come to understand Lockhart’s desire to signify on the word *nigger* beyond surfaces, as a marker of generative blackness and black Atlantic modernism.

Thompson discusses shine in hip-hop art and aesthetics through the concepts of *surfacism* and *sheen*, where *surfacism* refers

to a concentration on the materiality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane, the elaborately wrought and highly finished representations of objects that are themselves elaborately wrought and highly finished [and sheen is] the visual production of light reflecting off polished surfaces or passing through translucent glass, to emphasize the materiality and haptic quality of objects.³⁵

She goes on to historicize surface and shine in relation to reading race through representations of black skin, arguing that “the very notion of blackness as locatable on the surface of black skin is an extension, the (il)logical end of a blinding faith in the deeper epistemological meaning of epidermal shiny surfaces.”³⁶ Here, Thompson interpolates the production of meaning, or racialization, within the representation of reflective black skin, tracing through art history the ways in which the legibility of black bodies as commodities has been coded onto the shiny surface of represented skin. In paintings, black bodies shone much like globes, the skin of tropical fruit, and other objects acquired through trade, and were seen as materially interchangeable.

Cheng engages the skin and modern surfaces somewhat differently in terms of architecture, adornment, and race. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Cheng notes the impossible desire to escape racialized skin or to, in a sense “throw it off like a mantle.”³⁷ Both Cheng’s and Thompson’s works bring into relief questions regarding the commodification of black bodies, but they also ignite special consideration in relation to Lockhart’s film and the currencies of exchange in diasporic blackness during the 1970s.

What does it mean, and/or look like, when black people are not “looking to escape the burdens of epidermal inscription” and instead are looking at surface, often their skin, not in terms of “disavowal but for articulation”?³⁸ What if we, like the artists filmed by Lockhart and Greaves, imagine “shine” and “surface” not as the result of objectification/commodification but as a generative state of subjectivity and authorship? What if we see “shine” as “a visual, corporeal phenomenon” during a period in history when the gaze did not automatically result in objecthood, or the effect of “nigger” as a ready-made but as an enactment of interiority where the surface is seen as oscillating, with bodies owning through performance a particular kind of blackness that carries on and within their surface an invitation to *look at*, rather than *look away*?³⁹ What if we imagine this as touching the boundaries of a black aesthetic contained in the word *nigger*?

If one thinks of racialized skin as a surface, as Thompson and Cheng posit, then during the late 1960s and the 1970, one can argue that an increasing

number of black people in America and the Caribbean, from James Brown, Muhammad Ali, and Richard Pryor, to King Ossie, Mortimer Planno, and Bob Marley, began to resist what Pinney has described as “chronotopic certainties” implied by the surface of their skin. Instead, as Pinney argues, blackness and black bodies became unreadable (uncontainable) by the implied rational binaries on which colonial societies depended, and “the opacity of the surface [became] a refusal of this rationality and an assertion of cultural singularity.”⁴⁰ That is to say, as black bodies moved, migrated, and articulated themselves through other screens, surfaces, and geographies (photography, visual art, film, music), it became an excessive body, moving beyond binaries and the language of containment in America. In certain situations, the word *nigger* came to describe this excessive body. From this point of view, even the historic use of the word against the black body could be seen not in terms of black denigration but white recognition and fear of the power systemic that racism sought to contain.⁴¹

Let us take these ideas a step further. During the seventies, the aesthetics and politics of “shine” and “sonic art” were conceptualized in the Black Arts Movement by AfriCOBRA and expressed in word and artistry by its members and unofficial leader, Jeff Donaldson.⁴² The aesthetics of AfriCOBRA were centered on representation, mimesis, repeatable images—the use of bright, bold color and patterns to evoke “luminosity” and “shine” and effect what they described as *expressive awesomeness*. AfriCOBRA emphasized a historical and aesthetic connection to Africa, or what they termed “Trans-African aesthetics” a belief that similar approaches to representation and expression, a comparable ethos, could be found in the work of artists across the diaspora, from Ethiopia’s Alexander “Skunder” Bagossian to Trinidad’s LeRoy Clarke and everywhere in between.⁴³

In the United States, the work of AfriCOBRA demonstrated a formal emphasis on symmetry, shape, line, color, texture, repetition, packed surface, and finally a quality of design or what they termed “sonic art”: work that could be described on the page in musical terms such as rhythm, synchopation, and a sense of noise (figs. 8 and 9).⁴⁴ The AfriCOBRA manifesto indicated that these principles could be expressed through multiple mediums (paintings, murals, poetry, sculpture, the body in performance), often simultaneously. The staid principles of formal Minimalism that dominated American art at the time were rejected for what I would argue was a more prismatic definition of “shine” than previously attributed to the collective.

To fully appreciate the ways in which Lockhart drew on a particular form of black aesthetics coded in the word *nigger* during this period, it is useful to consider how AfriCOBRA’s ideologies were expressed via the black body, through ornamentation and adornment of its literal surface, but also through the body in performance. *Shine* was in Donaldson’s mind inconceivable in



Figure 8. Nelson Stevens, *Towards Identity*, (1970, oil on canvas, 47.5 x 47.5). Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), gift of Dr. James and Jetta Jones. Image courtesy of AIC.



Figure 9. Nelson Stevens's paintings reproduced in AfriCOBRA mural in Springfield, Massachusetts, 1974. Mural including a stanza of the poem "I Am a Black Woman" by Mari Evans. Courtesy of the artist.

its fullness without *expressive awesomeness*. It is a dimensional concept that extends beyond the surface: a conscious and continual articulation of the self



Figure 10. Jae Jarrell, *Revolutionary Suit*, suit designed in 1969, photograph in 1970, (125th and 5th Avenue, NYC). Photograph by Doug Harris. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Barkley L. Hendricks, *North Philly Niggah (William Corbett)* (1975, oil and acrylic on cotton canvas, 72.5 x 48.5 inches). © Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

through (re)presentation. It is witnessed in the way AfriCOBRA member Jae Jarrell's *Revolutionary Suit* was designed, constructed, and also worn on the surface of the body, yet simultaneously possessed and activated by and with the kinetic black body, becoming an intermedia form (fig. 10).⁴⁵

Expressive awesomeness can also be seen and felt in the work of Barkley L. Hendricks, an artist not associated with AfriCOBRA, but whose art has come to epitomize a sense of surreal blackness theorized in a series of *niggah* paintings he completed in the mid-seventies.⁴⁶ Because he painted a range of subjects and races in his oeuvre, this series speaks to the activation of this concept beyond a specific person, organization, or group. It teases out and activates an aesthetic sensibility tied to the word in the seventies that was not fixed but oscillated as diasporic black people consciously cultivated the act of being looked at, using the word as an expression of exceptional black subjectivity and power. This is a power I contend Lockhart attempted both to draw on, in an American context, and to illuminate, in a Caribbean context, through the film.

Hendricks never planned to create a series of *niggah* paintings. It just happened. He was born and raised in North Philadelphia and attended the

Tioga school with William Corbett, the subject of *North Philly Niggah* (1975) (fig. 11). Hendricks recalls that though raised in similar circumstances and in the same neighborhood, they took very different paths. When Hendricks left North Philly to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Corbett went to Harrisburg Prison for armed robbery. While in prison, he also took art classes, and after he was released from prison he and Hendricks reconnected.

Establishing a link between the artist and the sitter is a vital part of Hendricks's artistic process. He sees his work as bringing attention to everyday people that exhibit a truly extraordinary sense of self. One might describe the relationship he cultivates as disassembling the walls between the artist and subject, but also between the eventual object/ image and its audience. During this period, Hendricks often encountered his subjects on the street, having been drawn to them because they exhibit a certain *jouissance* articulated in ways slightly beyond written language. As he prepares his surfaces, he often begins a conversation with his subjects, trying in his words "to get them, get into them."

During various sittings, Corbett sometimes spoke of his days in prison and on one occasion he shared that while there he had met "fellas" from all over Pennsylvania. He then turned and looked at the artist point blank and with the utmost seriousness said, "But you know (Barkley) we North Philly niggahs gat to stick together."⁴⁷ Hendricks said there was something in that exchange that marked their encounter, but also communicated something about Corbett that he wanted to capture on the canvas, knowing that Corbett's words would become the title of the painting. In the portrait, there is an architectonic quality to Corbett's figure that recalls Romanesque architecture, a style associated with a premodern period of reawakening, reopening, and budding expansion within Europe and also between Europe and the rest of the world. It is tempting to think of Corbett's portrait as embodying similar post-prison possibilities, but the columnar quality of the figure, his thin, svelte-seeming elongated body, enveloped in what appears to be a light, camel-colored wool and fur collared coat, leaves things open. One is unsure of the space he inhabits. The artist has refused to provide viewers with the solid assurance of represented feet and instead the composition, form, and the cream-on-cream color scheme suggests oppositionality to a regular earthbound humanity, and to North Philly.

Instead, Corbett appears to levitate, commanding a spotless environment that seems otherworldly in relation to the gritty streets of Philadelphia. He dominates the composition just off center. An invisible plumb line appears to run through its core that reflects the symmetry, solidity, massing, and exactness of architectural forms. He lacks the slight *contrapposto* of high Romanesque sculpture and retains the rigidity of a late Gothic, early Romanesque style. No trace of what one might describe as "prison life" is

immediately apparent. Instead, he is clean-shaven with a crisp haircut, and is neatly and indeed richly attired. There is a solidity of form that may imply character, but also a kind of aloofness. Corbett's massing and pose renders him unshakable, yet wary and vulnerable at the same time. Refusing the closed interiority of early Romanesque icons and primitive objectification, Corbett's sideways glance offers a moment for the crystallization of the black modern vernacular subject below the dermis: *this niggah shines*.

In conversation with the artist, Hendricks discussed the ways in which the word was being deployed in this period. He indicated that in his social environment it was a word that was seen differently, defined differently, and deployed differently than the historical *nigger*. It was constantly being re-invented and used colloquially, maybe, he concedes, not by middle-class blacks but certainly by working-class blacks in places like North Philly. In other words, reaching back to David Joselit, the word oscillated in these spaces.⁴⁸

There is a prismatic enunciation of selfhood that is visualized and enacted in Hendrick's work from this period. It is this prismatic element of black diasporic reality that I contend Lockhart encountered in the music and culture of 1970s Jamaica and attempted to evangelize through the film. No doubt inspired by Lockhart's discussion of his project on the set of the film *Uptown Saturday Night*, Pryor, the consummate linguistic scientist of the word *nigger* at the time, was one of Lockhart's early and easiest converts. Pryor arrived for an interview with *Ebony* magazine in the mid-seventies wearing a bright yellow jumpsuit, across the front of which blazed the words "Every Nigger Is a Star." I would like to think Lockhart had the suit made just for him.⁴⁹

Conclusion

After *Every Nigger Is a Star* ended its run in Jamaica and the Bahamas, it never truly disappeared. The Boris Gardiner soul-inspired soundtrack became a hit, and over the years the title song was made and remade by recording artists such as Big Youth (1976), who brought it into the bosom of roots reggae using it as social commentary on the failures of postindependence Jamaica; Frankie Paul (1991), who transformed it into a dancehall tale of personal triumph; Supercat (1995), who used it to sound a warning about escalating violence in Jamaica and the need for black unity; and most recently by rapper Kendrick Lamar (2015). In each instance, the song expanded the narrative of the film, as each artist changed the lyrics to reflect the personal and political concerns of the times.

In 2011, the film reappeared again as a subject in a photographic exhibition by the artist Dave Smith held at Popop Gallery in Nassau, Bahamas.

The show was based on the archive of drive-in theater marquees he had photographed in the seventies and never printed. As the exhibition unfolded, it became clear that the artist had unwittingly perhaps, documented the fairly definitive menu of the American pop culture diet being consumed in the Caribbean during that time period. The photographs had marked the ways in which the manufactured worlds of Hollywood, but more importantly, the new explosion in black representation through film, took island people across time and space in a matter of minutes as they lit up the night skies during the decade.

Attempts to define black and blackness in 1970s America made many artists who were intimately involved with diasporic blackness recognize early on that it would never be a stable entity or thing, and that black Americans were not the sole authors of racial meaning. For many diasporic blacks, particularly those in the Caribbean, *nigger* entered their lexicon and consciousness through blaxploitation without its historical weight, making it easier for Caribbean people to want to be a *bad nigger*.⁵⁰ Living in both worlds when he conceived and named his film, Lockhart knew he was operating in multiple registers, informed by differing histories. He chose to redeploy it in a place where the intransient quality of the word had never existed and had, in any case, almost in every other way fallen away. Yet he was still hopeful that the film would communicate that the humanity and creative power of blacks in every sphere had not been foreclosed by history.

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Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of a Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 17–78.

2. See Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), and his discussion of semiotics—in relation to Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988).

3. Author interview with Barkley L. Hendricks, July 2014.

4. The best known example of this in action is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917, where the artist took a urinal, turned it upside down without changing anything about its form or material, and declared it a work of art; see David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 51; Sven Lütticken, "Art and Thingness, Part I: Breton's Ball and Duchamp's Carro," *e-flux journal* 13, no. 2 (2010): 16.

5. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida theorized this simultaneous position through the concept of *différance*. It was intended to refer to something that can simultaneously describe—or in this case be different from something else and thus having its meaning constantly deferred, according to context. I propose that *nigger* in the period under examination was such a word.

6. This often occurred phonetically even if it was stilled spelled *n-i-g-g-e-r*.

7. For scholarship that explores these positions from various perspectives, but do not reflect them, see David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch, and Chris Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2009); Mark Anthony Neal, "A Nigger Unreconstructed," *The New Black Magazine*, January 31, 2007, www.thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=605; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010). To consider ways in which black agency, visual literacy, and media awareness were cultivated and politically deployed leading up to blaxploitation, see Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

8. Manthia Diawara, "Conversation with Édouard Glissant: On Board the Queen Mary II (August 2009)," in *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic*, ed. Tanya Bason and Peter Gorschlüter (London: Tate Liverpool, 2010), 58–63.

9. E-mail interview with Dave Smith, September 7, 2012.

10. Walker, Rausch, and Watson, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*.

11. The play was filmed for British television and premiered on February 2, 1972. Calvin Lockhart played the role of the reluctant labor leader Jonathan. The play also featured Caribbean notables Louise Bennett, Charles Hyatt, and Ram John Holder.

12. *Kingston Gleaner*, February 29, 1972.

13. Like Lockhart, Sidney Poitier was also a Bahamian. Poitier was born in Miami while his parents were visiting Florida and spent his early years on Cat Island, Bahamas. See Sidney Poitier, *Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000).

14. Byron Balfour, "Calvin Lockhart Plans to Do More Films Here," *Kingston Gleaner*, May 18, 1974.

15. This film was produced by Jamaican boxing promoter Lucien Chen and shot by William Greaves. In addition to Lockhart it starred Carl Bradshaw, Charles Hyatt, Evett Hussey, Dudley Thompson, and other notables. It was never officially released, but has been available on YouTube since 2013.

16. *Kingston Gleaner*, September 30, 1974.

17. The series included *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973), and *Boss Nigger* (1974). The first film was initially banned in several cities because it was said that the owners of movie houses thought that if they promoted a film with their name on their theater marquees, irate blacks would riot and destroy the glassed theater facades. The producer of the series, Larry Spangler, suggested that the title wasn't necessarily offensive within the black community at the time. One should note that this was before *Roots* came to the small screen. Spangler suggests that after *Roots* was screened, tolerance for the word diminished. In order to placate the strident politicians in some markets, the word was taken out of the title of the original film and its sequels and it was released as *Boss* or *The Black Bounty Killer*. *The Legend of Nigger Charley* was renamed *The Legend of Black Charley* for American broadcast television. Though it does not appear that any deletions or changes were made for Caribbean audiences; see Walker, *Reflections on Blaxploitations*, 151–53.

18. The song “Every Nigger Is a Star” was written by Boris Gardiner and first recorded by Billy Paul, a close friend of Lockhart. See note 34.

19. *Foxy Brown* (dir. Jack Hill, 1974) is the eponymous lead character in a film starring Pam Grier. Released in 1974 by American International Pictures, it was as a follow-up to the 1973 hit film *Coffy* (dir. Jack Hill), also starring Grier. Both films placed special emphasis on the main character's sartorial style.

20. Mel Cooke, “Story of the Song: Boris Gardiner Croons ‘Every Nigger Is a Star,’” *Kingston Gleaner*, November 8, 2009; Barbara Blake, “Film in the Seventies,” *Kingston Gleaner*, January 27, 1980.

21. William Greaves played a key role in documenting the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar, Senegal, on film for the United States Information Agency in 1966—almost ten years before arriving in Jamaica. It is in Dakar where the members of the diaspora came together to express their creative vitality, and Greaves was able to witness and document the collective results of a Black Atlantic aesthetic imagination. Keeping this in mind, it becomes easier to envision the two artists committing themselves to developing a film that featured the creative output of Jamaican artists, many of whom would later become world-famous, duly recognized as pioneers of reggae music and the Rastafarian movement in particular—allowing the title for them to evoke a diasporic swagger in spite of the slavery and colonial oppression that deserved to be known, understood, and acknowledged.

22. See Verena Reckford, “Rastafarian Music: An Introductory Story,” *Jamaica Journal* 11, nos. 1–2 (1977): 2–13.

23. It appears that Lockhart wanted to capitalize on Paul's reputation and bring attention to the project. However, in a telephone interview with the author in the summer of 2014, Billy Paul stated that he and Lockhart were good friends. Because of their friendship he agreed to record the song, despite a dispute growing in Jamaica at the time between studios and local musicians. However according to Paul, after he recorded the song, his Philadelphia-based label Gamble and Huff, refused to allow his version of the song to be released, forcing Lockhart to turn to Boris Gardiner to record another version of the song. Author's interview with Billy Paul, August 15, 2014. See also Billy Paul, May 1974, “Interview: The Full 360 Degrees,” www.soulmusic.com/index.asp?s=1&T=38&ART=2586&A.

24. *Kingston Gleaner*, November 8, 2009.

25. What I argue is being commodified through blaxploitation and appropriated by

Caribbean audiences is the narrative of subjective blackness, through a specifically, though not exclusively, male performance of empowerment rather than power. Blaxploitation was not the only film genre popular in the Caribbean where aspects of this can be seen, but it was the primary genre where the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality could be rendered. American westerns, gangster films, and karate pictures featuring Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly were also extremely popular at this time. And though more scholarly work needs to be done in this area, being attentive to the cultural archive, I propose that many Caribbean men identified with the male stars of these films regardless of their race. This can be seen not only in the lead character of *The Harder They Come*, but in real life through the notable tendency for musical performers from the period to adopt the names of characters from such films—such as recording artists “Josey Wales” and “Dillinger.”

26. Barbara Blake, “Film in the Seventies,” *Kingston Gleaner*, January 27, 1980, 40.

27. Various theatre listings in *The Gleaner* document its screening at the Seville Theatre, St. Ann’s Bay, May 3, 1975; the Lyric in Port Maria, May 10, 1975; the Arcadien in Falmouth in July 12, 1975; and the Carlton-Annotto Bay, a country theater, on May 31, 1976 and as the marquee indicates, in the Bahamas through 1975.

28. Randall Kennedy explored the complexity of the term *nigger* in his book of the same name. Recalling his own upbringing, he stated, “because of the way *nigger* was used in my household I learned at an early age that it could be said in many ways, put to many uses, and mean many things” (xv). It described discredited negroes, was deployed for denigration, used to injure, or to define the hierarchy within Black America; sometimes it was used admiringly as in “James Brown is a sho nuff nigger, meaning that he was willing to be himself without apology” (xvi). What became apparent to Robinson early on was a generational difference between his grandmother’s and his own use of the word. For his generation the word was already turning, being associated with power and the fight against white supremacy; it would stand for glamour, individuality, realness, boldness, and, I would add, masculinity. Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troubling Word* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xv–xvi.

29. Michael Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

30. *Ibid.*, 204–10.

31. Amiri Baraka, “The Black Arts Movement: Its Meaning and Potential,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 29 (2011): 27.

32. See also Dick Gregory and Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography of Dick Gregory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964); Richard A. Long, “Niggers Is People,” *Ascending and Other Poems* (Chicago: DuSable Museum of African American History, 1975); Prince Jazzbo, *Every Nigger Is a Winner* (Mr. Funny Music, UK, 1975).

33. In a conversation with Stuart Hall for *Bomb* magazine, Scott argues that the hopes of postcolonialism and postindependence were all but dashed in the 1980s in Jamaica “with the assassination of Walter Rodney in January 1980; the defeat of Michael Manley in October of the same year; and the implosion of the Grenada Revolution in 1983.” He continues, “I am old enough to have believed in the 1970s, but I am also young enough to be skeptical of the mythology of the narrative of emancipation and to be able to cast an impassive eye on its rhetorical structure.” Stuart Hall, “David Scott,” *BOMB* 90 (Winter 2005); see also David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

34. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13. Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the

Surface of the Image: Photography and Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism,” in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, ed. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 450–51.

35. Krista A. Thompson, “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip Hop,” *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (2009): 485.

36. *Ibid.*, 489.

37. Cheng, *Second Skin*, 13.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.* This act of “looking” of attracting visibility is an important aspect of the black arts movement and can best be observed by the ways in which AfriCOBRA murals painted in black and poor communities were often accompanied by poetry.

40. Pinney, “Notes from the Surface of the Image,” 450–51.

41. While it is tempting to relate the concept of the excessive body to the political deployment of minstrelsy in African American culture as explored in the work of Eric Lott, something different, though perhaps historically linked is articulated here. There is no known tradition of blackface minstrelsy in the Caribbean, though Caribbean people—most notably the Bahamian Bert Williams, became a star of the form on the vaudeville stage after moving to and performing in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in this essay, I am content to let this history linger without directly engaging it, partly because to do so would discipline the argument in ways that make the experimental parts of the essay and the possibilities I am trying to imagine for the period, indexical and periodized in ways the film and cultural context that it emerged, were not. Instead I argue that this film and the deployment of the word in artistic circles represent a conscious effort to engage racialized understandings of oneself within diaspora in ways that are historically aligned, but through visual, kinetic, and aural language translated differently through surfaces. Blackface might involve a particular and literal “racialization of skin” but blackface does not equal blackness nor is it the equivalent of singularly imagined “nigger.” Black power is thus generated and recognized in an “expressive awesomeness” that relies on both the visualization and performance of the individual kinetic body. It democratizes blackness.

42. Like Greaves in 1966, Donaldson would play a major role as organizer for the second World Festival of Negro Arts renamed the World Festival of Black Arts or Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture FESTAC (1977).

43. LeRoy Clarke (b. Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1938) and Alexander “Skunder” Boghossian (b. 1937 Ethiopia; d. 2003, Washington, DC) are major figures in the history of black arts diasporically and in America. Clarke spent three years in New York in the early 1970s at the Studio Museum in Harlem and became a part of the black cosmopolitan at scene of the time forging relationships and links he has maintained throughout his career. Boghossian arrived in the United States in 1970s and taught in Howard University’s art department for almost thirty years. Both artists’ paintings are highly sought after in the international marketplace. See Elizabeth Hearney, *Ethiopia Passages: Contemporary Art from the Diaspora* (Washington DC: Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2003); LeRoy Clarke, *Tonight My Black Woman: Black Truth and Lament* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1976); and LeRoy Clarke, *The Taste of Endless Fruit; Love Poems and Drawings* (New York: Self-published artist’s book, 1974).

44. Jeff R. Donaldson, “AfriCOBRA Manifesto? Ten in Search of a Nation,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (2012): 80. The manifesto was first published in *Black World*, October 1970, 80–86. For a discussion of the ways in which AfriCOBRA saw

the movement as a diasporic one, see Jeff R. Donaldson, "AfriCOBRA and TransAtlantic Connections," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (2012): 84–89.

45. The concept of the body as an "intermedia" form was being explored through performance in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the California based artist Senga Nengudi. The manner in which Jae Jarrell designed clothing as wearable art that depended on the body for completion and the cultivation of the gaze can be extended within AfriCOBRA through the work of the painter Nelson Stevens. Stevens's work epitomizes notions of reproducibility and the democratization of these ideas beyond proscribed spaces and geographies. Stevens transferred his paintings on canvas to the walls of buildings in black communities in and around Boston, often interlinking image with graphically rendered spoken word poetry. In one Boston area mural, the importance of both seeing and being were underscored by the incorporation of the Mari Evans's poem "I Am a Black Woman," which literally commanded the audience to "look." The continuity between representation and material body is philosophically invoked—allowing the work to penetrate beyond the surface of canvas or skin.

46. Hendricks completed at least five canvases in the early to mid-seventies that incorporated the word *nigger* aka *niggah* in their titles and the interpretation of their meaning, including *New Orleans Niggah* (1973); *Family Jules: NNN (No Naked Niggahs)* (1974); *Fast Eddie-JN (Jive Niggah/Eddie Clanton)* (1975); *New London Niggah/Big Chuck (Charles Harvey)* (1975); and *North Philly Niggah (William Corbett)* (1975).

47. Author interview with the artist, July 9, 2014.

48. Hendricks recalls that within black male spaces in particular, the word was a common part of one's expressive language set. In his words, "it didn't have the kind of baggage some middle class blacks insisted on giving it" and in his milieu, it was often deployed in an offhanded way or to inhabit a kind of terrible sublime. Some might focus on the terribleness. He chose to emphasize the sublime. Ibid.

49. Weston Martin, "Every Nigger Is a Star," *Ebony Magazine*, September 1976, 55–60. During the sixties and seventies, Richard Pryor was firmly committed to the possibilities of the term. While every scholar returns time and time again to the story of his decision to put aside the word in performance, often using this as evidence to repudiate the use of the word (after all, if *Richard Pryor* could see the error of his ways, no one had an excuse to use it), it is equally important to note how and why he began to use the word, and the work he felt it did early in his career. In his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences*, Pryor recalls the moment when he decided to include the word in his act. Though he recognized *nigger* as "the most offensive, humiliating, disgraceful, distasteful, ugly, and nasty word ever used in the context of black people" and that it "embodied the hatred of racism as well as the legacy of self-hate" (116) at that point in his career he had become "braver, more confident, and willing to tap into whatever provocative or controversial thoughts" he had (116). He continues with the bit:

Nigger.

And so this one night I decided to make it my own.

Nigger.

I decided to take the sting out of it.

Nigger.

As if saying it over and over again would numb me and everybody else to its wretchedness. Nigger.

Said it over and over like a preacher singing hallelujah.

*Hello, I'm Richard Pryor. I'm a nigger.
Nigger. Nigger. Nigger.
Niggerniggerniggerniggerniggernigger.*

....

Saying it changed me, yes it did. It gave me strength, let me rise above shit . . .

....

Honest. It made me feel free to say it.

Clean.

It was the truth.

That's all I was looking to say. The truth.

Richard Pryor, *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences* (New York: Pantheon, 1997): 116–17. Derrick Z. Jackson, "The N-word and Richard Pryor," *New York Times*, December 15, 2005.

50. The complexity of the term 'bad nigger' is only just beginning to be explored in the work of scholars, willing to engage conflicts within black America during the seventies. Various key figures involved in the film industry at this time offer exceptionally revealing stories in this respect. The actor Ron O'Neal who gained fame as *Superfly*, gives a bristling account of his involvement with the leader of the Beverly Hills branch of the NAACP Junius Griffin, Tony Brown, and the late Marion Barry, then leader of an arm of the NAACP. His story is indicative of the complex and troubling power plays among so called "race leaders" during the post-civil rights years and their arguably weakening power in the face of popular culture. Rather than suggest alternatives or produce alternatives, many stars of the genre came to believe that black critics of blaxploitation attempted to kill what was present but failed to provide something to replace it or build on. Once the studios had recovered financially, arguably the infighting among black artists and intellectuals provided ample cloaking for the studios to return unchecked to their own brand of institutional racism, producing little or no films with black characters. Many black actors, writers, directors, musicians, producers. and crew members who had finally gotten their big break during the period never worked to the same degree again while many white people who were involved in blaxploitation easily morphed into other genres. The demise of these films arguably killed or severely curtailed black access to power in Hollywood for a long time. Lockhart saw it coming and like many artists also saw his career almost completely dry up in the wake. See Walker, *Reflections on Blaxploitation*, 130, 137–39.