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# Conjuring Caliban's Woman: Moving beyond Cinema's Memory of *Man in Praise House* (1991)

Ayanna Dozier

Communication and Media Studies Department, Fordham University, 441 East, Bronx, NY 10458, USA  
Corresponding author. [adozier2@fordham.edu](mailto:adozier2@fordham.edu)

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## Abstract

Julie Dash's experimental short film, *Praise House* (1991), situates *conjuring* as both a narrative and formal device to invent new memories around Black womanhood that exceed our representation within the epistemes of *Man*. I view *Praise House* as an example of conjure-cinema with which we can evaluate how Black feminist filmmakers, primarily working in experimental film, manipulate the poetic structure and aesthetics of film to *affect* audiences rather than rely on representational narrative alone. Following the scholarship of Sylvia Wynter, I use *Man* to refer to the representational body of the Western episteme that defines value through mass accumulation. It is through Wynter's scholarship that we find the ontological emancipation from *Man* that is Caliban's woman, who represents discourse beyond our normative, colonial mode of feeling/knowing/being. Through an analysis of *Praise House* that foregrounds film's ability to generate affect via its aesthetics, this article argues that aesthetics can similarly enact the same power of conjure as found in *Praise House's* narrative, and as such conjures an epistemological rupture to our normative order that is Caliban's woman.

## Introduction

"Our gift is to turn silence into insight and to make a chorus of many voices contending."

Granny to Hannah in *Praise House* (1991)

The first line of dialogue in *Praise House* invokes the act of conjuring, "Bring the spirit, child!" And with that declaration, the spirits manifest onscreen through the artwork of Minnie Evans, the choreography of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and the creative vision of director Julie Dash for a film that situates *conjuring* as both a narrative and formal device to invent new memories around Black womanhood that exceed our representation within the epistemes of *Man*. I define *Praise House* as an example of conjure-cinema with which we can evaluate how Black feminist filmmakers, primarily working in experimental film, manipulate the poetic structure and aesthetics of film to *affect*

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audiences rather than rely on representational narrative alone. This poetic is imbued with emancipatory potential that moves us beyond our present mode of feeling/knowing/being, what Sylvia Wynter defines as Caliban's Woman, the ontological absence and potential of a Black feminist poetics that exceeds the epistemological confines of Western *Man* (Wynter 1990, 356). Following Wynter's scholarship, I use *Man* to refer to the representational body of the Western episteme that defines value through mass accumulation. As Wynter astutely notes, *Man* is not the human, although he represents himself to be and in so doing submits linear time to its image. Therefore, to conjure Caliban's woman is, inevitably, a rupture of this world's episteme and violent un/silencing of her pasts and memories from time.

*Praise House* stands out in the larger Black feminist experimental archive for its use of conjure culture, ritual, and narrative of intergenerational responses to the conjuring gift against the backdrop of wage labor and modernity. The experimental short film focuses on three generations of conjure women (grandmother, mother, and daughter) who navigate and respond to their gift with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance. Guiding these women is a guardian angel who teaches them how to cope with their gift and care for one another. It is in the presence of the angel and the ritual dances that the characters and the audience are pulled into the space of time and learn valuable lessons on relationality, breaking familial kinship structures in the process. Outside of the film's use of conjure, Dash deploys an arsenal of affective engagements and actions onscreen that keep the audience thinking through affective registers of sense-making in between representational use of dance rituals.

The matriarch of the three, Granny (Laurie Carlos) is in between life and death at the start of the film and spends most of her time passing between worlds, memories, spaces, and in communion with angels. The youngest of the three, Hannah (Viola Sheely), is beginning to conjure visions from the other side (or from the totality of time itself): "draw or die," these voices tell her. Unlike Granny's present state of liminality, Hannah's conjuring abilities are unpredictable and may manifest themselves in varying rituals that include communion with angels, dance fits, or through drafting, a form of drawing or writing informed by habit. Mama (Terri Cousar) is the bridge between the two generations and represents the link to "reality"; she has the ability to conjure but resists the practice as she focuses on prayer and the symbolism of the rational, "real" world of wage labor. Because of this, Mama's personhood is firmly fixed in time and bound by colonial temporality's limited mobility for Black womanhood. Haunting all three women is a guardian angel wearing a black leather coat, played by Zollar, there to help Granny pass on to the next world, guide Hannah's conjuring fits, and lead Mama back to the knowledge and practice of conjure that she has suppressed for years. The guardian angel is there to free these women and their bodies from linear time (or put another way, the temporality defined by *Man*). "Bring the spirit, child" is a command that incites action through its declaration of time and presence that another world can be made visible onscreen through the work of conjurers. It is this act of conjuring that I take up to examine how a Black feminist poetics imbues the film's aesthetics with a feeling of emancipation that moves audiences beyond the memory of *Man*.

My use of the word *conjure* emerges from several social definitions produced by Black feminist theory. Conjure defines a manifestation of the spiritual into the world of the visible, and the labor of conjuring designates a medium with access to the imagery, narratives, lives, and memories beyond the world of the visible. Within the United States, conjure culture emerges from Hoodoo practices from the deep South before becoming more widespread after the Great Migration. As Black literary studies scholar

Marjorie Pryse writes, conjure culture is about making something possible in her introduction, “Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the ‘Ancient Power’ of Black Women,” to the edited anthology *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Pryse 1985). In the literary tales of *The Conjure Woman* by Charles W. Chesnutt in the nineteenth century, the conjure women made his own fiction possible as well as making white men do what they did not want to do: read and learn about the lives and folklore of Black folk (Pryse 1985, 15).

Further, Pryse links the practice of the Black women’s literary tradition with conjure in that the work of authors like Zora Neale Hurston, which “gave her the authority to tell stories because in the act of writing down the old ‘lies,’ Hurston created a bridge between the ‘primitive’ authority of folk life and the literary power of written texts” (11). This labor of writing down the folklore of Black culture created blueprints to trace and study memory, spirituality, and space for considering such “riddles of the universe” as to “why they are poor, why they are black, and where they came from,” information that otherwise would be made knowable only through oral traditions (11). Following Pryse’s rich assessment of conjure in Black women’s literary tradition, I would like to assess how Black feminist experimental film practices similarly evoke the use of conjuring in both its formal and narrative aesthetics.

Although the subject of Black women in film has received a tremendous amount of visibility recently, there is still a paucity of scholarship and critical analysis on contemporary Black feminist experimental film practices emerging from the late 1960s to the present. And yes, contemporary scholarship is emerging around key artists like Madeline Hunt Ehrlich, Ja’Tovia Gary, and Tourmaline, among others, that foregrounds their experimental filmmaking aesthetics with their concentration on Black spiritual practices and rites, of which I include my own extensive scholarship on the subject culled from my doctoral studies on the topic (Dozier 2015; 2017; 2018; 2020). But more attention is needed to fully attend to Black feminist experimental filmmaking as a field of study with arguments that do not prioritize its representational pull or effect.

This piece is not meant to recap the history of Black feminist experimental film but rather to direct our attention to lesser examined film of that archive that reveals an analytical approach to filmmaking that is akin to conjure itself through its use of affect.<sup>1</sup> My move away from representation, here and elsewhere, is due to how representational meaning is largely fixed within the epistemological practice of *Man*. I turn to affective readings that foreground aesthetics to demonstrate how a Black feminist poetic can not only be conveyed but critically *felt* through affect rather than representation. This method of film reading shifts our attention away from what aesthetics mean to what they *do* as a practice, by which I feel that Black feminist art-making not only contributes vastly to this archive of political aesthetic *doing* but is often the most underserved in scholarly analysis due to audiences’ interest in reading politics through representational narrative alone.

For my analysis of *Praise House*, I examine how a Black feminist (and in some cases, womanist) tradition is mapped onto the form and narrative of the film. I foreground aesthetics and form to shift readers’ perception of Black feminist film as a monolithic practice. I fear that with the mainstream visibility of discourse emerging on Black women in film, the complexities and the genealogical traditions of some of the filmmakers on the margin will be lost in favor of reductionist arguments that coalesce Black women as engaging in the same praxis of meaning-making without interrogating their geography, class, color, and sexuality. A Black feminist tradition complicates

meaning-making and different forms of knowledge-production. When examined in the practice of Black experimental film, a Black feminist approach provides audiovisual documents that carry over the work of decoding and recoding symbols via aesthetics that emerged in Black women's nineteenth-century literary practices in that they (as a group of enslaved women or adjacent to slavery) were using literature to conjure up spaces of emancipation. Black feminist experimental film thus challenges what we (as scholars, viewers, filmmakers, and critics) have inherited from western Europe with regard to our aesthetic decisions.

Julie Dash's filmography has emerged as a productive point for tracing Black feminist filmic experimentation because of her frequent use of dance, memory, mysticism, conjuring, and history as points of activation in her formal and narrative aesthetics (Bobo 1995; 1998). Following the release of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in 2016, a piece that heavily cited Dash's 1992 film *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash's career has been revitalized, with many scholars turning their attention to her work. Much of this attention, however, has remained firmly in dialogue with her most popular films, *Daughters of the Dust* and her UCLA student short film *Illusions* (1980). In this moment of marginal visibility that has been cast upon Dash, I would like to direct audiences' attention to a film Dash produced and directed in collaboration with Zollar, founder and director of Urban Bush Women collective in Brooklyn, NY (1984–present), that introduces her most explicit use of conjure in film and remains one of her most experimental because of it.

What follows is an analysis of *Praise House* that accounts for its emancipatory power via conjure culture in the film's narrative and formal aesthetics. I situate my method of reading *Praise House* through the critical scholarship of Wynter's argument on *Man*, analogy, memory, and cinema found in "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman" (Wynter 1990), and in her lesser-read text on cinema, "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man" (Wynter 2000). These texts help frame *Praise House's* aesthetics as conjure work that brings Caliban's woman to the fore of our memories. The effect of this aesthetic evocation of Caliban's woman moves emancipation beyond discourse that is only represented onscreen to a memory that is felt. The argument is that by exploiting how aesthetics affects audiences, Black feminist poetics, analyzed here via conjure in cinema, turns emancipation into cardio-muscular mnemonic action that audiences feel from the experience of cinema-watching that then lies in wait for its activation.

### *Man is not the Human, Although he Represents himself to be*

In "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man," Wynter poignantly describes cinema as a vehicle by which the memory of *Man* is submitted to an audience (Wynter 2000, 29). By submitting mankind to the memory of *Man*, Western cinema (as a global product) has deployed and crafted a shared memory in which the representation of *Man* is the human. This is troubling, for as Wynter describes, "*Man* is not the human, although he represents himself to be"; the effect is an ontological history and normative order by which the human is understood to be an individual of accumulation, divinely ordained, and with a close approximation to whiteness. All other humans outside of the aforementioned descriptive traits, namely the racialized poor, become *Man's Other*, the damned who exists outside of our representational conception of humanity. What Wynter's argument in the "The Cinematic Text after Man" makes available to readers is how Western analogies morph into

biocentric values that determine our personhood and value in society. The demonology of the symbolic damned, for example, is represented and fixed with properties of racialization. The “life principles” that govern how we make and establish kin-relations in the world are, at their root, based on mutations of Christian values and capitalist accumulation. Thus, analogy via film and how that analogy is produced, its aesthetics, are key for reestablishing kin-relations that prioritize the human in society rather than *Man*. Wynter defines *Man* as being “conceived of as an acultural mode of being. As one, therefore, whose ostensible pre-given and biologically determined ‘human nature’ is supposed to determine the behaviors that collectively lead to a social reality that is then represented as *the way things are* in themselves, the way the *will have to be*, with this representation then serving a teleological purpose” (Wynter 2000, 30). This transformation asserts that our supposed “secular” epistemological imagination and modes of representation are still derived from the symbolic referents forged through Christian conceptions of divinity.

If the “divine” occupies the secular position of *Man*, then its adversary, the inherent demonic symbolics/referents of death and negativity, must have also been secularized and displaced onto that which is defined as *Other*. If *Man* inherited the symbolic value of divine life from “God,” then it is paramount that we redirect our focus toward what has been constituted as the “damned,” for their symbolics are antithetical to *Man*’s reproduction in the Western episteme. Cinema presents the greatest opportunity for such a repossession of symbols to emerge and be distributed to a wide audience. Wynter writes:

If the novelistic text and its medium, print, was the quintessential genre/medium by which Western *Man* and its then epochally new, because secularizing Renaissance “understanding of man’s humanity” was to be inscribed and enacted, the cinematic text, conceptualized in terms outside those of our present biocentric understanding, will be the quintessential genre of our now de-biologized conception of the human; the medium, I propose of a new form of “writing” which reconnects with the “writing” of the rock paintings of Apollo Namibia, some 30,000 years ago. (Wynter 2000, 60)

In the above passage, Wynter makes the argument that cinema presents the “new frontier” by which the practice of memory-making and representation can be used to challenge and recode colonial value, to move us beyond the “divinity” of *Man* and re-enchant the human. It is my argument, then, that such a theory as Caliban’s woman could best be realized through cinematic texts, specifically those that are experimental in their practice.

In an earlier piece, “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Woman” (Wynter 1990), Wynter recuperates the ontology of the silenced/negated Black woman who inhabits the space of demonic ground. As Caribbean scholar Carol Boyce-Davies succinctly describes, “Demonic ground is how the latter [the dreadful elements that interrupt aesthetics] is preoccupied with the systematic function of the ‘ontological absence’ of a black female subject position within the ruling epistemes of the modern world” (Boyce-Davies 2018, 844). In Boyce-Davies’s synthesis, demonic ground draws explicit attention to the way in which Western discourse, as a hegemony over theory and philosophy globally, defines meanings interpreted by the symbolic order of man (white) and woman (white) (Black/native male). Thus, the ontology that could be derived for and from Black/native

women in the world is excluded and erased from our present normative order. To conjure Caliban's woman in art (through poetics) draws attention to the social discourse of episteme-production and asks new questions and considerations around humanity. I argue that it additionally manifests knowledge from outside (extended and beyond reach from the visible frame) colonial knowledge-production to theorists, scholars, researchers, archivists, artists, writers, and so on. To conjure the ontology that exceeds coloniality is an act embedded in deconstruction of colonialism's ways of knowing and also pursues unpredictable creativity. (I should note that though I am greatly indebted to Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* [McKittrick 2006], her work is not cited here explicitly as my use of the term used a different set of citations for this piece.)

"Beyond Miranda's Meanings" appeared as the afterword in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Wynter 1990). Boyce-Davies was encouraged to invite Wynter to participate in the anthology after she was informed that Wynter was receiving some criticism for not invoking a political stance around the term *Woman* (Boyce-Davies 2018, 837). At a Caribbean women's writing conference in 1988, Wynter delivered a talk titled, "Why We Cannot Save Ourselves in a Woman Manner" that drew explicit tension from the Western symbolic meaning of *Woman*—arguing that *Woman* had come to occupy the public imagination of the ideal beauty, class, and Western geography, racialized as white. Wynter describes that this archetype of *Woman* has in fact recognized and leveraged access to the modes of knowledge-production that were/are available to her, that is, the overrepresentation (and occupation) of image-making in the West (Wynter 1990, 360). It is a damning critique, for it suggests that though *Woman* may constitute herself as *Other* to *Man* in her silence, she in fact gains power from the occupation of visual representation that in turn silences others.<sup>2</sup>

Wynter directs her focus to analyzing a key Enlightenment play in "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *The Tempest*, she argues, can be used analogously to break down ontological meaning for *Man*, *Woman*, and its *Other* produced by Western colonialization. In *The Tempest*, the Italian merchant Prospero is exiled to a Caribbean island with his daughter Miranda where they enslave the island natives, one of whom, Caliban, occupies a speaking role in the play. As Wynter explains, Caliban represents all things monstrous on the island, with Prospero asserting that Caliban was sired by the devil himself (Wynter 1990, 360). It is Caliban's unseen mother Sycorax whose use of magic is the harbinger of unpredictability and destructive forces of natives working with enchantment, as evident by her "inability" to work with the spirit Ariel.

Prospero, who "frees" Ariel from the tree that Sycorax "binded" it to before the first act of the play, comes to represent the "rational" (that is, one who studies letters and who learns from consciousness) man of the sixteenth century, the same *Man* who inherits value from the Christian identity of divine right and life. Even Prospero's use of magic is coded as "good," for it is based on the Western exploration of rationality, that is, analyzing the land through literature and its "divine" perspective. Caliban, then, is the antagonist to Prospero, vengeful of Prospero's enslavement of the natives, his use of magic, and his taking of the island, which Caliban believes is his to inherit. Caliban is the referent for the symbolic death of *Man* and thus, his representational *Other*.

Prospero's daughter, Miranda, who speaks few words, comes to represent the silence of European women who participated in colonial conquest as extensions of property. However, the process of migration afforded European women "new" freedom insofar

as Miranda owned slaves. Art historian Kay Dian Kriz analyzes the contradiction that emerged for white women in the new world where they leveraged power over the enslaved through their silence in her book, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* (Kriz 2008, 46). Kriz relies on sixteenth-century paintings from the Caribbean to trace and study the limited representation of dark-skinned Black women of the New World, the “peaceful” savage representation of dark-skinned Black men, and the emergence/marketing of the *mulâtresses* as the production of a new “inferior” woman whose representation brought new forms of ethnic and social difference to the New World. Through an analysis of the Caribbean paintings of *mulâtresses* by the Italian artist Agostino Brunias, Kriz argues:

Brunias’s *mulâtresses* provoke the fantasy of possessing a body that both is and is not white, bearing the marks of refined whiteness and the promise of savage sexual pleasure so closely associated with blackness. . . . Brunias’s images of *mulâtresses* permit possible viewing options that involve fantasies not only of subjection via a master–slave encounter, but also of identification. It is all too easy to assume that Brunias’s images were designed to appeal to white heterosexual men, but they equally, if perhaps more surreptitiously, invite the gaze of white women, who might fantasize about “possessing” (in either sense) a body that is so closely associated with “dark” sexual pleasures. (Kriz 2008, 55)

In this way, we can see how Wynter’s argument against Miranda realizes her as the symbolic referent of white womanhood who makes herself symbolically known as *Woman* in the world. *Woman* attempts to exert the same sexual domination over the enslaved, critically Black women, by lusting after their bodies as the symbolic passageway to savage, sexual pleasures. Critically though, Kriz asserts how colorism was key not only to the erasure of dark-skinned Black/native women from the purview of representation but also to the visibility of *Woman*’s subjectivity. Wynter raises a critical concern in the ongoing quest to give voice to Miranda (or the Mirandas of the world), in that many feminists fail to recognize how Miranda gained a voice through image-production and had access to power through the ownership of Black/native bodies. It is in this vein that Wynter critically argues that we, especially Black feminists, need to move beyond the ontologies derived from Miranda, for her meanings are built upon the silence and absence of ours.

Miranda, despite her limited speech, is an active participant in knowledge-production in *The Tempest*. What is missing, however, is Caliban’s equal, his physiognomic complementary mate (Wynter 1990, 360): the woman of the same “monstrosity” as Caliban, with the same hair texture and color of skin who is also enslaved by Prospero and Miranda. The absence of Caliban’s woman does several things for the production of *The Tempest*. One, it annuls the existence of native intra-reproduction. Second, it silences the rape of native women of the Caribbean by white slave owners so that the reproduction of the enslaved now stands as mixed-race/*mulâtresses* (as Kriz argues above) and without maternal lineage beyond their status of enslavement. And third, the erasure separates this woman not just from visibility, but from desire, as Caliban did not desire his mother (it is also worth noting that Sycorax is not native to the island but was banished there from Algiers). In the absence of “his” woman, Caliban placed his desire onto the body of Miranda where he fantasized about populating the island with his seed through her due to her idealized features (361). Again, this interracial copulation produces a color line among the

enslaved in which offspring produced may create an “equal” of (potentially) lighter skin and Eurocentric features to the native men to place their (at times, unrequited) desire for the Mirandas of the world.

Thus, Caliban’s woman in her ontological and visual absence ruptures our normative order through the existence of possibility outside the symbols of coloniality. To conjure Caliban’s woman is to invite new questions around kin-relations and the symbolic as well as to move beyond what we have inherited of Western discourse. It opens possibilities for different ways of living—potentially emancipated—in this world, even if those possibilities are themselves unpredictable. As my analysis of *Praise House* will examine, the pursuit of Caliban’s woman takes ambiguous hold of the body and work; it is not for the faint of heart. Wynter suggest as much in “The Cinematic Text after Man,” where she redirects her reader’s attention to alterity as a position to which one must grow accustomed if the pursuit of emancipation from *Man* is desired (Wynter 2000, 58). Our arsenal of tools to conjure up new memories beyond *Man* are foreign, aberrant, and can be downright troubling to weaponize. Nonetheless, they are tools that we must utilize to free ourselves from the memory of *Man*, like conjure as taken up in this analysis, and must be aberrant to the normative system, for they reveal the ways in which they hide in plain sight but remain disavowed because of their symbolic status. Critically, I link experimental film here as an act of conjure cinema for the way in which its production pushes directors to the thresholds of alterity in ways that open their personhood, the performers, and audiences to experience states of potential otherness to what we know, that is, making space for Caliban’s woman.

To restate, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings” is an articulation for Black feminists to think critically about the symbolic inheritance of meaning that we have learned from Western colonial thought. To conjure Caliban’s woman does not restore us to a pre-colonial position, for we cannot go back, which is also echoed in the climactic chant during the possession in *Praise House*, “there ain’t no turning back!” Rather, we must examine what existed beside and beyond colonialism’s grasp for symbolic coding. Wynter’s piece recuperates the existence of Caliban’s woman and provides an account that is generous for Black feminists to follow in their analyses on narrative work and for my interest, cinema. Cinema may submit audiences to a memory built around global capital and accumulation of *Man*, but in the work of Julie Dash (and increasingly others) we see these filmmakers use that system to (re)produce new memories that emancipate us *from Man*.

### *Praise House*

*Praise House* is a thirty-minute, sixteen-millimeter experimental narrative short that premiered on KTCA-TV in Minneapolis. The program was commissioned by Alive and KTCA-TV, a local PBS affiliate, marking a new opportunity for Dash to make films that would receive a wider distribution via television following her completion of her MFA studies at UCLA in the Film and Television Program in the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> *Praise House* premiered the same year that *Daughters of the Dust* did on the festival circuit, which would make Dash the first Black woman director to receive theatrical distribution for a feature film in the United States following its release in 1992. Conjure in *Praise House* acts as a form of unpredictable knowledge-production for the audience and relies on a variety of styles: drafting, dance, and prayer to convey its effect to the audience. The film is partially inspired by the artwork of Minnie Evans and sees Dash collaborate with the Urban Bush Women dance collective, whose founder and



director, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, choreographs and plays the guardian angel in the film. The dance-narrative that Zollar created for *Praise House* exists only in the film. I analyze *Praise House* for its ability to show how Black feminist poetics' ultimate goal is to emancipate us from the "tools of universal reason, and the narratives of science and history that sustain the transparent trajectory of the subjects of universal reason and of its grip on our political imagination" through conjure work (da Silva 2014, 82). This practice enables Caliban's woman to take flight.

*Praise House*, like most of Dash's films, is an account of generational remembrance.<sup>4</sup> Granny's conjuring days have since passed, but they are starting to emerge in Hannah, who conjures her sight through drawings and dance. The film plays with familiar hauntings through its circular and pluriconceptual use of time and space between worlds. The audience is frequently pulled into Hannah's and Granny's visions; since we are able to "see" the angels, Dash provides the camera with access to this "gift" as well. The film uses nonsequential editing, voice-over, aberrant sounds, and vignettes to unsettle the audience's relationship with a traditional three-arc narrative (Act I—set up: exposition, inciting incident; Act II—confrontation: rising action, midpoint; Act III—resolution: preclimax, climax, and denouement). The vignettes are especially unnerving as we draft through the film rather than concretely move through a narrative with clear transitions. This effect conveys the film's use of conjure where we are pulled into the film through movement or force (and even at times through the force of the rituals conveyed onscreen) rather than pure narrative action alone.

*Praise House* notably features no male authority onscreen. Some of the angels may be gendered male, but I prefer to leave their gender identity open to ambiguity as they are vessels for the memory of ancestors and do not inscribe or benefit from the oppression of the women onscreen. A praise house specifies a place of worship without the aid of a minister or "leader" (George-Graves 2010, 73). It is a place largely filled with women performing the labor of the spiritual healers, the dancers, and the choir—labor that is normally gendered as "female" in Southern Baptist Christian practices—who freely move without the "watchful," and at times predatory, eye of the patriarchal pastor/reverend/minister. *Praise House* acts as an extension of the fluidity of that non-denominational space as these women's lives unfold without a male gaze. This is not to suggest that systems of patriarchy do not exist in the film; they do, and are exemplified through Mama's labor as a dishwasher, struggling to provide for the home.

Mama is constantly "worn" out, physically searching for peace; her personhood represents the conditions of reality in that she is condemned *by* and *in* it; she *is* the image of "reality." Mama's body is also the only body to convey the passing of time, for Hannah's and Granny's conjure acts (via rituals) pull them outside the legibility of the "representation" of linear time. Each time the sight takes hold, time becomes suspended in the image demonstrating ritual's reflexive activity in the form of the film and the representational effect. With Mama, her wage labor—hourly and daily—puts time into her body; she has the before and after embedded in her appearance that is tiredness, weariness. Her body becomes the revealer of the deadline, and Dash uses her presence to return audiences to reality whenever she emerges (Deleuze 1989, 189). A clear break between these women is manifested for the audience where we begin to recognize how conjure frees Granny and Hannah from time and see how violently time's burden lies upon Mama's personhood.

Our first encounter with Granny is in communion with the spirits. Dash visually conjures the angels here to convey a key difference between Granny's relative ease with her sight as a conjurer compared to the intensity of ritual labor that Hannah enacts

through drawing and dance. Hannah's body is defined by its process of relationality; she is constantly laboring for the audience and for her family (Thain 2017, 16). As audiences we are encouraged to view Hannah's body for its otherness in that her center lacks a fixed identity but is rather a series of processes of senses that propel her to conjure forth the recollection of images or other personhoods suspended in time. Her labor ritually brings communion to characters and the audience in that Hannah's violent embodiment of intensity enables a constant reservoir of a choreographic "replay to the [cultural] rites of [s]isterhood" (Spillers 1985, 163). If Hannah's rituals replay cultural rites for her family (in which her mother needs that affection), then the audience too is enraptured in the process of reorienting our aesthetic kin-relations in the process. The film makes good use of Hannah's ritual, for it mythologizes the life of Minnie Evans, a twentieth-century conjure artist.

Evans was born in Pender County, North Carolina in 1892 and worked in several domestic and security positions until her retirement at the age of eighty-two. In 1935, at the age of forty-three, Evans had a vision in which voices called out to her and said, "why don't you draw or die?" Evans completed two drawings from that call: *My Very First* and *My Second* are ink-on-paper pieces with abstract mapping that covers the entire sheet. Evans was so terrified by the process of possession and translation that she would not pick up a crayon again until 1940, when she became possessed and would draw those aberrations (recollection images) manifesting before her, for they would not cease (Lovell and Hester 1993, 4).

Evans's family thought she had "lost her mind" in the early periods of practice until they understood the acts of possession and could comprehend their force over her artistic production. In a post-screening discussion of *Praise House* held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019 (organized by Gwyneth Shanks, Simon Wu, and Nia Nottage, 2018–2019 Helena Rubenstein Curatorial Fellows at the Whitney Independent Study Program), Zollar stated that Evans would be considered schizophrenic today in Western Eurocentric terms; however, it is important to know that she pursued the act of artistic vision (or conjure) regardless of financial compensation or widespread visibility. The act of conjuring—that is, Evans's translation of her visions—indicated that there was something vital that was striving to create.

To Zollar, Evans's practice was a model for her to ascertain how to translate narrative through the labor of the body in dance, transforming the narrative as a ritual to conjure the essence of Evans to others. These dueling manifestations emerge in the body of Hannah, who is carrying the sight and ways of knowing from a previous generation (her grandmother and artist Minnie Evans) to the work of dance. Here, Zollar's specificity about Evans's perceived "madness" names the stakes of the film: *can we learn to relate with a mad Black woman in the world? And, critically, are we able to provide care for her?* Conjure—the act of plunging into time and drawing audiences into the space of movement where we see time split itself through its suspension—is Dash's way not only of drawing out our affective responses (being consumed by movement) but of drawing out a model of relationality to the characters and one another. For Dash, this looks like the emancipation of Black womanhood from colonial temporality.

Mama is firmly defined by her temporal placement in the film and rises as an opponent to Hannah's and Granny's conjure acts, refusing to relate. Mama continually pulls Hannah out of her rituals by calling her name and pointing to the domestic and wage labor that needs to be done to get by in life. Hannah's mother is burdened by labor practices that do not replenish her spiritually; she is presented as disconnected from the spiritual and from her ancestors. This separation is exemplified in a vignette

where Mama testifies to a group of church healers that Hannah's always talking about some vision and that, "If I had a nickel for every dish I wash, I'd be set up. I'd have me a good life. Maybe I'd be able to have me one of those big visions for me," suggesting, as Nadine George-Graves writes, that Mama literally cannot afford the time and labor (the commitment to ritual) that the visions demand (George-Graves 2010, 78).

Dash and Zollar do not frame "the spiritual" of the church as opposition in the film when Mama tries to "right" Hannah through the healing power of God. Here, we see a strategic, symbolic recoding where the Hannah's otherworldly use of aberrant movement parallels the movement of the healers and conjures the same angels. Hannah moves between both worlds as her mother testifies against her, not knowing that Granny, Hannah, the healers, and the angels are all on the same side. Charles M. Lovell reminds us that the practices of Hoodoo and the Black Southern Baptist church were often entwined as the same practice for many individuals. For Black artists in the Americas and Caribbean, spiritual practice (in either sense) travels between West Africa and the New World and that their art must be understood in that context—that is, the demonic ground constituted from enslavement (Lovell and Hester 1993, 5).

Granny departs this world halfway through the film. Just prior, Hannah communicates with Granny about their shared gifts—marking this as one of the few times Hannah uses speech. As Hannah brushes Granny's hair, she asks her about the gift of sight (to see the angels) and seeks guidance to comprehend the command they take of her body. Granny tells Hannah that these things have a "way of working themselves out." She then sings about the secret that exists in her hair and the gift that is shared between them and alerts her to her impending death so that she "will understand just where my world is gone," before requesting her purple dress, for the "angels are coming here this evening." Once again, Granny's riddles in speech exceed representational meaning. Granny's "formal" preparation for the angels is disrupted by Mama's insistence that Hannah do the dishes and put Granny to bed, but they also signpost to the audience that "meaning" is revealed through time and being immersed into time's fracture where communion with the past can formally usher the present to the fore. This is just another example where Dash relies on more affective registers and actions to communicate what the film is *doing* to her audience rather than structure meaning as available solely in language, representation, and speech.<sup>5</sup>

After Granny's passing, Mama and Hannah are left at odds with each other. Dash uses a vignette where Mama prays before a makeshift altar to save her daughter, while Hannah partakes in a dance ritual in the graveyard with the angels. The scene features parallel shots of Mama praying and Hannah dancing; this editing style is usually deployed to suggest the scenes are happening simultaneously and that they are each other's equal. This is of particular interest as both Mama and Hannah are performing rituals. However, Dash disrupts this simultaneity by inserting Mama's body in the graveyard searching for Hannah; she is both praying for her daughter in her scene and exists in Hannah's scene to guide her home and give Hannah her shoes after the angels take a more ambiguous hold of her body than in earlier scenes. If the shots of simultaneity exist, then the suggestion is that Mama's ritual of prayer enabled her to find and help her daughter, foreshadowing the climax where it is revealed that Mama possesses the gift of sight and conjure (as we see through dance) as well.

In his critical study on dance and movement in performance art, André Lepecki situates performance artists' use of dance as a threat to dance's tomorrow because it indicates a disruption of dance's identity as being in flow through its lack of choreographed being. He writes, "Perception of a hiccupping in choreographed movement produces a

critical anxiety; it is dance's very future that appears menaced by the eruption of kinesthetic stuttering" (Lepecki 2006, 1). Furthermore, Lepecki situates this anxiety as being intimately connected with space, place, bodies, and the history of colonialism. What I take from this is that spaces we inhabit and the memory that shapes those places affect and shape our being. Movement, specifically forms that produce a kinesthetic stuttering or aberration in dance through its use of cultural specificity to memory—hauntings, in relation to race—produced momentarily disruptions to linear time. The choreography of space to move us closer to *being* in time, which is achieved through the use of conjure (in both the camera as conjurer and via the narrative) and ritual dance in the film. *Praise House* is a dance ritual pulled from a variety of dramaturgical practices that include Zollar's archive of theatrical performance, a dance narrative working out forms of expressions and feelings from the dancers, and a negro ballet in the style of Katherine Dunham (Dee Das 2017, 25). Zollar trained in the Dunham technique while pursuing her studies at the University of Florida before applying more theatrical, experimental, and social engagements with dance to her practice with Urban Bush Women.

We see, then, elements of the rich pedagogical replay that Dunham meticulously researched to convey to an audience how folklore did not just exist in an isolated region but often incorporated dance and movements into its oral practices. Dunham frequently inscribed theory into her ballets as her aesthetics became her politics, for her "dance technique, which emphasized the creative reimagining of tradition, demanded a place for people of African descent in the realm of the modern" (Dee Das 2017, 56). In her biography of Dunham, Joanna Dee Das theorizes that the form of Dunham's works carried the political disruption around Black representation and folklore in the theaters in the United States as opposed to the content alone. She writes, "her seemingly neutral aesthetic choice to format the show as a revue . . . allowed audiences to travel without leaving their seats, on a journey of the imagination . . . [h]er black audience could experience kinesthetic empathy on an egalitarian level, a crucial aspect to the development of a diasporic sense of transnational belonging" (56). The depth of Dunham's investment is seen in her invaluable translation of the *ag'ya*.

The *ag'ya* is a Martinican dance, colloquially referred to as the Martinican fighting dance. As Dee Das writes, it relies heavily upon dissociation of movement and improvisation, a reworking of one's feelings to articulate to an audience (63). The general moves depict a turn not dissimilar from a pirouette, with the leg firmly outstretched in turnout with flexed feet, a clear opposite of the tucked-in form and divine lines of ballet. The leg firmly planted on the ground enabling the turn jumps and strikes a kick pose, and the outstretched leg takes its former place as support. From there, various "fighting" moves and leaps are enacted against another opponent. In the *ag'ya*, the opponent usually goes low when its opponent "strikes," creating a rhythm of endless weaving in and out of "aggressiveness" and "passiveness."

Dunham's construction of the *ag'ya* appears in *Praise House* specifically in the climax where Hannah—after receiving a scolding from her mother for "surrendering" to her visions as opposed to the "necessary" work of labor—tries to resist the call from the angels against a frantically beating drum and the angels' relentless chant, "There ain't no turning back!" This last dance is more violent than the others, which carried a sense of jubilee or glee in them (with the exception of the graveyard dance). The angels forcefully grab Hannah and in turn draw out that the tension of the gift is mandated by force; there is no other way but to work through it with the body. This knowledge is made pointedly clear as the film ends with Hannah's mother likewise being pulled

by the ritual against her will. The guardian angel watching over these women throughout the film is there to comfort Mama through the process just as she was there to help Granny cross over. This aesthetic framing of the violence of force and the angels' guidance suggests that although the process is violent, ultimately the access to other ways of knowing is invaluable for Black life and is now possible for Hannah and her mother to pursue and work out together. In turn this alters their familial relationship as Mama accepts the gift; it is now Hannah who must *mother* Mama through that process. Again, the audience is caught up in this movement and imbued with an alternative structure of care for others (and familial bonds) through the intensity of the ritual.

Hannah works out the *ag'ya* as a movement in tandem with her internal struggle and response to that struggle. In Zollar's choreography we grasp specific Black folkloric movements in dialogue with the dancer's response to the narrative, the narrative arc, and improvisation. The ritual of the dance exemplifies the ambiguity of the gift of sight, in that the movements are never at ease but always convey some tension, the citation of the *ag'ya* is an exemplar of this ambiguity (why cite a "fighting dance" for angels?). The gift—as manifested through rituals, be they through riddles, drawings, convulsions, or dance—is a form of communication and thus knowledge-production; we are pulled into this field of relations through Hannah's evocation of it in the film.

The use of conjure in the film bridges a gap from the relative absence of speech by Hannah in the film and the fractured forms of communication that emerge through her practices of conjuring (as brought forth by Dash and Zollar). Hannah rarely communicates through the forms of knowledge that her mother has inherited but can communicate through the gift. Similarly, when Granny speaks, her speech is in riddles or in spontaneous songs, indiscernible to her daughter but comprehensible to the angels whom she sees. Granny's vocalicity follows this pattern as she weaves in and out of song, accompanied by some type of soundtrack—which, like the presence of the angels, can be perceived by us, suggesting that her engagement with the angels is not because she's "crazy." When singing, her voice evokes the deep baritones emerging from Black Southern spiritual tunes: "I crossing da river" is verbally dragged out to tremble the river into a much longer note than exists in its syllables. This is the song that slows our engagement with the singer and with time. Granny's vocal timbre when she is not singing is often several octaves higher than her singing voice, producing an almost childlike quality to her presence that enables her daughter, Mama, to be dismissive and slightly patronizing of Granny's speech.

Hannah's silence and Dash's filmic shift to alternative forms of communication conceptualizes, in Wynter's terms, "un/silencing" or conjuring Caliban's woman (Wynter 1990, 363–64). To conjure Caliban's woman does not always mean manifesting her voice through speech but through poetic form, like experimental filmmaking and conjure, to make an account of their lives visible to others. In this way, Hannah and Granny conjure up the communication of that silenced Caliban's woman, including Evans whose work and life are reanimated in this film as a form of remembrance just four years after her death in 1987. *Praise House* is an affirmation of Evans's life, her visions, and her conjuring skills and in so doing, it provides a necessary way of learning about ways of being that exist beyond our colonial framework. *Praise House's* architectonics submit the life of Evans to a circle of mythology that through conjure draws out the place of Evans's life in the space of time. Evans's life becomes a speculative historical account for Dash in that she understands history to be something that can "be reincarnated, recollected, its spirit given new life as living memory" (Mellencamp 1999, 100).

### *A Question of Emancipation, Cinematic or Otherwise*

*Praise House* masterfully uses film aesthetics to conjure the memory of emancipation in its audiences, but the film also demonstrates the stakes and ambiguity of what conjuring does to the body. Mama and Hannah are case studies for *Praise House* in that they serve as larger, analogous examples of the tension that conjure and Caliban's woman produce through their unpredictable results in the "real" world. It is the practice of conjuring, which I read as inherent in the poetics of the film, that make the unknown visible for an audience. If the humanities sustain an opening of working through uncertainty, then we can further the work of poetics that participates in holding spaces open for alterity as demonstrated in the pursuit of Caliban's woman. Unpredictability, here, is constitutive of the land/people working through their aesthetics that fall outside of, or were symbolically coded negatively by, coloniality. This can be seen in *Praise House's* taboo subject of visions and talking to oneself and is even echoed by Granny at the start of the film, "They say I'm crazy but only time will tell." The process of recoding is varied and may not mean that "positive" value will be "restored" or would "occupy" that position; it is the process of *doing* and un/silencing that acknowledges what was erased and forgotten in that these new memories may emancipate us from the cinematic memory of *Man*.

Part of this process of recoding that draws out Caliban's woman is to work with symbols and narratives that may have already been negatively defined as abhorrent. Working with symbols negatively coded or rooted in Western conceptions of alterity is not an effort to reclaim those analogies but to open ontology to ways of being/knowing/feeling not accounted for under colonial logic, some type of existence that may lead to an articulation of emancipation, even, of oppressed bodies. The process exists in the poetic un/silencing of those images but not before it. As such, the work of symbolic recoding exists beyond a question of good or bad representation and instead breaks down the inception of representation as a symbolic stand-in for something else, alerting audiences to *how* referents are deployed to represent/be symbolically coded for life, value, and justice in Enlightenment terms. And how those "meanings" of value derived from the Enlightenment were established at the symbolic negation of a racialized, poor labor force. In effect, Wynter's scholarship declares that we must rewire our brains through analogies, giving us new memories that counter the memory of *Man* in cinema.

The need to move beyond the cinematic image of *Man* is to delink ourselves from the submission to its memory that causes us to repeat its codes, symbols, and kin-relations. To conjure Caliban's Woman and the demonic ground on which she resides is a step toward unsettling that dominant cinematic memory. Caliban's woman critically reveals to audiences that another way of living outside a patriarchal system is possible and has been practiced by our foremothers before us for many years, and I view the act of conjuring as instrumental in making that way of being/feeling/knowing tangible as a physical *feeling* to audiences. We may not always see it in the same way, as exemplified by Mama being initially unable to process the gift in *Praise House*, but like her eventual awakening in the film, conjuring is here to evoke the possibility of emancipation in this world, and when we feel it we will not be alone to process it and live in it.

### Notes

1 For that history, see Dozier 2010; 2015; 2017; 2018. See also Field 2016; Raengo 2016; Sheppard 2016. Recent scholarship on Black feminist experimental filmmaking traces its lineage to the experimental

filmmaking practice coming out of the LA Rebellion, of which Julie Dash was a member. Moreover, numerous Black feminist experimental filmmakers are the subjects of scholarship on their work, such as Madeline Anderson, Camille Billops, Michelle Parkerson, Ada Gay Griffin, and others. I have recapped that history elsewhere and do not see it necessary to restate here.

2 Wynter's critique of the symbolic meaning of Woman drew the ire of some feminists at the time, but it stood in dialogue with a larger critique on *Man* that was cut in order to publish the article as an afterword for the book (Boyce-Davies 2018, 838–39). It is important to note that “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning” does play out in a larger critique against labor’s monoconceptual framework of a Marxist-Leninist critique against oppression (especially as it was being heavily deployed by white feminists), which she argues cannot account for the pluriconceptual way in which Black/native bodies were and are oppressed in the world; space does not afford me the opportunity to deal with this critique in full.

3 Although Dash continues to struggle to receive financial backing for feature films following her, still sole, theatrical release, *Daughters of the Dust*, she has maintained somewhat steady directorial work in television. Like several other women from the LA Rebellion—Pamela Jones and Carrot Parrot Blue come to mind—Dash has accumulated a solid resume (if still not nearly as expansive as those of her male colleagues) through directing television episodes (most recently with *Queen Sugar* [2016–]), made-for-television films (*Subway Stories* [1997] and *The Rosa Parks Story* [2002]), and a few shorts for public television channels like KCTA TV.

4 We see this in films like *Illusions*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and her (unproduced) script for *Digital Diva*. “*Digital Diva* is about a young [B]lack woman who is a third-generation computer encryption specialist. She’s the digital diva. Her grandfather was a mathematical genius who worked for the Allies during World War II. And her father, a Carnegie Mellon Fellow, was a Black Panther” (Martin 2010, 5).

5 Granny asks Hannah to brush her hair. George-Graves astutely points to the intimacy of the request that combing a Black woman’s hair provides a direct link of intergenerational communion, and is one that Zollar has choreographed in other pieces in her oeuvre, such as *Hair Stories* (2001–present). Zollar stated in the post-screening discussion that the “hair vignette” manifests the dynamic of bodily labor and interpersonal relationship required to interact and convene with Black women, as “You just don’t let anyone touch your hair”. The framing of this scene features several close shots of Hannah brushing/working with Granny’s tight curls. These shots are similar to the opening frames of Mama washing the dishes and an unnamed individual shaving ice as Mama waits for the bus. The similarities of these shots suggest that Dash is interested in drawing out the social, interpersonal dynamics of domestic Black labor alongside questions of wage labor in society while also linking how ritual’s reflexive activity, if transformative to Mama, can shift our attention from the reality to the recollection of images of time itself.

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**Ayanna Dozier** is a performance artist, filmmaker, curator, and scholar. She is the author of the 33 1/3 book on Janet Jackson’s *The Velvet Rope* and the recipient of the 2020 Toni Beauchamp prize for Critical Art Writing. She received her PhD in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. She was a 2018–19 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Studies Program. She is currently a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University. [adozier2@fordham.edu](mailto:adozier2@fordham.edu)