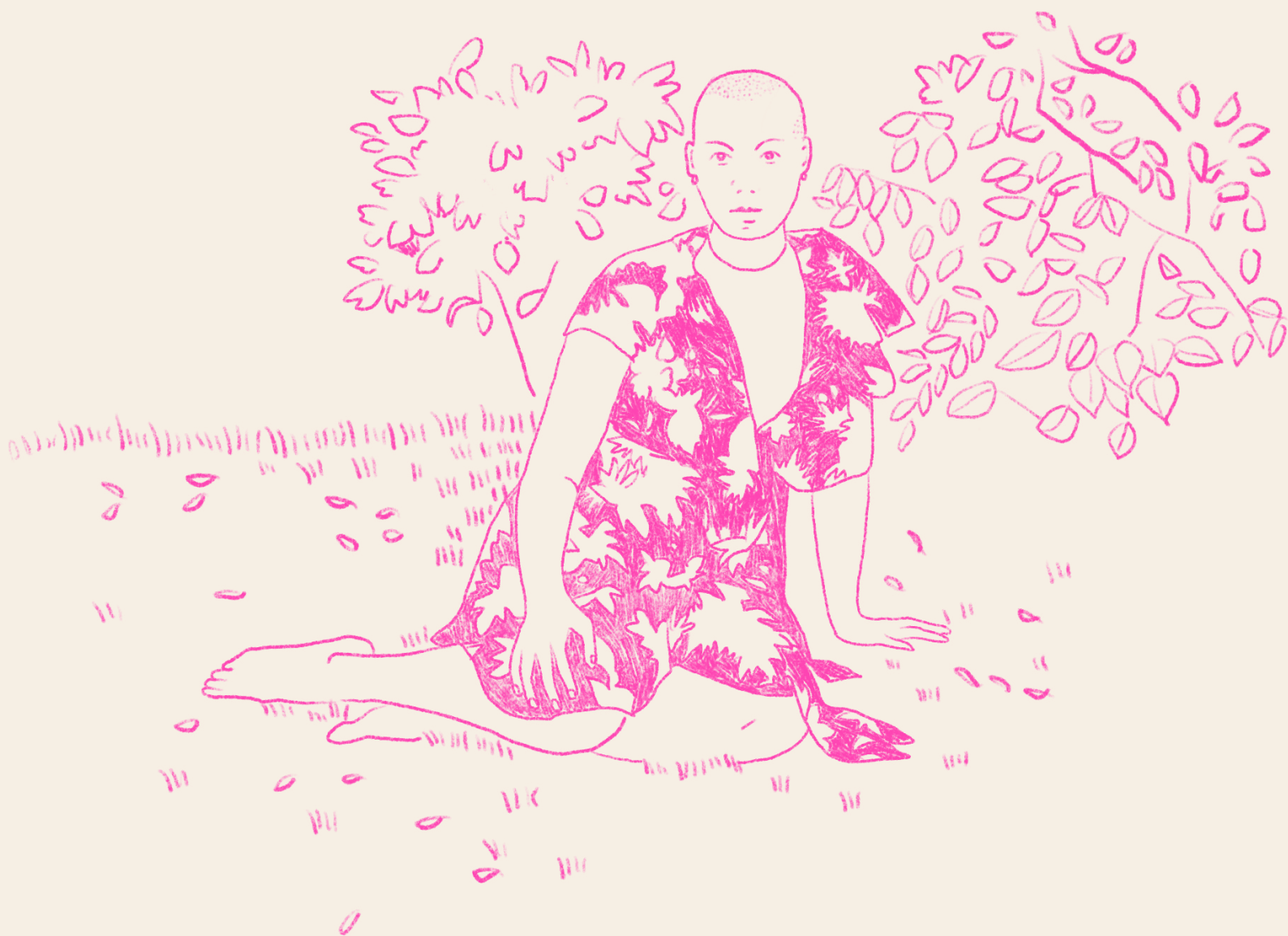


Liberation from Racial Oppression: *Ja'Tovia Gary's* Experimental Approach of Transcendence through Moving Images


by Gordon Fung



Ja'Tovia Gary is a filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist. She has presented works at numerous renowned festivals, including the Locarno Film Festival, Edinburgh International Film Festival, New Orleans Film Festival, and Ann Arbor Film Festival. She intertwines documentaries and experimental films into a closely knitted discourse. This dialogue conveys the multiple layers of Black resistance, resilience, and psychological residue of slavery and its associated historical complexity. She also bridges documentaries and videos from a broad timespan to create a timeless reference to how Black women respond to racial oppression. As part of the Voices in Moving Image Series organized by Alison O'Daniel in the CCA Graduate Film program, Gary presented three works created between 2013 and 2019 to show her progression and growth as an artist.



Screenshot of Cakes da Killa: NO
HOMO, 2013, from Gary's lecture



Gary filmed *Cakes da Killa: NO HOMO* (2013) during her first year of graduate studies at SVA in New York City. This film was presented at renowned film festivals such as the Ann Arbor Film Festival (awarded the 2014 Audience Award), the Chicago International Music and Movie Festival, and others of the same caliber. This early documentary represents how she incorporates personhood in her style. For this film, she interviewed and filmed Cakes da Killa, a queer hip-hop rapper who was 22 at the time of filming. This biographical portrait reveals the hardship and oppression received by many in the LGBTQ+ community. This hardship is felt through how Cakes retells his narrative through creativity and performance. Recounting the bullying he received in high school as an openly gay person, his approach to resilience was to stand up for himself, especially because nobody else was speaking up. While shooting, Gary enjoyed the collaboration as the pair vibed together, and the two young artists mutually brought ideas and inspiration to each other.

Inspired and encouraged by her instructor in graduate school, Gary started exploring experimental film. *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015) is a 6-minute film that explores its namesake. Despite its short length, it is intense and emotionally charged. Gary juxtaposed archival footage of experimentations with direct animation—an early analog technique pioneered by Len Lye and Stan Brakhage in the '50s. The archival footage includes a performance by Ruby Dee, an actress and civil rights activist. Dee reenacts a slavery narrative delivered by Fannie Moore in an original interview from the 1930s. Moore was a woman born into slavery in 1849, who narrated how her mom faithfully prayed that enslavement would end.

Given that analog films are projected at 24 frames per second, a 2-minute sequence would imply working on over 70 feet of celluloid. Gary described such a time-consuming process as “painstaking.” And yet, she found it rewarding as she developed a sense of intimacy and familiarity with Ruby Dee, as well as the historical backdrop of her performance. Over time, she became familiar with her face and the tale.

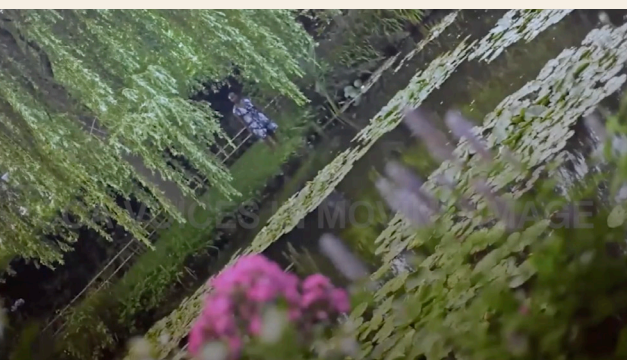
The video also integrates a gospel performance, paralleling how the Black community supports each other through a common faith. In contrast with that peaceful voice, the video includes footage of insurrection in modern-day Baltimore and Detroit in the '60s. By fusing the Black Lives Matter movement and Black Liberation Army across decades, Gary collapses time and confronts the viewers to acknowledge the devastating impact of state brutality. The oppression due to racial discrimination has defied the singular timeline of history.

Gary grew up in the '80s and was heavily influenced by '90s hip hop, R&B, soviet montage editing, and fast cutting technique. Her signature quick editing pace often becomes the heartbeat of her films. Her upbringing in Texas also exposed her to Black church communities, where she experienced marriages between gospel, blues, and musicals. Such a high caliber of musical experience granted her the idea to structure her film according to certain principles in music. Through this multi-layer process, Gary traced and incorporated the narrative in the mid-19th century and transcended it into a modern reinterpretation that celebrates liberation.

Accumulating her filmmaking experience's multiple layers, Gary filmed the *Giverny* series between 2016 and 2019. In 2016, she had a residency in Giverny, a village in northern France where Claude Monet resided and produced his signature impres-



**Screenshot of An Ecstatic Experience, 2013,
from Gary's lecture**



**Screenshot of the Giverny suite, 2016-2019,
from Gary's lecture**

sionist works in his garden. During the residency, Gary did not make many films. Instead, she witnessed violence in the country. Encountering such contradicting sentiments during the residency, she filmed herself wandering and posing around the garden to express the inconsistencies of her experience in France: her in the peaceful garden and the people in arms in the street. In 2019, she elaborated the whole project into *The Giverny Document*. This single-channel video work is a multi-layer mash-up that features the Giverny garden footage and interviews with people in Harlem alongside other found footage of Monet painting and Nina Simone performing, to name a couple. In her performance, Simone's reinterpretation of Albert Morris's *Feeling* poses an emotional interrogation to the film's audience.

In this project, Gary cast herself as an interviewer to interview female-identified people of African descent on the street. For her interview style, she drew reference from *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), a French documentary by filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin. Instead of asking Harlem residents about happiness as the original film does, Gary rephrased her questions to probe the interviewee's response towards personal safety in relation to their own bodies in the neighborhood and the world generally. Gary interviewed a diverse spectrum of Black females, including Harlem locals, Caribbean Afro-Cubans, Southern residents, African natives, and others. By incorporating this considerable diversity of Black girlhood, she defies the stereotype of Black women as portrayed in Hollywood blockbusters. The traditional screenwriting of those films narrows what Blackness means. But through her reexamination of Black femininity, Gary reinvents a narrative that is authentic to the contemporary world.

Gary also incorporated the footage of the killing of Philando Castile in Minneapolis in 2016, another fatal tragedy of police brutality in America. With the interplay of juxtaposition and opacity, Gary hid away the bloody body that mass media had shown over and over again. She plucked flower petals in the Giverny garden and pasted them onto the 16mm film as direct animation, a camera-less technique that works directly on the film emulsion. Gary referenced Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963), an early experimentation that adhered objects onto celluloid for projection. After digitizing the 16mm film, she overlaid it with her own portrait filming in the garden and the clip of Nina Simone's performance to filter out the violence. Yet, the devastating screams from Diamond Reynolds, Castile's surviving partner who witnessed and live-streamed the killing, penetrated through these seemingly "peaceful" images, creating a drastic effect that is unsettling to the viewers.

The world has seen too much violence and oppression due to racial injustice. It is up to artists to transform these actions of hatred into a message of hope. In the filmmaking world, many have followed a traditional commercial path; yet, many others dare to experiment and expand film's possibilities. Gary's experimental approach is one that successfully visualizes the transcendence of historical complication through moving images.



Screenshot of the Giverny suite, 2016-2019, from Gary's lecture

Gordon Fung is a transdisciplinary artist who works across various fields, including: installation, music composition, sound art, video art, multi-/ new media, experimental and conceptual arts, etc. With the use of unconventional materials like noises, lo-fi presentations, and glitches, his immersive and synaesthetic works challenge the viewers to expand their experiential horizon.

Voices in Moving Image: Ja'Tovia Gary was organized by CCA's Graduate Film and Graduate Fine Arts programs.