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**It's All for Naught:
Avant-Garde Cinema, Regional History, and the South**

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by

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Thesis

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Abstract

It's All for Naught: Avant-Garde Cinema, Regional History, and the South

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At the margins of cinema history are films that defy traditional strategies of production, narrative, and aesthetics. These “experimental” works are the subjects of their own histories concomitant to those in “mainstream” film studies. Media scholarship by the likes of David James and P. Adams Sitney has attempted to implement the avant-garde into wider filmmaking narratives. But histories and critical studies alike widely marginalize experimental works made outside of expected cosmopolitan centers, particularly when fringe films and their makers hail from the American South. This project argues that the near-elimination of the region’s avant-gardists from media history prevents works of cultural import from disseminating into the national narrative. Through an interdisciplinary study of local experimental communities, with direct focus on New Orleans, it also contends that recovering these works is essential to more inclusive and thus emancipatory regional media narratives. The thesis concludes with an original taxonomy of archives and interviews for future critical Southern media scholarship.

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Chapter 1: Experimental Film and the New South

Introduction

At the margins of American cinema history are works that defy normative strategies of production, narrative, and aesthetics. Critic Phil Hall describes such films as: “Eschewing the polished look of the Hollywood productions and usually throwing away the concept of linear storytelling, these films [take] on a rough and experimental visual quality that offered a surreal challenge to how audiences considered movies.”¹ Often referred to synonymously as “fringe,” “experimental,” or “avant-garde,” these works have been the subjects of their own taxonomies and histories concomitant to those in “traditional” film studies. The admixture of factors that leads to these labels can vary from film to film: where footage has been physically shot; how a filmmaker has chosen to present narrative action; or how the physical film material will be exhibited and distributed all contribute to the classification of a work as experimental. This thesis deploys terms like “avant-garde” and “fringe” in reference to any works that take non-normative approaches to aesthetic style, story, production models, distribution circuits, and in certain cases, the working philosophies of the artists. Where necessary for the accuracy of this project, these qualities are described and differentiated by film – one may be visually abstract but narratively conventional; another may not utilize physical film at all – in order to clarify why a certain piece is considered “experimental.”

Together, avant-garde films and their makers are participants in an alternative timeline of landmark work in American cinema. Historical narratives from within media

¹ Hall, Phil. *The Encyclopedia of Underground Movies: Films from the Fringes of Cinema*. Los Angeles: Michael Wiese Productions, 2004. p. xiii.

studies have attempted to offer such projects as counterpoints to dominant tales of the nation's filmmaking past: scholars like P. Adams Sitney, David James, and Sheldon Renon have written about distinct communities in which movements developed and came to influence wider cultural history. However, as Steve Anker and Kathy Geritz write, in the few instances when experimental communities are cited in histories of the American cinema, the academy consistently privileges work from the expected cosmopolitan centers: New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and sometimes Boston.² Film histories and more theoretical interdisciplinary investigations alike almost unanimously marginalize experimental film and non-narrative, fringe moving-image-making.

This is particularly true of the avant-garde filmmaking in the American South, an area of such expansive yet blurry boundaries that no one has appropriately defined them. Regional performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson, for example, insists that at least fifteen states should be included in any national geography.³ If the geospace is as large as Johnson describes, it follows that contemporary academic practice obscures a mass of work made by experimental filmmakers across the region. And since experimental film studies is already such a niche subfield in cinema (much less media) studies, this obfuscation of the Southern avant-garde pushes these media projects to the very peripheries of cultural consciousness.

² Anker, Steve; Geritz, Kathy and Steve Seid, eds. *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. p. 9.

³ Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. p. 11.

In the wake of recent natural disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, as well as the ever-expanding amateur and fringe media landscapes, experimental film from the American South is in danger of becoming nearly invisible. Historians must ask: what are the ramifications of and the extent to which avant-garde filmmaking from the South is marginalized in regional history? And how does the incorporation into or neglect of experimental cinema history impact wider American culture?

This thesis argues that the near-elimination of regional avant-garde work from scholarship prevents works of historical import from disseminating into the national cultural narrative. This, in turn, helps to maintain exclusionary archival, social and organizational practices that have resulted in loss of valuable material artifacts. Through an interdisciplinary study of avant-garde cinema practice in the South, and in a case study of post-Katrina New Orleans, Louisiana thereafter, it also contends that reclaiming these works can contribute to a more socially inclusive, and therefore more historically rich, regional media narrative. Finally, the thesis concludes with an original taxonomy of archives and interviews that will help scholars to enrich Southern cinema studies.

In order to substantiate these claims, the project addresses several key questions. It first highlights the contexts and academic disciplines in which histories of the South and the American avant-garde consistently overlap. Next, in Chapters One and Two, the project determines how institutions, mediamakers, and the networks of distribution in the underground macroregional and more local New Orleanian communities perpetuate exclusionary historical practices. It asks how the segregation of the Southern avant-garde from multiple scholastic disciplines fosters an incomplete understanding of New Orleans

culture and history; and further, how future research might counter such marginalizing practices. Ultimately, the thesis argues that the avant-garde of the American South can and should be more widely valued as a culturally powerful, pedagogy-combatting element in the nation's media history.

Literature Review

The major scholarship from which this thesis draws necessarily occupies several overlapping fields. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee have explained that film studies and southern cultural studies converged from the earliest moments of inquiry into each, and that the South's visual legacy is inextricably tied up with that of the United States.⁴ This section thus interrogates how the narrative lines of national cinema and southern studies have concomitantly addressed the avant-garde since the New American Cinema group's emergence in the 1960s, as best chronicled in P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*.⁵ More recent and more space-specific media studies have since emerged that help bring these fields into the contemporary moment for the reader. Regional scholarship combines with media studies in the second chapter in order to frame the complex academic discourse around New Orleans's unique social status and complex public image in the United States. In the post-Hurricane Katrina years, geopolitical considerations of the city's media landscape have significantly overused the binary around New Orleans-as-historical-exception and New Orleans-as-regional-paradigm, a discursive practice that I refute. Still, in concluding

⁴ Barker, Deborah and Kathryn McKee, eds. *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. p. I.

⁵ Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1974. p. 16.

my case study of the city, these scholastic poles do encourage a discussion of its sociocultural status and media output within the greater Southern imaginary.

Cinema Studies

Though preceded by surveys of the non-normative by David Curtis (in 1971) and Stan Brakhage (in 1972), Sitney's 1974 book *Visionary Film* marked a change in distribution channels, production methods, and aesthetics amongst filmmakers.⁶ Sitney explains that collectives of audiovisual artists, specifically those in New York City in the 1960s, had seen fully-fledged communities coalesce in which development and exhibition were being financially and culturally sustained. A filmmaker himself and the foremost academic of a group that consisted of several others – Ken Jacobs, Jonas Mekas, and Kenneth Anger among them – Sitney wrote that his peers' work was epochal. His historical claims are among the first to define critical perspectives on the modern American avant-garde. However, in the ensuing years, scholars have complicated Sitney's narratives of the field by factoring new spatiotemporal contexts into their analysis. In 1976, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino attempted in Bill Nichols's anthology *Movies and Methods* to shift genre studies into the realm of experimental cinema scholarship by identifying such films as segments of a general "Third Cinema."⁷ For Solanas and Getino, Mekas, Jacobs and Anger represented only a small segment of a movement that stretched from shore-to-shore, its practitioners connected in practice by the use of alternative audiovisual strategies and underground distribution techniques.

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Getino, Octavio and Fernando Solanas. "Towards a Third Cinema," *Movies and Methods. An Anthology*. Bill Nichols, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. pp. 44 – 64.

Solanas and Getino were correct, but their proposal offered mere testament to thirdspaces in U.S. film rather than substantive analysis. The study of experimental cinema has since evolved from purely testimonial to the more theoretical and critical, laying the groundwork from which this project originates. Sitney himself realized the field was in a constant state of discursive flux and was quick to publish *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* with Anthology Film Archives, an avant-garde film distributor. In the book, he shifts from his earlier textual readings and interviews to essays focused on recurrent themes, emergent genres, and new communities that had formed in the decade following *Visionary Film*'s publication. Sitney's input as an editorial curator resulted in a major swing away from book-length, quasi-historical essays on the American avant-garde in the Renan mode and towards collection editing in multiple media forms. Pip Chodorov's *Free Radicals* [2012] and Stephen Silha and Eric Slade's *Big Joy* [2013], for example, focused on avant-garde history as their mutual subject. Both films utilize decidedly non-normative audiovisual techniques to represent narratives of avant-garde history, demonstrating the shift from classical documentary practices to more reflexive stylistic approaches.

Wheeler Winston-Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster compiled an extensive anthology on the same subject in *Experimental Cinema, the Film Reader* in 2002. Where Sitney classified the key practitioners of New American Cinema in essay, Winston-Dixon and Foster recover filmmakers previously neglected by both canonical and alternative narratives of the American cinema. Their book unites AV work of 1920s underground artists to the politicized racial, gender, sexual orientation-based, and aesthetics-based

movements of the new millennium. The editors utilize interviews, prose poetry, reception material, and autobiography. And Jan-Christopher Horak's *Lovers of Cinema: The American Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* furthers their efforts by asking how makers of experimental cinema emerged in step with the cultural turmoil of the American interwar period.⁸ Horak's investigation of war's pollination into national experimental productions, as well as the growth of the classical Hollywood studio system, ventures into a critical mode that had few precedents. His contention that global conflict led to an influx of cinematic experimentation within and outside of the mainstream American cinema fortifies the need for dual methodologies: archival historiography and media analysis.^{9 10}

These authors represent the best-known attempts to foment experimental film as an academic subfield, but they almost unanimously reinforce the marginalization of regional works in interdisciplinary scholarship. In fact, sources that incorporate postcolonial, global or Southern studies frameworks into writing on the avant-garde are extremely scarce – making each individual project all the more essential. A critical space is open for theses like my own to make visible peripheral histories of production, reception, and distribution of avant-garde work made outside of the expected metropolitan communities. As David James argues, minor or Third cinemas “create

⁸ Horak, Jan-Christopher. *Lovers of Cinema: The American Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ In Ch. 2, Joy V. Fuqua takes the concept of global conflict one step forward in her discussion of the “disaster aesthetic” in postdiluvian New Orleans. She argues that the debris of trauma left by the storm has filtered into visual imagery in alternative local media projects, as it did in both mainstream and avant-garde films of the interwar period.

emancipatory and progressive culture” in their originary regions.¹¹ His contention is one of this project’s grounding conceptual beliefs at it regards national moving-images.

Histories like James’s *The Most Typical Avant-Garde* and *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*, published five years after, take defiant interdisciplinary approaches to the places of experimental production. Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid, the latter’s editors, combine oral ethnography, primary source archiving, lyric nonfiction, and photographic essays to suggest that communities in Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, and Marin all generated exemplary and historically radical “experimental” works. Implementation of the Bay Area underground corrupts both the geospatial narratives of the Sitney-era avant-garde and of the country’s mainstream cinema, which normally erases San Francisco from the canon. This explicit example of scholastic defiance finds important parallels in Jeffrey Skoller’s *Shadows, Specters, Shards* [2005]. Skoller combined archival visits and textual analysis to trace American historical narratives of experimental film and video communities around the country.¹² And similarly, he attempts to defy them through the reclamation and first iteration of previously marginal works and figures. He nonetheless almost exclusively refers to filmmakers or their work from outside of the South, reinforcing the pedagogical habit of focusing on urban capitals of the American North.

Laura U. Marks successfully fuses Benedict Anderson’s concepts of imagined communities with postcolonial critiques in her approach to intercultural, multimedia, and

¹¹ James, David. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. p. 1.

¹² Skoller, Jeffrey. *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. p. 4.

national cinemas. Marks's analyses in *The Skin of the Film* [2000] suggest that common approaches to sensory representation (or haptics), and to distribution of moving image media throughout North America, effectively communalize and regionalize alternative films.¹³ This suggests that a cohesive network of aesthetic choices and distribution methods exists for experimental video from Little Rock, documentary Super-8 footage from Miami, and abstract installation art from Jackson. For Marks, such haptics can be representative of a unified sociocultural thirdspace regardless of the mediamakers' intents or affiliations.

Southern & New Southern Studies

If the history of experimental film is to be considered, we must also maintain adequate focus on historical narratives of the region's mediascape as per Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee's argument. Their 2011 collection, *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, seeks "both to construct and to unsettle national narratives" by mapping the braided trajectories along which national film history has been crafted.¹⁴ Barker and McKee locate the foundational moment of this dualistic disciplinary approach in Warren G. French's *The South in Film* [1981], though they acknowledge that the anthology's essays were already outdated by the time Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* was released in 1982. Anderson's concept of nationalism as constructed pathologically in the minds of a "country's" inhabitants, rather than by "real" geographic borders, led regional scholars to note: "all communities larger than primordial villages of

¹³ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. p. 11.

¹⁴ Barker/McKee. p. 3.

face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”¹⁵ This includes “New Orleans” at the micro level and “America” more broadly. This postcolonial framework alerted the academy that French’s original piece in *Southern Quarterly* grappled merely with representations of the South in Hollywood, while neglecting to consider the disjuncture between mainstream cinema’s representation of the region and the region’s actual media landscape.

Barker and McKee argue that only with Michael Kreyling’s *Inventing Southern Literature* [1998] did the New Southern Studies begin to force globalization, intercultural exchange, and imagined community studies into the “self-absorbed gaze” of southern media history writing. This field has so far fostered the strongest structural models for the historical approach this thesis takes to southern avant-garde film. Kreyling fused contemporary postcolonial scholarship by Anderson, Homi Bhabha, and Édouard Glissant with a Southern Studies framework, allowing him to collapse the synecdochic relationship between the region and its many signifiers.¹⁶ Kreyling’s addition to official media narratives is an important step in the recovery of marginalized histories, but Barker and McKee neglect valuable preeminent scholarship other than his and French’s. Karl G. Heider’s *Images of the South* collection, which attempts to “construct a regional culture on film and video,” also details the exhibition and distribution paths on which Southern underground and amateur moving-image work circulated. Heider’s collection is doubly

¹⁵ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Ed. London: Verso Books, 2006. p. 11.

¹⁶ “Faulkner,” the “gothic,” and “Black-ness,” are key examples of such signifiers. Resultantly, Kreyling’s book has caused a critical reevaluation of these diverse terms in the two decades since its publication.

notable for its commission by the University of Georgia's Southern Anthropological Society in 1993, a clear indication that concepts of the South-as-concrete place were in flux to those living and working in the region.¹⁷

Historiographical, archival, and mixed media research define the structural success of microregional studies like Wanda Rushing's *Memphis and the Paradox of Place* [2009]. Rushing regards her subject with a strong awareness of its oxymoronic global/local media production, from blues music to corporate supermarkets to fringe documentary filmmaking. She also refuses, rightfully, to divorce Memphis history either from southern *or* from broader national narratives.¹⁸ A similarly useful structural template is found in Alison Macor's trade-friendly *Chainsaws, Slackers, and Spy Kids*, an interdisciplinary account of localized Austin cinema. Though Macor's book is perhaps more colloquial than scholastic, her project nonetheless combats the exclusionary metropolitan film histories like Sitney's that pay Texas no heed.¹⁹ Rushing admirably confronts Memphis's problematic cultural identity and the exceptional/exemplary binary that interferes with accurate media history, while Macor dismisses the binary outright. These authors together provide a strong framework for the second chapter of this thesis in particular, in which New Orleans's avant-garde comes to the fore in a case study.

¹⁷ Heider, Karl G., ed. *Images of the South: Constructing a Regional Culture on Film and Video* (*Southern Anthropological Society Proceedings*.) Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993. p. xi.

¹⁸ Rushing, Wanda. *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* (*New Directions in Southern Studies*.) Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. pp. I-II.

¹⁹ The issue of Texas's "Southernness" requires (and receives) significant debate elsewhere, but Johnson and Macor both describe it as a state in the South. This thesis follows those expert opinions; but for the most part, this issue is elided.

In the process of repositioning New Orleanian experimental film history(s) within the wider South's, critical region-based scholarship provides more complex investigative methodologies. For Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, the concept of social borders – often enforced by national bureaucracies – are as imagined as Anderson considers the very existence of the nation. Perhaps no American Southern city's cultural borders are more unstable and ersatz than those of New Orleans. Rightly, theoretical and historical discourse around its social identity and positionality has become a widespread practice. Spivak and Butler's stances originate with the recent social scientific adoption of Kenneth Frampton's "Critical Regionalism," better known for cultural studies analyses of architecture and frontiers. But their critiques deal equally with broader cultural output as with the recent defining trauma of Hurricane Katrina. By necessity, this thesis draws from a variety of "post-K" essays, books, maps, and media that move out of the public cultural commentary of Frampton, Spivak, and Butler, and into the Marksian thirdspace.

Lawrence Powell's *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* [2013] helps revise city history to accommodate the post-colonial hybridity and cultural multiplicities that define Louisiana's largest metropole. Powell's tracing of the French, Spanish, Caribbean, British, and Creole influences is at first classical, then gives way to his reflexive, contemporaneous rejection of any single objective history.²⁰ Like Ned Sublette's *The World That Made New Orleans*, Powell's book both creates new narratives and informs them with de-historicizing critiques, using official colonial-era records of the city to argue against their own verisimilitude. In so doing, Sublette and

²⁰ Pratt, Lloyd. "New Orleans and Its Storm: Exception, Example, or Event?" *American Literary History*. Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 119.

Powell defy extant pedagogical histories and make room for more in the wake of the deluge.

Neither author provides a replacement model for New Orleanian media scholarship to follow, but others have taken up this challenge. Richard Campanella's *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before The Storm* [2006] pivots on the erasure of history that Katrina wrought, and pays special attention to the multiform works that compose urban landscapes and neighborhoods. Campanella's geospatial project pairs nicely here with the twenty-two-fold "remappings" collated by Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker in their interdisciplinary *Unfathomable City* atlas. Solnit and Snedeker's impeccable multimedia collection also inscribes sociopolitical and cultural lines into the geography of the Bayou, most notably where such lines have been obscured by the destruction of physical media and notoriously sticky colonialist cartographic practices. Their maps combine personal visual art with academic histories to create more equivalently gendered, racialized, spatial (for different neighborhoods) and class-focused narratives. Artists contribute drawings, paintings, and original photography that supplement various recreations of the city's "borders." Their use of "Unfathomable" is ironic: for Snedeker and Solnit's historian-artisans, local media is salvageable, recordable, and certainly fathomable under diligent scrutiny. The atlas, together with Campanella's project, literally redraws the imagined boundaries inside of which the city's experimental ventures take place; at the same time, it accords such fringe projects renewed relevance in the New Orleanian scholastic community.

Localized New Orleanian underground productions have come under the critical scrutiny of Diane Negra, Dan Streible, and Joy V. Fuqua. Negra's *Old and New Media After Katrina* ventures into performance, music, painting, and other important forms of response to the storm, but its attention to audiovisual media is of eminent value. Through interdisciplinary foci, the essayists in Negra's collection historicize projects and producers representative of the fringe moving-image community in the post-Katrina landscape. Additionally, archive-oriented critics like Streible and Fuqua, among others, centralize their microregional studies around "race, class, region, government, and public safety" in the context of local media's recent move towards a unified "disaster aesthetic."²¹ These essays apply laser-foci to the current geopolitical, social, and cultural circumstances across the postdiluvian New Orleans mediascape in the aftermath of both local trauma and natural disasters throughout the South. The result, as James argues, is the recovery of "emancipatory" and "progressive" narratives of the city's and the region's supposedly "unfathomable" alternative media.²²

The State of the Southern Avant-Garde: A Cinema History

Experimental filmmaking in the South has in recent years produced works that cinema historian Scott MacDonald calls "avant-docs."²³ MacDonald has traced how commercial film and television opportunities in the South are the portals for deliberately

²¹ Fuqua, Joy V. "The Big Apple and the Big Easy: Trauma, Proximity, and Home in New (and Old) Media," *Old and New Media After Katrina*. Diane Negra, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 43.

²² See Snedeker/Solnit, Introduction.

²³ MacDonald, Scott. *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*. Berkeley: University of California Press and Ahmanson Foundation, 2013. p. 2.

non-commercial ventures into alternative nonfiction.²⁴ Experimental documentary often emerges in direct antagonism to normative visual style, with the filmmaker(s) interrogating the very term “nonfiction” through challenging formal, aesthetic, and exhibitory strategies. Ross McElwee is perhaps the best-known documentarian of this type in the American underground; and he is also a case study in the use of jump-cut imagery, multiple footage imposition, and dislocated voiceover that marks avant-garde style.²⁵ ²⁶ McElwee was hired to film RCA news studio television prior to making the nationally distributed *Sherman’s March* in 1986, but for MacDonald, the latter job would not been possible without the former. The filmmaker’s commercial background attests to both the maneuvering that even famous experimental practitioners, like Stan Brakhage’s commercials or Peter Kubelka’s safari tourist films, must do to get by; and to the denial of one’s artistic capabilities that goes in to producing commercially viable nonfiction.

In certain historic cases from the South, avant-doc aesthetics overlap with a more mainstream audiovisual sensibility. For example, the Memphis-based filmmaker Judy Peiser and her documentary ethnography collaborator William “Bill” Ferris obtained public funding for autopoetic films about hog-whispering, blues music, and local history. These non-narrative short films, referred to more often as “folklore” than “nonfiction,” often shirk any cohesive story in favor of lyrical, abstract imagery. As documents, Peiser’s and Ferris’s films are considered deeply historical, meriting commendations from Former President Bill Clinton and continued funding by the National Endowment

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁶ Scott MacDonald profiled McElwee for his 2013 book on critical ethnography. See *American Ethnographic Film*.

for the Arts.²⁷ ²⁸ Given these qualities alone, their material preservation is a significant factor in the protection of American culture.

Despite such historical films, interdisciplinary writing fails to recognize how the nonfiction tradition continues across the regional South's avant-garde. Sustained aesthetically – if not always by each individual community's output – by what Marks has theorized as the “haptics” of transnational cinema, alternative audiovisual techniques act as conduits for intercultural experience. In this way, experimental media represent the unrepresentable differences between “official history” and “private memory.”²⁹ Put more precisely, avant-nonfictions, especially in such subgenre as ethnography, biography, folktale, and historical documentary, disrupt dominant narratives of the South.

Take for instance Jonathan Kahana's example of a 2006 surrealistic, lyric documentary by Liza Johnson about the effect of Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast: “One of the rare works of film or visual art made in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to look beyond the devastation of New Orleans, *South of Ten*...opens our eyes to the possibilities of other images, and other meanings, of this American tragedy.”³⁰ Besides inserting itself into a national media discourse that has notoriously centralized New

²⁷ <<http://www.folkstreams.net/pages/about.html>>

²⁸ William “Bill” Ferris is also the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the founding director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture; and the co-founder of the Center for Southern Folklore. His canonization in American history, however, remains incomplete, as his filmmaking has yet to be the subject of an aesthetic or regional studies analysis. This thesis represents an early effort to place his work with Judy Peiser into these discourses.

²⁹ Swalwell, Melanie. “The Senses and Memory in Intercultural Cinema,” *Film-Philosophy*. Vol. 6, No. 32, October 2002. Accessed Online February 2015.

³⁰ Johnson, Liza and Jonathan Kahana. “Interstates: *South of Ten*,” *Millennium Film Journal*. No. 51: Experiments in Documentary (Spring/Summer), 2009. Accessed March 2015. <<http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ51/Johnson%20Kahana.html>>

Orleans as Katrina's victim at great cost to Mississippi, Kahana argues that *South of Ten* disrupts the official narratives of the storm that popular histories reinforce.³¹ Johnson's work and that of her collaborators inscribes the Hurricane into a cross-regional aesthetic movement that includes fluid editing, dislocated dialogue over the soundtrack, and abstract landscape shots. *South of Ten*, a document of private, local memory, can be seen as a sister-text to the more conventionally distributed and exhibited *When the Levees Broke* [2006]. Simultaneously, it diverges from the tragic narratives in which Spike Lee's film traffics, putting their imagery into direct conversation.

Furthermore, avant-docs and experimental ethnographies have accompanied fiction works that imbricate regional haptics with historical memory. The filmmaker and educator Georg Koszulinski's *Cracker Crazy: Histories of the Sunshine State* [2007] explicitly interrupts the wider cultural imaginary of his native Florida by combining found-footage, old documentary reels, and photography with surrealistic modern sets. Since Hurricane Sandy destroyed much of South Florida in 2011, Koszulinski's work has come to the fore of the state's experimental history. This is because his films are characterized by the vocalization of "invisible histories," untold narratives that have been sublimated by Floridian public image making (as well as by more nationally cultivated myths and clichés about the state.)³² For example, his earlier film, *Blood of the Beast* [2002], inverts horror film tropes with formalist experiments that intentionally deny the viewer any cohesive story. In this non-narrative approach to cinema, Koszulinski shares

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cassanello, Robert. "Review: *Cracker Crazy: Invisible Histories of the Sunshine State*," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 86, No. 2 (Fall). Orlando: University of Central Florida, 2007. p. 251.

with experimentalists like Ed Pincus, McElwee, and Johnson an interest in breaking official histories apart. His films utilize similar haptics to achieve this goal, and thus position themselves within an aesthetically unified Southern thirdspace.

Organizations, not just individuals, participate in the recovery of “invisible histories” within this geospace’s media. Under the guidance of animator Jan Millsapps, the South Carolina Arts Commission funded a touring program of regional experimental works in 1982.³³ The films presented came from several states with the intentional purpose of reinvigorating a “*Southern Circuit*” for “independent media artists.”³⁴ The Arts Commission’s involvement is itself historic, a rare act of government collaboration with fringe film artists from the American South. More recently, private media collectives like the Atlanta, Georgia-based Contraband Cinema have made efforts to exhibit, distribute, and promote alternative audiovisual works. Contraband’s business practice parallels the Bay Area-based Other Cinema’s, which Craig Baldwin borrowed in turn from the San Francisco avant-garde distributor Canyon Cinema. Likewise, that organization’s exhibitory and promotional strategies were drawn from the New American Cinema group – establishing an interstate network on which to consistently circulate and screen new work. Over thirty years, the tactics of Contraband and Millsapps’s *Southern Circuit* team have helped to stabilize an interregional circuit for experimental cinema that remains active to this day.

³³ Leonard, Susan. “Southern Films To Circulate Internationally,” *Independent Spirit*. Vol. IV, No. 1 (Winter). Columbia: South Carolina Arts Commission, 1983. Online Newsletter. Accessed April 2015. p. 2.

<<http://dc.statelibrary.sc.gov/handle/10827/11451?show=full>>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Marginalization in Southern Archives and History

Writing on the historic power of experimental ethnography, Catherine Russell argues via Walter Benjamin that the use of a new, non-normative aesthetics in mediamaking creates a conundrum for those who write history. Each “auratic” work of avant-garde ethnography “theorizes cultural memory without mystifying it as an originary site,” a major postmodern and postcolonial disruption of dominant practices in the academy.³⁵ The overuse of canonical work in history and analysis denies the American South relevance in contemporary avant-garde studies because, for one, it restricts viewership of important artifacts from less cosmopolitan, urban communities than San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City. Russell points out that this has been the habit of international filmmakers and scholars for years: one group even protested the International Film Congress in 1989 when it promoted “the Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde.”³⁶ The reinforcement of the underground cinema canon prevents considerations of non-landmark works. In turn, this widespread historical approach sublimates such works, and in the language of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, reinforces certain experimentalists’ stranglehold on history. Ultimately, the endemic liminality of the avant-garde from regional media scholarship barricades the collective national consciousness from contact with marginal voices in local media.³⁷

³⁵ Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Recovering southern experimental film from the cultural periphery through archival research disrupts these narratives' strangleholds. One of the key factors in the continued marginalization of the macroregion in media scholarship is what Russell posits as a problem of "the social."³⁸ She contends that contemporary historians elide cross-regional haptic imagery and alternative mediamaking communities in their academic writing. Russell's argument parallels Stephen Tyler's claim that postmodern ethnographic work from any region or medium can act as a "document of the occult," a provocation against ideas of historical truth.³⁹ The avant-ethnographic process of *South of Ten*, for instance, is an aesthetic counterpart to the more widely discussed anthropologies of Trinh Minh-ha, Julie Dash and Peter Kubelka. Historians and critics have labeled Kubelka's satirical anthropology *Unsere Afrikareise* [*Our African Journey*, 1966] a paradigm of experimental ethnographic practice. Scott MacDonald's interview with the filmmaker for *A Critical Cinema 4* [2005] and continued considerations of *Afrikareise* in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* [2013] even posit the filmmaker's surrealist, absurd approach alongside Brakhage and Maya Deren in the canon. However, no Southern media artists are invoked in this discourse.⁴⁰ The "social" problem mentioned by Russell is that the New York and Bay Area independent film scenes eclipse movements from imagined "elsewheres," like the South or the rural

³⁸ Russell, p. 16.

³⁹ Tyler, Stephen A. "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. p. 122.

⁴⁰ See MacDonald, 2005; MacDonald, 2013.

Midwest. As such, invoking Liza Johnson's anthropological experiments is a politicized interruption of the pedagogical cinema histories oriented around Kubelka or Minh-ha.

Another social factor in the scholastic marginality of southern experimentalism is the indefinability of the region's imagined borders. In 2010, the state of Maryland made clear its determination to leave the cultural South despite being geographically located below the Mason-Dixon. How, then, should historians incorporate the new Baltimore-based experimental media collective Sight Unseen into their research? Like its aforementioned counterparts in Georgia and South Carolina, the collective's website features filmmakers from Maryland and Florida working with members from New York City. What Sight Unseen's particular situation requires is case-by-case interrogation of each filmmaker about his or her regional affiliation; otherwise, it is unfair to put the organization's community identity into critical dialogue with Memphis, New Orleans, or Atlanta underground cinemas. As Johnson and others have argued, a micro approach is necessary for any honest scholarly investigation into Border State media. Additionally, historian Steve Hendrix has written of the "D.C. area and Dixie drifting farther and farther apart."⁴¹ Hendrix is not being literal when he describes the "drift," but rather observes the "steep decline" of Washington's bond with more "in-between" Border States like Pennsylvania and Maryland.⁴² The sociocultural borders of the district are too

⁴¹ Hendrix, Steve. "D.C. area and Dixie drifting farther and farther apart," *The Washington Post*. Newspaper. Published January 16, 2011. Accessed Online March 2015. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2011/01/15/AR2011011503988.html>>

⁴² Ibid.

socially blurry and fluctuating to presume its appropriateness for Southern experimental media studies. Hence, scholars in the field often omit it from historical studies.

Moreover, academic and geopolitical borders are maintained by a vanguard of cultural experts and public figures from within local communities themselves. Wanda Rushing explains how the identity crisis faced by the citizenry of Memphis, a bustling metropole and media hub at the North end of the South, impacts national discourse: “Memphis ‘has come to see itself as an amalgam of characteristically southern urban traits, where close proximity to rural culture bred innovative cultural expression and also fomented vicious racial tension, where the influences of the rural delta still mix uncomfortably with cosmopolitan ideals.’”⁴³ Rushing goes on to argue that this identity discomfort has created incoherence around Memphis’s public image, social memory, and historical narrative.⁴⁴

As “auratic” conduits for local memory and the Marksian haptic imagery that Rushing speaks to, experimental media (and their histories) from within the city and wider Delta region are troubled by this cultural confusion. Consider that the decades-old Indie Memphis film festival only began to screen the city’s experimental films in 2013, despite continuous output by independent artisans labeled by the organization as “Hometowners.” This very recent decision reveals ArtsMemphis’s collective wish to be associated with the more urban underground cinema movements in New York and San

⁴³ Rushing. p. 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Francisco, rather than with its distinctly local alternative mediamakers.⁴⁵ Rushing argues that this preference carries over into criticisms of more mainstream works, like those made by Memphian director Craig Brewer: “People already think Memphis is a backwater river town. [Brewer’s film *Hustle and Flow* {2006}] will just further their perceptions.”⁴⁶ So while Brewer’s first digital works remain foundational in the city’s fringe community, the public fears association with the subjects of his popular fiction films, which include rural poverty, pimping, and spousal abuse in the South.

Finally, it is clear that the academic marginalization of experimental film exists in part due to media archival priorities throughout the region. Southern archives widely prioritize local newsreels of the kind housed by the Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound, or anthropological jazz docs as in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane, when allocating archival monies. Greg Wilsbacher of the Moving Image Research Collections argues that the principle challenge for preservationists in the South is to convey to funders what physical material is being handled; how precisely the process works; and why preservation is so urgent for such material. The Folkstreams network housed at the South Carolina School of the Arts best articulates the problems faced by independent, aesthetically “deviant” productions seeking archival stewardship:

Audiences might lack the background to understand the social worlds that the films showed. The documentaries to which public-television programmers instead gravitated typically had national historical subjects presented through scripted narration intercut with archival photographs, newsreel footage, and talking heads of scholars. If

⁴⁵ ArtsMemphis is the state-run parent organization for Indie Memphis, and assigns its employees in part to create and develop the annual film festival program. In this way, the festival’s efforts are directly reflective of its host, and perhaps indirectly, the Tennessean government’s.

⁴⁶ Rushing, p. 148.

independent filmmakers could not work through existing media institutions, they also found that they had no good way to advertise and sell their work to the general public.⁴⁷

Comparably, Edwin G. Frank, Ann E. Case, Judy Peiser, and other professional moving-image archivists argue that underground AV work goes unconsidered by archival funders.⁴⁸ They suggest that contemporary preservationists struggle less to find fringe media than to find the necessary monies for their salvation. This creates a fundamental obstacle for academics hoping to research and historicize alternative audiovisual artworks, and the cycle of material abandonment and physical degradation continues.

Conclusion: Recovering Experimental Cinema in a Microcosmic South

This chapter has demonstrated that archival and social problems surrounding the study of experimental film in the American South marginalize foundational movements, institutions, and actors from the history of the region. Neglect towards the southern avant-garde is the shared responsibility of scholars, cinema experts, regionalist critics, and filmmakers around the world. Due to the peripheralization of experimental AV work, the imagined borders that define the macroregion, while blurry and flexible, bar critical consideration from entry into wider interdisciplinary media scholarship. And finally, the social and archival restriction on public moving-image narratives renders historical experimental work invisible to those studying the cinemas of the South.

By contrast, in areas in the United States where archival stewardship is more artistically expansive, such as the University of Southern California in Los Angeles,

⁴⁷ <<https://blogs.libraries.iub.edu/filmarch/2013/06/06/greg-wilsbacher-of-the-moving-image-research-collections-at-the-university-of-south-carolina/>>

⁴⁸ Case, Ann E. October 17, 2014. Author Interview. Tulane University: New Orleans, LA.; Frank, Edwin G., Ph.D. October 27, 2014. Author Interview. The University of Memphis: Memphis, TN.;

Rutgers University in New Brunswick, or the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, CA, extensive scholarship follows suit. UC Berkeley has for example devoted an entire segment of the university's press site to avant-garde film and video scholarship. Similarly, Dartmouth and the University of Buffalo have both been minor subjects of trade publications on the membership of the '60s and '70s avant-garde.

The exceptions in the geographic South to this space-specific national dichotomy each represents a key effort, as James argues, to emancipate and recover lost historical artifacts. The National Film Preservation Foundation has established a fund for archivists at Duke University, with the intent of preserving "significant examples of America's avant-garde film heritage."⁴⁹ Likewise, the Louisville Underground Music Archive also collects, preserves, and digitizes audiovisual ephemera in deliberate acknowledgement that the lack of "records of popular culture of this type are...putting this history at risk for loss" for Kentucky as well as the United States.⁵⁰ Sanctioned by its parent institution, the University of Louisville, LUMA is bound to revitalize critical regionalist studies or published histories of the state as its efforts gain traction in the national press narrative.

If historic invisibility is the major ramification of scholastic marginalization, the following chapter narrows its focus to a case study of New Orleans in order to make southern experimental media more fathomable on the whole. Through a constant flow of

⁴⁹ That their grants are allocated only to "titles that have made a significant contribution to American experimental film," recalls the kind of canon reinforcement protested in Toronto in 1989. See "National Film Preservation Foundation – Avant-Garde Masters Grants for Film Preservation." Accessed Online April 2015.

<<https://researchfunding.duke.edu/detail.asp?OppID=2432>>

⁵⁰ <<http://louisville.edu/library/archives/luma/>>

aesthetic exchange, national media attention, and international foot traffic, the city has become one of the region's most productive and intercultural moving-image-making capitals. Additionally, cultural hybridity in the wake of multiple colonial rulers lends New Orleans a highly individualized and yet still vitally Southern community spirit. Ultimately, the city's extensive and sometimes contrasting histories have ruptured any cohesive sense of identity with media practitioners elsewhere in the region.

Due to its fame, social complexity, and geopolitical uniqueness, critical regional scholarship and studies of New Orleanian media output must still contend with a complex, divisive public imaginary. Therefore, before interrogating production and archival practices in the experimental community, the chapter first addresses the consequences of utilizing the city in a historiographic study of the South given its blurry social borders. Then, it identifies specific practices, projects, and persons that have been marginalized by canonical histories within and outside of the microregion. And finally, with an eye on recovering historic artifacts and their makers from the margins, the chapter's conclusion critically repositions the New Orleanian avant-garde as a Southern paradigm within wider interdisciplinary scholarship.

Chapter 2:

Experimental Filmmaking and History in New Orleans

The Exceptional/Exemplary Binary

Like the wider region in which it is located, New Orleans is host to an immense cultural heritage and media history. As a result, interdisciplinary academics struggle to comprehensively articulate the position the city occupies in the nation's social imaginary. Financial decision-making at public institutions, private archival strategies, and the constant remapping and revising of "official" histories speak to major questions facing experimental cinema historians. How do fringe media and its makers from within New Orleans contribute to a wider public image of their community? And is that image, in terms of the city's imagined and cartographic borders, of an exceptional or a more microcosmic southern geospace?

Both local and global scholars have claimed the city as one without a duplicate anywhere else in the nation. As Lloyd Pratt writes in "New Orleans and its Storm": "The naming of an exception marks a deviation from a cumulative historical norm," and in the case of New Orleans, the deviant histories are as common as the classical.⁵¹ Ned Sublette claims that exceptional status was already conferred on Louisiana by its statehood in 1812, when "most of the elements that make New Orleans so visibly, and audibly, different from the rest of the country were already in place."⁵² Musical forms,

⁵¹ Pratt, Lloyd. "New Orleans and Its Storm: Exception, Example, or Event?," *American Literary History*. Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 251.

⁵² Sublette, Ned. *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008. p. 4.

performance traditions, and even “alternative American histories” began to articulate themselves in the metropole, fostering intercultural engagement and exchange in one of the world’s most active ports.⁵³ That bayou culture has since become an inextricable web of hybrid artistic exchange, Cajun foodways, personal identity confusion and abusive political maneuvering goes without further explication. Lloyd Pratt, Barbara Eckstein, and Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella have since Sublette recontextualized New Orleanian media as representative of something “new[ly],” or at least recently, socioculturally emergent: localized global trauma.⁵⁴ As Jennie Lightweis-Goff argues via Tulane’s Matt Sakakeeny, the proliferation of cultural voices across fiction, television news, nonfiction tomes, atlases, and academic writing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina have rendered New Orleans “a Southern Babylon-meets-Atlantis uber-city of exceptionality.”⁵⁵

But Lightweis-Goff is rightly suspicious of tug-of-war discourses surrounding what she calls “post-K” NOLA: the question of whether it is “one-of-a-kind” or “one of many” perpetuates a binary unsuitable for accurate critical analysis or historical writing.⁵⁶ Like Memphis, Austin, Atlanta, and Miami – all claimed by regionalist historians as alternately exceptional or microcosmic – New Orleans’s experimental film culture is both part and parcel of a wider “Thirdspace” where similar multicultural collision and non-normative aesthetic approaches abound. Laura Marks has spoken extensively of how

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 4–5.

⁵⁴ Pratt. p. 256.

⁵⁵ Lightweis-Goff, Jennie. ““Peculiar and Characteristic”: New Orleans’s Exceptionalism from Olmsted to the Deluge,” *American Literature*. Vol. 86, No, 1, (March). Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. p. 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 150–151.

haptic visuality – sensory expressions manifested through non-normative production, distribution circuits, and exhibition venues – unite works made across the region. The South has been described already as one such space where memory and sense experience carryover from filmmaking community to community. These shared haptics collapse the issue of exceptionality in local as well as global academic schemata. As Dan Streible succinctly notes: “alternative media practitioners in New Orleans are linked via ad hoc means to accordant ones elsewhere.”⁵⁷

This chapter demonstrates that the city’s experimental film output is both completely individual *and* identical to the tactile, performative, hybrid, mixed, and abstract moving-image media that emerge from Savannah’s College of Art and Design to the less-clearly-southern communities in Baltimore and D.C. The dualistic logic that governs critical post-Katrina discourse is useless here, replaced with the argument that the historical moments, figures, and projects discussed could as easily be found in post-Sandy Virginia or along the flooded Mississippi Delta. By eliminating this binary, previously marginalized New Orleanian avant-garde work comes away from the periphery and towards a more inclusive and accurate public history.

Avant-Garde Cinema in New Orleans

Trade press and archival documents suggest that formally experimental cinema was shown to New Orleanian audiences as early as the late 1920s. Cecile Starr writes that Oskar Fischinger’s Paramount Pictures-made abstract animation *Allegretto* [1936] played

⁵⁷ Streible, Dan. “Chapter 8: Media Artists, Local Activists, and Outsider Archivists: The Case of Helen Hill,” *Old and New Media After Katrina*. Diane Negra, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 150.

at the Saenger's Theater in New Orleans in 1937.⁵⁸ That same year, according to the *Motion Picture Daily*, Pare Lorentz's New Deal documentary *The River* – made in collaboration with experimental filmmaker Ralph Steiner – had its world premiere at a downtown theatre called The Strand.⁵⁹ These examples also demonstrate that a market existed for local exhibitors and audiences to read about and see fringe work. Capsule reviews of canonical New American Cinema works by Hollis Frampton, Maya Deren, and Stan Brakhage can be found in editions of the *Times-Picayune* and even, in scarce cases, in the *New Orleans Review* archive.⁶⁰ As cultural touchstones, these films were somewhat self-circulating, endlessly traveling along national exhibition circuits in museums, colleges and galleries. Their references in public newspapers indicate a space for and interest in experimentalism in New Orleans extending into the twenty-first century.

Yet the “pedagogical legacy,” as Dan Streible calls it, of famous avant-garde works continues to obscure the extensive ongoing practices of both local filmmakers and moving-image archivists.⁶¹ Regional experimental productions are more rarely documented than screenings by avant-garde legends working in California, New York, or Europe. This is one direct result of organizational policies that restrict the exhibition and preservation, and thus criticism and historicization, of the city's alternative audiovisual

⁵⁸ Starr, Cecile. “8. Busby Berkeley and America's Pioneer Abstract Filmmakers,” *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893–1941*. Bruce Posner, ed. and annotated. New York: Anthology Film Archives. p. 78.

⁵⁹ See “N.O. Sees ‘River,’ Government Picture,” *Motion Picture Daily*. Vol. 42, No. 183. Published October 30, 1937.

⁶⁰ See: Smetak, Jacqueline R. “Continuum or Break? ‘Divine Horsemen’ and the Films of Maya Deren.” *New Orleans Review* 17 (1990). pp. 89–97.

⁶¹ Streible. p. 167.

work. In a report for the University of New Orleans in 2013, Jennifer L. Francino profiled the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans in the wake of its “rigorous strategic” redesign.⁶² The CAC had been host to protests and the resignation of several of its top executive directors due to its “decision to briefly close [the show] for five days to accommodate a Hollywood film shoot rental.”⁶³ As Francino notes, the mediamakers whose projects were permanently on display there were forced to acknowledge their low position on the artistic totem pole, and so chose to boycott their projects’ exhibitions in favor of smaller venues. That the CAC, New Orleans’s only major multidisciplinary exhibition venue and stable financial supporter for digital media artists, deigned to accommodate a Hollywood production over local fringe artistry reflects the policies of its sister organizations in both Louisiana and the wider South. In its regional context, the center’s decision making recalls the endemic archival problem detailed in Chapter One. The CAC seems to be aware of this, as it is expanding into permanent archival activities as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and has revamped its practices and policies to fix its public relations problem.⁶⁴

Another CAC offshoot, a filmmaking and exhibition collective that began as a new-media exhibit called Cinema Reset, continues to organize year-round screenings of

⁶² Francino, Jennifer L. “Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans (CAC): Past, Present, and a Vision Towards the Future,” *Arts Administration Master’s Reports*, Paper 146. New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 2013. Accessed April 2015. p. 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

experimental work in multiple venues.⁶⁵ Art galleries, crumbling theatrical spaces, cheap bars, and churches all screen unusual, abstract, and non-narrative cinema. The group collaborates with the Center, the New Orleans Film Society, and several underground filmmakers via social media to raise awareness of its events – in the process creating a rudimentary digital record of its programs and curatorship. But preservation of and local journalism on these events and programs includes little more than clippings and blog posts. An author in a *New Orleans Times-Picayune* article from the 2014 New Orleans Film Festival referred to a screening of Cinema Reset’s documentary shorts as a way to “get the most of the festival” – high praise indeed, but removed from any further interpretation or research.⁶⁶ As an accredited not-for-profit organization that also sponsors workshops and seeks to grow future alternative cinema practice in New Orleans, the fact of Cinema Reset’s elimination from local news and scholarship can be considered both intentional and typical of hierarchical experimental film histories. Cinema Reset contributes to the creative discourse by installing moving-image-art into non-normative spaces, a historical venture given that venues like the CAC which might normally show such work have proven partly unsuitable. But without active academic

⁶⁵ This practice is a direct carry-over from the New American Cinema practices in Buffalo, NY and San Francisco in the 1960’s. See the Cinema Reset website:

<<http://cinemareset.com/about/>>

⁶⁶ Scott, Mike. “2014 New Orleans Film Festival day-by-day viewer’s guide: Secrets to making the best of your fest,” *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Published October 13, 2014. Accessed Online March 01, 2015.

<http://www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2014/10/2014_new_orleans_film_festival.html>

historicization of such organizations, New Orleanian avant-gardists find themselves forced to the edges of the city's media history.

Streible and archivist Kara van Malssen have been highly attentive to the mediamakers that have not been completely marginalized by the city's audiences, as they are so few. Both scholars explore the work of the late Helen Hill, van Malssen in the context of a career case study in "Disaster Planning and Recovery: Post-Katrina Lessons for Mixed Media," and as utopian film paradigm in Streible's *Old and New Media After Katrina* anthology. Hill and her husband Paul Gailiunas are the best-known producers of 16mm, Super 8mm, and video work from any part of Louisiana; and importantly, Katrina eviscerated much of the work they made together.⁶⁷ By highlighting these artists, van Malssen and Streible help to protect the history of their experimental works from being washed away as well. Additionally, Hill's work has come under the preservationist auspices of several institutions around and outside of the city including the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center, the Harvard Film Archive, and NYU's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) program. Though perhaps too individualized to change the canon, Hill's work helps to implement the New Orleanian underground into a national film history that typically excludes it.

Though they are the most individually and globally visible of Louisiana's lot, Hill and Gailiunas were not alone in making alternative media of historical import. Michael

⁶⁷ van Malssen, Kara [*sic.*] "Disaster Planning and Recovery: Post-Katrina Lessons for Mixed Media Collections." Master's Thesis. New York, New York University: Moving Image Archiving and Preservation, 2010.
<http://www.nyu.edu/tisch/preservation/research/disaster/06alataalks/talk_vanmalssen.shtml>

Mizell-Nelson writes that a significant batch of non-narrative audiovisual work exploded into postdiluvian NOLA as a communal, humanist response – experimental activist journalism and ethnography.⁶⁸ One such important example is the oeuvre of Benjamin Chappetta, a videographer whose avant-doc footage of wrecked buildings in St. Bernard’s Parish parallels the visual impulses of southern experimental stalwarts like Liza Johnson and Hill.⁶⁹ Streible and Diane Negra both profiled Chappetta’s work because it stands as one of the first online responses to Katrina’s damage outside of the 9th Ward, although the videos he made are now hardly watched on Chappetta’s own website. In the fusion of traumatic imagery of the storm with a social activist’s attention to the community of St. Bernard’s Parish, these videos represent a valuable juncture into pedagogical narratives of Katrina. Furthermore, works by Linda Dumas, Maxx Sizeler, and Courtney Egan demonstrate affinities with Chappetta’s activism through lyric home-movie footage and abstract aesthetics. These experimental filmmakers contribute individualized styles to the post-storm media landscape, in the process complicating and enriching the more public Katrina media narrative.

(Re)Making Local Film History

Companies, institutions, and organizations have collaborated with individuals to more comprehensively historicize the New Orleans filmmaking underground and bring it into widened discourse. The University of New Orleans and George Mason University’s Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media founded the Hurricane Digital

⁶⁸ Mizell-Nelson, Michael. “Not Since the Great Depression: The Post Katrina Documentary Impulse and New Media.” New Media Consortium Presentation, 2007. Accessed Online March 2015.

⁶⁹ Streible. p. 158.

Memory Bank in 2005 as a repository for multimedia records of natural disasters.⁷⁰ As a partner of the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress, the twenty-five-thousand-item collection of materials is one of the most popular and populated historical resources in the South.

It is useful here to think of Howard Becker's sociological consideration of "art worlds," the network of spaces in a given community in which "nonstandard works can ever get exhibited, performed, and distributed."⁷¹ New Orleans's art world as it exists today pivots on the functionality of the Memory Bank, a substitution of two parent universities which had the space and the personnel, but strangely neither the specialized academic tracks nor the organizational channels, to support experimental arts exhibitions prior to the storm.⁷² The archive also contains online-only collections: one, in the "New Orleans Visual Artists" forum, sends visitors immediately to four local AV practitioners, the *Neighborhoods* installation collective, and an institution for preservation and production called the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA). The archiving of the artists' work is supplemented by updates on their digitization projects, and in some cases, résumés that contain press links to their work.⁷³

Much of the Bank's expansion comes from the efforts of the New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC), another not-for-profit with educational programs and panels equal in attendance to many of the events at larger institutions like the UNO and Tulane.

⁷⁰ <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/hurricane-digital-memory-bank/>>

⁷¹ Becker, Howard S. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. p. 28.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ "New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Media Arts." Hurricane Digital Memory Bank. Website. Published 2005. Accessed March 01, 2015. p. 171. <<http://hurricanearchive.org/collections/show/171>>

NOVAC is a media preservation center, screening room, and granting foundation all in one. Carole Evans and George Wood write that the Center was originally intended as a guerrilla cable advocacy group; and it has organically morphed into a multimedia arts advocate since helping to bring wider television access to New Orleans.⁷⁴ Predictably, NOVAC was historically villainized by the city's municipal government despite compromising with officials on the spread of access to public locations like the CAC and the UNO campus. Only in recent years and with support of New Orleanian artists has the center been able to expand outside of the city and into Baton Rouge, where it also conducts screenings. As such, NOVAC's collaboration with the Memory Bank has become a foundational element of the state's recent independent and alternative media production: Southern history and underground film are here perpetually unified.

Additionally, NOVAC, "the longest continuously running media-arts arts nonprofit in the Southeastern U.S.," has installed itself into public discourse as its policies have come to more closely reflect the region's self-policed cultural history. In the 1970's, the founding VISTA Volunteers provided cable access to disenfranchised members of the local community at the expense of television companies and the city's more privileged factions alike.⁷⁵ Since then, the tide has literally turned: the immense destruction wrought by Katrina on video content morphed the NOVAC Archives Project into one of the city's largest moving-image repositories (along with the Memory Bank). And the faces of the archives project, including Liz Dunnebacke and the late Michael

⁷⁴ Evans, Carole and George Wood. "Cable Access in New Orleans," *Journal of Film and Video XXXIX*. No. 3 (Summer). Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Community Access Cable Television. Accessed February 2015. pp. 28–34.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Mizell-Nelson, are some of the city's best-known contributors to local media scholarship. Internal growth, organizational partnerships, and renowned employees have turned NOVAC into a toolshed for the production, preservation, and distribution of groundbreaking artistic work when once it fought what it describes as “an uphill battle” for recognition.⁷⁶

The center has obtained grants from the City of New Orleans, Cineworks Louisiana, the Arts Council of New Orleans, and the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, as well as forming partnerships with higher education institutions like Tulane, UNO, Dillard University, and Breathe Video Nation.⁷⁷ When it appears in interdisciplinary scholarship, it is as a hub for archival research in or as the focus of studies on guerilla television in publications like *Old and New Media After Katrina* and the *Journal of Film and Video*.⁷⁸ NOVAC's and, by proxy, the Memory Bank's, exposure is historically exceptional in a culture of scholastic neglect for fringe media producers and archivists, so attention must be paid when new projects are developed under these organizations' auspices.

Alternatively, the Access Center's recent growth in public discourse may be a result in part of its collaboration with more powerful outsider sources like NYU's Moving Image Archive Project, the Bay Area Video Coalition, and Final Draft. As Jonathan Kahana points out in reference to *South of Ten*, the public sustains certain trauma narratives about art, including those which detail an event as widely known and

⁷⁶ <<http://www.novacvideo.org/neworleans.html>>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ See Boyle; See Negra; See Cook.

felt as Hurricane Katrina.⁷⁹ These working partners sanction the center's policies and programs, as well as its archival admissions, as conduits for the dissemination of a publically appropriate narrative. By maintaining the trauma narrative and adhering to what Joy V. Fuqua considers a "disaster aesthetic," underground-made media within these centers stretch the boundaries that typically restrict exposure to New Orleanian experimental film production, preservation, and scholarship.

Haptic Imagery and the "Disaster Aesthetic" in Postdiluvian New Orleans

The social and economic infrastructures for contemporary Louisianan underground filmmaking have been reinvigorated by what Diane Negra calls the "radical eruption" of antediluvian media narratives. She writes: "Hurricane Katrina is positioned at the intersection of numerous early-twenty-first century crisis narratives centralizing contemporary uncertainties about race, class, region, government, and public safety."⁸⁰ These post-storm narratives help both to reveal and to repress avant-garde practices in the city in that they demand recovery, protection, development, and production of new works. Benjamin Chappetta's videos were at one time the most significant ongoing documentation of St. Bernard's Parish's destruction, so the University of New Orleans opted appropriately to preserve and digitize his three videos for the sake of local history.⁸¹ By contrast, mixed-media artist Courtney's Egan work – most of it professionally commissioned, and shown in venues around the country – remains mostly

⁷⁹Johnson, Liza and Jonathan Kahana. "Interstates: *South of Ten*," *Millennium Film Journal*. No. 51: Experiments in Documentary (Spring/Summer), 2009. Accessed March 2015. p. 1. <<http://mfjonline.org/journalPages/MFJ51/Johnson%20Kahana.html>>

⁸⁰ Negra, Diane. "Introduction: Old and New Media after Katrina" in *Old and New Media After Katrina*. Diane Negra, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 1.

⁸¹ <<http://parishtalk.com/katrinavideo/index.html>>

underserved by the community's archives. Joy V. Fuqua writes that this is because experimental audiovisual projects must accord with the city's need to be mediated in a certain way, under the aegis of a "particular representational urgency": "Do these forms of visual culture work in similar ways to conventional media texts or do they manage to accomplish certain things that conventional media texts cannot?"⁸²

At the root of the discontinuities in historical, critical and archival practices highlighted above are the self-images that New Orleanian citizens, scholars and media envoys present to the outside world in the wake of Katrina's "radical eruption." Fuqua argues that the presence of a "disaster aesthetic or a fascination with the debris of trauma" determines the parameters around "representational and documenting practice" in the city's independent media.⁸³ It is useful here to determine what typifies a "disaster aesthetic" in avant-garde moving imagery, and how cultural memories are carried through it. As Fuqua writes, certain media are relegated to the fringes of consumption (and thus public discourse) if they do not tap into the popular social imaginary. The experimental films of Helen Hill or Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* [2006] incorporate the aesthetic markers of the deluge as well as the haptic imagery of touch, sight, and sound into their documentation of post-K NOLA.⁸⁴ Such works receive the widest coverage in trade and scholarly media as paradigms of socially acceptable

⁸² Fuqua, Joy V. "The Big Apple and the Big Easy: Trauma, Proximity, and Home in New (and Old) Media," *Old and New Media After Katrina*. Diane Negra, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 43.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Helen Hill's tragic death also plays a significant role in her recent popularity in New Orleanian (and) experimental film histories. For more on her personal legacy, see Jason Berry's article for New York Magazine in 2009. <<http://www.myneworleans.com/New-Orleans-Magazine/January-2009/Helen-Hill-An-Unfinished-Story/>>

documenting practice. Fuqua cites the mixed-media installations of Paul Chan, which foreground personal over more broadly documentary subjects, for contrast.⁸⁵ The artist's traveling exhibition, *1st Light, 2005* used hand-made experimental animatics to discuss issues of religion, politics, and art; but it did not incorporate hurricane imagery, as did his acclaimed performance piece "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans."^{86 87} This distinction in aesthetic approach partly determines how visible, accessible, and well-documented alternative New Orleanian media will be to the public.

When present, what Fuqua calls the "debris of trauma" in local experimental work often manifests both directly (audiovisually) and symbolically. Catherine Russell speculates on how avant-garde ethnographies so easily foreground traumatic images: "Technologies of representation become the means by which [intoxicated] memory takes on the pathos of melodrama and becomes a scene of desire and despair."⁸⁸ This undoubtedly applies to the collaborations between Hill and Courtney Egan, such as *Cleveland Street Gap* [2006], wherein frantic (handheld) Surrealist 16-mm imagery serves as a visual surrogate for the audience's eye.⁸⁹ Though the images in their films are sometimes incoherent and abstract, traumatic memory comes through the simulation of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ <<http://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/permanent-collection/artists/chan/>>

⁸⁷ One measure of how Chan's different works have been received is how widely the press covers individual pieces. The same year as his cinematic *1st Light, 2005* premiered to no national press, the performance piece "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans" was the subject of a profile in *The New York Times*. See Cotter. p. 1.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/arts/design/02cott.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>

⁸⁸ Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 47.

⁸⁹ *Cleveland Street Gap*. 2006. Dirs. Courtney Egan and Helen Hill. 16mm and Digital Video. Color, B&W. 3 minutes.

lived experience: New Orleanian haptics are represented physically for every viewer because Egan/Hill create a first-person sensory portal.

Likewise, Chappetta's and Ingmire's docs, neither of which is yet canonized by the academy, also use these representational techniques. Postdiluvian disaster is put on display in their projects through lyric photography, non-narrative editing and lack of expository information. If not for the breadth of their audiences – so public that “underground filmmaking” no longer safely applies – the more straightforward documentary aesthetics of network broadcasts like PBS's *The Storm That Drowned a City* [2005] might be argued do the same. Across genres and media, artists incorporate disaster imagery through a unifying aesthetic, and are rewarded with cultural exposure the likes of which more “personal” filmmakers in the underground rarely receive.

Furthermore, it is evident that specific kinds of New Orleanian media must compete for recognition in scholastic and popular discourse by nature of their very form(s). In her essay “The Big Apple and the Big Easy,” Fuqua affirms that artistic and academic communities give critical attention to documentary television, video, and visual art at the cost of installation, performance, photography, and other alternative media history.⁹⁰ The previous chapter demonstrated that this kind of interdisciplinary scholastic marginalization happens for sociopolitical, budgetary, and aesthetic reasons (among others). So it is important to note that locally made New Orleanian media are sometimes elided in academic writing simply because certain works “challenge the logistics of

⁹⁰ Fuqua. p. 43.

transportation.”⁹¹ Fuqua directs her critique at two projects specifically: the multimedia installations *Floodwall* by Jana Napoli, and *Social Dress New Orleans – 730 Days After* by Takashi Horisaki.⁹² ⁹³ As is typical for the avant-garde, both works incorporate abstract digital filmmaking into collaborative sculptural assembly and place-based installations. The “challenges” to which she refers include the threat of natural or human material degradation; the loss of any number of the works’ parts (a file, a sheet of cloth, or a wooden drawer) in transit; or damage to the venues of exhibition themselves (*Social Dress*, for example, is currently staged outdoors). Writing history about or preserving such works in the postdiluvian community is thus a logistical nightmare.

Fuqua’s contention applies equally to moving-image media artifacts that lack active distribution, exhibition, or preservation circuits.⁹⁴ Even experimental films as acclaimed as Helen Hill’s, notes Dan Streible, are forced to seek protection outside of the city: “This gallimaufry of material was what had to be assessed upon Helen’s passing...New Orleans was no longer deemed a viable place to keep the films safe.”⁹⁵ Natural destruction from Katrina wiped out swaths of extant physical film and video material, and the decade since has continued to threaten unpreserved footage with complete evisceration. The result is a minor exodus of Louisianan media to less

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁹² Napoli, Jana. *Floodwall*. January 2007 – February 2007. World Financial Center, New York City.

⁹³ Horisaki, Takashi. *Social Dress New Orleans – 730 days after [sic.]* 2007. 1941 Caffin Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁹⁴ Horisaki and Napoli’s pieces both traveled around the world, but Napoli’s was cremated in 2011 at Algiers Point, New Orleans. See her artist statement: <http://www.floodwall.org/pdfs/Cremation_PR%20-1.pdf>; and “*Floodwall Cremation invitation*,” a short film by the Bartos Brothers: <<https://vimeo.com/32812459>>

⁹⁵ Streible. p. 163.

logistically challenging, more weather-stable locales. In fact, van Malssen's New York University thesis "Disaster Planning and Recovery: Post-Katrina Lessons for Mixed Media Collections," suggests that local archivists imagine the worst possible environmental situations when organizing preservation projects. Tellingly, the remainder of Hill's films landed at the Harvard Film Archives, while a project with Courtney Egan wound up at the University of South Carolina instead of Tulane, the UNO, or the CAC.⁹⁶

For alternative audiovisual projects with less support from the academic or public communities, orphaning and marginal discourse concomitantly prevent their circulation in the wider regional mediascape. As van Malssen acknowledges, an indefinite amount of film, video, and installation moving-image material has already been disposed of in post-deluge New Orleans. Films that do not contain footage of historical merit like Chappetta's or utilize a strong "disaster aesthetic" are forced to seek preservation on massive online entities like YouTube, Vimeo, or UbuWeb. These platforms offer a digital archive for the city's orphaned avant-garde work, but one that competes for viewership against many millions of other media projects. Additionally, once uploaded, the host sites control the copyright on those digital video files permanently, which could prevent such work from generating income for the artist. Emily Cohen's "Orphanista Manifesto" regards film abandonment as a political procedure, with the marginalization of non-canonical, non-disaster-focused media a dangerous ramification of regional orphaning.⁹⁷ From exhibition to archival stewardship, Cohen aptly describes the situation as

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Cohen, Emily. "The Orphanista Manifesto: Orphan Films and the Politics of Reproduction," *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 106, No. 2 (2004). pp. 719.

“apocalyptic,” requiring members of the avant-garde community to produce and preserve their new projects “in the midst of destruction.”⁹⁸ When they do not, fringe media artifacts face the threat of permanent erasure from local cultural narratives.

New Orleans in the Wider South

The orphaning of experimental film footage, coupled with logistical challenges and archival practices in exile, cut a strain of the New Orleans “art world” off from wider regional history. For sociologist Howard Becker, the repercussions are extreme: limning alternative or fringe moving-image media to the (archival, academic) peripheries allows art to be governed “in a serious and official language” by cultural actors that seek to perniciously control society’s artworks.⁹⁹ Studies of the city continue to employ binaristic “exceptional/exemplary” discourse, frustrating scholars that seek pedagogy-defiant modes of archival and aesthetic inquiry. In its current position in the social imaginary, the city stands in for the macroregional American South in that the endemic marginalization of experimental film restricts the growth of alternative media narratives.

One significant concern for macroregional history is that the omission of the underground films inadvertently denies avant-ethnographic, biographic, and anthropologic works from being canonized. Consider Benjamin Chappetta’s digital videos, in which St. Bernard’s Parish was briefly and uniquely introduced as an alternate historical subject to New Orleans for hurricane coverage.¹⁰⁰ Courtney Egan’s innovative film work (with and without Helen Hill) likewise uses audiovisual cues to summon the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Becker. p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ Streible. p. 163.

viewer's emotional surrogacy with New Orleans residents. But Chappetta's, Egan's, Linda Dumas's, Paul Chan's and many others' fringe audiovisual projects are relegated to personal websites, only to be found by historians that deign to read Master's Theses on the subject. Notably, even in recent atlases like Richard Campanella's urban fabrics project and Solnit/Snedeker's *Unfathomable City* map-essays, one cannot find a single reference to "experimental," "fringe," or "underground," films despite their demonstrated presence throughout the city.

The "rhizomatic sociocultural possibilities" – the giving of new historical voices to the voiceless – that Spivak and Butler consider essential to critical regional analysis are dead-ended by the unavailability of such works on more public platforms. When wider access and preservation can pull personal narratives from the margins, the history of the South becomes richer and more culturally diverse. The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, Tulane's on-campus archives, and NOVAC, three powerful examples of audiovisual preservation efforts in New Orleans, all choose not to classify their material under racial, gendered, or class-based labels (also known online as "tags.") This policy, which may be due to political correctness, bureaucratic protocol, or disorganization, makes it difficult for scholars to determine works' points of origin. Additionally, the policy forces feminist, postcolonial, or globalization scholars to investigate marginal southern cinema histories "against the grain" of pedagogical narratives. Finally, because regional media historians like Rushing, Sublette, and Macor prefer not to identify their respective cities' media in common with other cities', the "exceptional/exemplary" binary recurs around films made in Austin, Memphis, and throughout the region.

Historical practice like this renders culturally reflexive, haptically unified experimental cinema from the South discursively inert. For if these interregional avant-gardes each have exceptional practices, then their films can not be fairly put into conversation with one another. With these cross-border practices and geospatial lines in mind, countermeasures must be taken in order to expand the rhizomatic sociocultural possibilities that renewed avant-garde narratives can provide.

Conclusion: Physical and Theoretical Recovery: Historically Necessary

In the age of “democratized” production technologies like smartphones and webcams, and exhibitory platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, and Open Culture, experimental projects from the South are more easily and often generated than ever. As I have argued, without the protection and storage offered by these online entities, historically significant alternative cinema runs the risk of permanent erasure.

The destruction wrought on southern states like Florida, Virginia and South Carolina in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 calls for moving-image recovery of a scale so significant that it has yet to be calculated. Van Malssen’s guide for postdiluvian preservationists addresses those working specifically in New Orleans, but her research applies here as well. Floridian experimentalists like Georg Koszulinski, Southern Circuit filmmaker Roger Beebe, and their peers in South Carolina and Virginia merit heightened priority for academic and physical recovery. A similar situation applies to Hurricane Wilma’s destruction of South Florida in 2005, of which neither a book to rival Negra’s *Old and New Media*, nor a film like *When the Levees Broke*, has been produced.

Luckily for future scholars, as van Malssen points out, the public and private sectors already have the tools necessary to combat this lack. For example, an archivist at Tulane University told me that e-mails or forms advertising the school's willingness to accept and process moving-image material submissions are forbidden.¹⁰¹ This practice does not reflect Tulane's actual financial and spatial capacity for such material, which is high by most institutional standards.¹⁰² The allowance of interdepartmental e-mails may be the change that allows local experimental filmmakers to find an archive for their material. Moreover, institutional solicitation for footage from the city's public citizenry, or "stop-and-drop" personal movie donation days, would buoy access to (and perhaps ownership of) relevant historic imagery for major universities like Tulane, the University of Mississippi, the University of Memphis, or Jackson State University.¹⁰³ Each occupies a distinct portion of the southern geospace, and each is equally likely to benefit from the salvation of experimental or fringe cultural artifacts. And new histories of the regional avant-garde should incorporate onsite research to archives in the South. Many collections facilities at colleges, universities, museums, cultural centers, and even houses of note are in poor condition following recent natural and financial disasters.¹⁰⁴ Films, videotapes,

¹⁰¹ Rubin, Jeff. October 17, 2014. Author Interview. Tulane University: New Orleans, LA.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ These examples are discussed in more depth in the appendix. The author visited each of these institutions by the time of this thesis's publication to verify their individual policies.

¹⁰⁴ For example, the University of Mississippi preserves an array of documentary media from William Faulkner's home, Rowan Oak, in its Dain Collection (1961–1962.) But some of Dain's and Prof. James Silver's images remain at the house site; a media studies approach to Southern imagery might therefore borrow similar tactics to the critic and Faulknerian Édouard Glissant's by visiting the historic building.

photographs, and audio recordings await material recovery and protection in most of these facilities; and this can only be accomplished through deliberate archival practice.

The marginalization of experimentalism from cinema, southern, and regionalist histories dismisses the power of a cross-regional, unified haptic aesthetics. As Marks asserts, haptic imagery creates a more inclusive discourse around cultural experiences of discrimination, colonization, social abuse, and other repressive nationalistic behaviors. As with those in New Orleans, avant-garde production has crossed into the more popular local arts: painting in Savannah; music and protest in Tennessee; and video distribution in Baltimore, to name but a few. Experiments in aesthetics or distribution reflect new means of function in these contexts, disturbing narratives of cultural production across state borders. These cross-regional works document personal experience with image, sound, performance, and technology. Interdisciplinary scholarship must therefore acknowledge the sociocultural relevance and historicity of experimental film communities in the South.

Appendix:

A Taxonomy of Archives and Interviews

The previous chapters have demonstrated that pedagogical scholastic practices in American cinema and critical regional studies effectively obscure culturally valuable works of the Southern avant-garde. Fringe film communities around the country can be both sublimated by the mainstream and self-restricting in terms of their social reach. As such, cross-regional media requires exhaustive investigative research to be recovered, physically and historically. The above analysis of production, circulation, and preservation of experimental moving-image works in the macroregion necessarily draws as much from contemporary scholarship as from a set of on-site research trips in the South undertaken by the author in the summer and autumn of 2014.

This appendix provides future historians, filmmakers, and cinephiles in pursuit of richer alternative cinema narratives a taxonomy of resources for their investigations. It documents a combination of institutional visits, trips to historical sites' repositories, and exclusive conversations with local moving-image preservationists. While the guide does not purport to comprehensively detail practices across the Southern geospace, it can serve as a starting point for micro- and macroregional media studies projects going forward.

Louisiana

Moving-image preservation is often organized by higher education, and the consequences of private versus public funding are evident in archives' respective curatorial priorities. My embarkation point was at an institution that falls into the former category. In New Orleans, Louisiana, Ann E. Case supervises Tulane University's

Archives; and the Archives directly distribute audiovisual material to other repositories on campus, including the Louisiana Research Center, the Newcomb Archives, and the Hogan Jazz Archive. They also currently store undigitized university media collected from decades of professional and non-professional submissions in a campus basement. Much of this media is already irrecoverable due to vinegar syndrome and other various natural ailments.

Combing through the Special Collections run by archivist Jeff Rubin, as well as the Jazz Archive in the same building, one finds more than two thousand additional reels of oral history footage, local home movies, amateur and documentary jazz films, and promotional ephemera. However, footage that may contain formally experimental or abstract imagery remains undiscovered, in part due to anonymous or as-yet unrecorded community submissions.¹⁰⁵ The curators at Hogan stated that the only documented material from the consciously avant-garde at the university are canonical works shot and donated by directors like Les Blank, the Maysles Brothers, and D.A. Pennebaker.^{106 107} The Special Collections tailors its archival project slate to publicly submitted material.¹⁰⁸ According to Rubin, moving-image material from the bayou's underground *can* be

¹⁰⁵ Rubin. AI.

¹⁰⁶ Raeburn, Bruce Boyd, Ph.D. and Alaina W. Hébert. October 17, 2014. Author Interview. Tulane University: New Orleans, LA.

¹⁰⁷ Neither the Jazz Archive (under Dr. Bruce Boyd Raeburn) nor the Special Collections (under Rubin) has ever received submissions for preservation expressly from the New Orleans experimental film community.

¹⁰⁸ Rubin. AI.

preserved within the Special Collections, but only when submitted with the direct knowledge of its copyright owner(s).¹⁰⁹

On the public spectrum, the University of New Orleans Film Archives at the Earl K. Long Library contains a comparable Special Collection with audiovisual material in urgent need of digitization and preservation. The Long Library contains Louisiana's largest assembly of professional news, local films, and raw amateur footage on nearly all media formats produced in the state from 1960 to 1990.¹¹⁰ More specifically for media recovery, the Film Archives require complete access to the unprocessed or damaged materials (which I did not have). But their digitization projects come from a wider network of interstate communities. The university's participation with a sister archive at Louisiana State has also led to significant offsite audiovisual material holdings in Baton Rouge and Lafayette.

Additionally, research trips to Tulane and the UNO were supplemented by consulting online repositories from non-institutional media organizations. The annual New Orleans Film Festival screens experimental and non-narrative cinema from around the country; and its host group, the New Orleans Film Society, retains records of those works on its public website.¹¹¹ However, a representative of the Film Society stated that it cannot afford to preserve prints or copies of each year's screenings; so the New Orleans

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "Louisiana and Special Collections – Home." Library, University of New Orleans. Website. Publication Copyright 2015. Accessed February 2015. <http://library.uno.edu/specialcollections/lacol_index.cfm>

¹¹¹ "Experimental Shorts." *New Orleans Film Festival*. New Orleans Film Society. Website. Publication Copyright 2014. Accessed February 2015. <http://neworleansfilmsociety.org/film/by_category/26/experimental-shorts>

Video Access Center has assumed the brunt of local projects' preservation needs. As Chapter 2 discusses in greater detail, NOVAC's digital archive maintains an extensive collection and reference list for local community projects. This now includes Film Festival admits annually.

NOVAC's sister preservation project, MediaNOLA, bills itself as an online scrapbook for non-professional audiovisual, oral, and performed cultural artifacts.¹¹² It collates place-specific archival material efficiently as well, with information about origins and discovery for material (which most repositories lack). MediaNOLA's usefulness comes with two provisos: first, it is not yet an active physical repository for onsite research; and second, it did not contribute in any direct way to the above chapters.¹¹³

Mississippi

Going one state eastward, Mississippi institutions also almost unanimously lacked material artifacts of significant impact on this thesis. The author acknowledges that this lack resulted in part in a contrapuntal historical focus on other microregional experimental film communities. Nonetheless, prior to visiting any of its archives, the Mississippi Digital Library greatly helped to develop an itinerary of institutions around

¹¹² The project receives direct financial support from Tulane. Its founder, Dr. Vicki Mayer, is a current professor at the University.

¹¹³ In fact, search redirects of the terms "experimental film," "alternative media," "fringe film," and "avant-garde" to the Louisiana Secretary of State's Multimedia Archives program conducted via MediaNOLA's site turn up no results. Digital availability is severely limited for similar work.

the state for research consultation.¹¹⁴ Like Louisiana's government sites, none contained references or sources for experimental film specifically, but the archives' diversities in admissions policies, funding, and public popularity suggest the myriad narratives waiting to be pulled from the cultural-historical margins.

Short stops along the Blues Trail at museums, private galleries, and musical landmarks revealed several that store individual alternative media projects in their facilities. In small cities across Mississippi, submissions of preserved or protected underground films come primarily from the blues music scene and outsider art communities. The new B.B. King museum in Indianola, for example, contains significant on-site storage of professionally made and restored footage, newsreels, and documentary excerpts. And it also contains amateur-shot documentary footage of King before his great fame. In Tupelo, the Elvis Presley Birthplace & Museum is run similarly and with comparably large material holdings.¹¹⁵

The Mississippi Museum of Art in the state's capital, Jackson, displays audiovisual and installation media that incorporate abstract aesthetic techniques and local/unprofessional production into the Mississippian "art world." These works are formalist experiments in all but their curatorial contexts, as Becker argues – and their use for avant-garde scholarship is therefore eminent.¹¹⁶ Aesthetically "creative" art-

¹¹⁴ See the Mississippi Digital Library Collections and Participating Institutions site for more information: <<http://www.msdiglib.org/cdm4/collections.php>>

¹¹⁵ On the other hand, neither collection maintains labels as to whom or which institutional bodies produced, distributed, or provided copies of the films therein (excepting the exhibitory footage); allows for public visitation; or hosts media that deviate from normative documentary aesthetics or media.

¹¹⁶ Becker. pp. xi, 20.

documentary imagery from the civil rights movement, like some of the Lytle material housed at Ole Miss (see below), remains in the museum's digital archive as well.

Across town at the historically black Tougaloo College, the Special Collections department allocates funding primarily to civil rights-related media. An associate at Tougaloo's Library Services claimed that a large portion of this material will either never be digitized by the school or has already been lost to the elements in the wake of several recent natural and man-made disasters. Additionally, the college accords scholarships to a wide majority of its visual arts students; I would argue that this indicates historic movement towards alternative multimedia practice, and perhaps even experimentalism, on campus. This contention is buoyed by the fact that Jackson State University parrots Tougaloo's arts funding, hosting visits and project submissions to its onsite S.C. facilities. JSU has two active, ongoing digitization programs at the Margaret Walker and the Fanny Lou Hamer institutions. And while neither contains more than a few cardboard boxes of unpreserved video and film footage, both provide scholars with complete access to their campus archives.

Continuing northward in the state, the University of Mississippi in Oxford houses the Southern Media Archive via its Visual Collections department. As with Mississippian universities, the footage preserved and digitized at Ole Miss is mostly professional news reportage, but some is amateur-made and aesthetically daring. For example, the University's preservationists have classified 1940s nonfiction films by the artist Emma

Knowlton Lytle in 1940's Mississippi as "creative documentary."¹¹⁷ Lytle's fringe output is now in the restoration process thanks to the National Film Preservation Foundation. Concomitantly, the Home Movie Collection in Ole Miss's Center for the Study of Southern Culture contains multiple formats of home movie footage and orphan films. These locally produced ethnographic and anthropologic films, as well as semi-professional and amateur family videos, are some of the first subjects of alternative media archiving in the state.

Tennessee

Several essential archival resources for this thesis's historical process were located in Tennessee. The Center for Southern Folklore, a decades-old privately operated multimedia archive and arts development offshoot of the city's cultural enrichment programs in the 1970s, is still run by its co-founder, Judy Peiser.¹¹⁸ The Center produces and collects unpreserved ethnographic, region-based nonfiction films, which are then stored and digitized under Peiser's supervision. One of its flagship exhibitions, for instance, Peiser's *Hush Hoggies Hush* [1978] is both a folkloristic ethnography and a non-narrative, lyric visual poem. As Scott MacDonald has written, these are qualities representative of "the intersections of documentary and avant-garde cinema," and companion projects are available for free screenings to visitors.^{119 120}

¹¹⁷ For more information about Emma Knowlton Lytle's AV collection, consult the Southern Media Archive website via the University of Mississippi Libraries. <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/archives/visual/sma.html>

¹¹⁸ According to Peiser, Memphis's municipal government provides financial support in addition to private, international donations made to the Center.

¹¹⁹ MacDonald, Scott. p. 143.

Also notable for local media research is the materials collection of the Memphis Multimedia Archival Project. The University of Memphis, Tennessee's Mississippi Valley Collection sponsors the complete digitization and maintenance of the project's decades-long paper records, raw video footage, and cooperatively made films. The CBS newscaster David Yellen and his wife Carol Lynn Yellen, along with a half dozen other Memphian producers, used underground and guerilla-style audiovisual techniques to document the sanitation workers strike that brought Martin Luther King Jr. to the city in March 1968. After its completion following Dr. King's assassination in April, it was donated to "Memphis State University" to supplement its growing multimedia collection.

Head archivist Edwin G. Frank and his team supervise both an on-site atrium for archival visitation and an offsite repository for unlabeled, undigitized material. Stylistically normative documentary footage was the name of the game for the original crew of filmmakers; but the production, circulation, and distribution paths on which the project footage circulates are as fringe as any others for the cross-regional avant-garde. In fact, the project continued after the strike for decades to produce new guerilla work for amateur and professional exhibition.

Author Interviews with Southern Archivists

The specific professional tasks and policies of audiovisual media preservationists in the South determine the value each holds for new cinema studies. Some of the subjects of this thesis have already been quoted, but the details of their individual sociopolitical

¹²⁰ *Hush Hoggies Hush: Tom Johnson's Praying Pigs*. 1978. Dirs. Bill Ferris and Judy Peiser. Feat. Tom Johnson. 16mm. Color. 4 minutes. Distrib. Center for Southern Folklore/Folkstreams.

positions and occupations in the region warrant further discussion. In-person author interviews revealed an array of interdisciplinary expertise with many media technologies, from video to microfilm to metadata. Similarly, certain interviewees claim preservation as their second priority to more central careers like archive management, history writing, or library supervision. To identify these subjects and our key discussion points in this section, then, is to present a list of diverse human resources for future space- and text-specific investigations into experimental film history.¹²¹

Tulane's Head Archivist, Ann E. Case, supervises and coordinates the entire university's media stewardship projects: all paper, video, film, sound recordings, art works, and ephemera go through her office as physical material or record of acquisition. Case argues that archiving local film and video is of low priority at the school in comparison to endangered historical paperwork and artifacts (sculptures, local paintings, and drawings, for instance). So while Ann Case and her team are the media gatekeepers at Tulane, her personal efforts to mediate between those priorities have met with strategic cuts to the audiovisual budget.¹²² AV archiving, especially of damaged film and video, is considered "a pet project" even when footage contains potentially historic imagery.¹²³

Case and her team are far from alone in attempting to recover, preserve, and protect fringe media in the post-deluge environment.¹²⁴ Working in the same building is Jeff Rubin, now the Digital Initiatives and Publications Coordinator, and formerly the

¹²¹ All interviews were conducted in person unless otherwise specified and recorded to audio without prior publication. Transcriptions are available by request to the author.

¹²² Case. AI.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Senior Director of the Special Collections. Rubin focuses aggressively on new project development and acquisitions as his department quickly expands, with institutional funding pushed towards large-scale media preservation models and the creation of a sustainable “special” budget in the wake of the Hurricane.¹²⁵ Likewise to Ann Case, he works with Special Collections items acquired through both submission and off-campus recovery; however, when material comes under the Digital Initiatives program, much more footage has been previously identified, recorded, and collated than is typical for his colleagues.¹²⁶ Both Case and Rubin conduct research tours of their onsite audiovisual collections; and both direct local media scholars to the largest individual repository on campus: Hogan Jazz Archive.

The office of Bruce Raeburn, Ph.D., head curator at the Jazz Archive and current Director of Special Collections, is adjacent to the holding and viewing facilities in Hogan. Dr. Raeburn, a music expert, and his assistant curator, Alaina W. Hébert, collaborate on the physical as well as the managerial sides of jazz material archiving. They apply their expertise equally to musical features, shorts, and documentary films, as well as unique memorabilia, audio recordings, and photographs.¹²⁷ Original 78rpm records, 16mm and restored 8mm footage shot around the country, and all manner of *tchotchke* made or recorded in other continents is stored in Hogan if New Orleanian, Creole, and Cajun cultural performance is involved.¹²⁸ Locality is not a factor in material admissions (as it is more widely for University Archives, naturally), making the Hogan

¹²⁵ Rubin. AI.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Raeburn/Hébert. AI.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

collection's origins quite diverse. As the archive expands, these curators and their faculty grow in value as experts on microregional culture, performance, and mixed-media-making in Louisiana.

The citizens in the Delta interviewed for this thesis range the widest in terms of the value they placed on alternative film making and archiving. An antique media collector in Natchez, as well as two separate museum curators in Indianola and Tupelo, all independently argued that locally-produced "creative" film was a non-starter in their communities.¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ By contrast, Dr. Jennifer A. Stollman of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation championed fringe filmmaking as a means of protesting cultural injustices in the contemporary American South.¹³¹ Dr. Stollman, a social science professor, asserts that her personal efforts to "[detect] and [eliminate] institutional and interpersonal bias" throughout the South are tied directly to the exhibition, circulation, distribution, and preservation of creative documentary footage.¹³² In private conversation, she mentioned that in her position as Academic Director of the Institute, she had seen footage from the region depicting physical attacks, Ku Klux Klan meetings, and civil

¹²⁹ The collector's name has been withheld by request.

¹³⁰ The curators' names have been withheld by request. No audio was recorded in discussions with these curators.

¹³¹ Dr. Stollman's presentation opened with introductory comments on foodways, performance, and the politics of identity by Dr. Marcie Cohen Ferris of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Both scholars employ critical regionalist scholarship into their discussions of America's larger history. Dr. Cohen Ferris was not interviewed for this project. For more, see: Stollman, Jennifer A., Ph.D. October 24, 2014. Group Presentation. The University of Mississippi: Oxford, MS.

¹³² Stollman, Jennifer A. "Staff – William Winter Institute" at University of Mississippi. University Site. Accessed April 05, 2015. <<http://winterinstitute.org/about-us/staff/>>

rights marches pushed to the fringes.¹³³ Finally, her recommendations to the work of expert colleagues, like the Institute's former Documentary Educator April Grayson, and Visual Collections Librarian Jessica Leming, contribute to the argument that Oxford's community of experimentalism is not a myth, but rather a marginalized element of the city's media landscape.¹³⁴

Furthermore, interview subjects in Tennessee help(ed) to recover alternative cinema from the peripheries of macroregional history. An unofficial collective of independent and alternative filmmakers meets weekly at Black Lodge Video, the last active video store in the Memphis County neighborhood of Cooper-Young. A small crew of directors described mainstream filmmaker Craig Brewer's constant visits on behalf of ArtsMemphis; and owner Matt Martin stated that the store continues to purchase, rent out, and locally distribute Memphian underground projects.¹³⁵ Experimental video artist Nate Packard, another local, mentioned that Black Lodge events have received profiles from city and statewide press. Packard correctly argues that public consciousness of the store expands the discourse for fringe cinephilia in the city, a strategy that may help to keep Black Lodge, its screening events, and Martin's film circulation efforts funded.¹³⁶

Accordingly, the Memphis underground has in the last five years (despite the city's encroaching bankruptcy) received professional support thanks in part to Lisa Bobango and Patsy White Camp of the Tennessee Arts Commission, the ArtsMemphis

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ April Grayson is also an experimental filmmaker and video artist. See her website: <<http://www.aprilgrayson.com>>

¹³⁵ Martin, Matt. October 26, 2014. Author Interview. Black Lodge Video: Memphis, TN.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

offshoot festival Indie Memphis, and curators of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.¹³⁷

¹³⁸ Indie Memphis President Brewer (whom I did not speak with directly) was feted in 2014 for his pioneering digital short films, and now makes non-narrative lyrical videos on the organization's behalf.¹³⁹ As of the October 2014 edition of the festival, Mr. Martin, Mr. Packard, and Black Lodge Video look to partner with Indie Memphis to draw even more mediamakers, pop film critics, and non-locals in coming years.

Judy Peiser, a founding member and the current director of the Center for Southern Folklore, also collaborates with ArtsMemphis on regional film production. Peiser's forty years of experience as an anthropological filmmaker and creative documentarian make her one of the city's preeminent media experts, folklorists, and archivists. She supervises, along with Archives Manager Mark Hayden, the production, preservation, and digitization of audiovisual recordings in the permanent collection. Footage shot either by Judy Peiser, her former professional partner William "Bill" Ferris, or other local documentarians is also screened annually at a music and heritage festival.¹⁴⁰

Lastly, but still within state borders, the University of Memphis maintains a multitude of special material acquisitions and project upkeep. Preservation Librarian

¹³⁷ Branston, John. "The Comparison of Detroit and Memphis, Again," *Memphis Flyer City Beat Blog*. Newspaper Weblog. Published May 15, 2013. Accessed April 24, 2015. <<http://www.memphisflyer.com/CityBeatBlog/archives/2013/05/15/the-comparison-of-detroit-and-memphis-again>>

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Center for Southern Folklore. "Memphis Music & Heritage Festival." Website. Publication Copyright 2014, Center for Southern Folklore. Accessed April 05, 2015. <<http://www.southernfolklore.com/#!/festival/c22sw>>

Gerald Chaudron supervises the digital repository, including licensing of moving imagery and historic Memphis-shot footage to sources all over the world. Prof. Chaudron also provided my tour of the Special Collections at the McWhorter Library, and has developed the university's new finding aids for all processing and fully digitized preservation materials.¹⁴¹ He works with Dr. Edwin G. Frank, who explains that his specific archival priorities as Curator of the Special Collections are paper-based: documents and regional books once prevented him from authoritatively acquiring and protecting multimedia artifacts. But, Frank clarifies, the University's recent employ of coworkers like Chaudron and assistant curator Sharon Banker helped to reinvigorate attention and funding to historical media preservation projects like the Memphis Multimedia Archival Project housed in the Mississippi Valley Collection.¹⁴² This renewed participation in the preservation of underground media may soon produce richer histories of the state.

¹⁴¹ Chaudron, Gerald. October 27, 2014. Author Interview. The University of Memphis: Memphis, TN.

¹⁴² Frank, Edwin G. October 27, 2014. Author Interview. The University of Memphis: Memphis, TN.

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