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Border Art

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Malleable Chronology and History of The Black Audio Film Collective and The African  
American Quilters of Los Angeles

Part I: Black Audio Film Collective

**Origins and Focus of Black Audio Film Collective(BAFC)**

The 1980's were a polarized time in the United Kingdom marked by collective labor movements losing steam and Margaret Thatcher's right wing projects. In reaction to that environment, several art organizations agreed on the ACCT workshop Declaration, which provided funding and broadcasting for progressive filmmakers to push the boundaries of the British Film Industry. The Black Audio Film Collective started with the help of these funds in 1982. The collective consisted of 7 artists ( John Akomfrah, Edward George, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Lina Gopaul, Claire Joseph and Trevor Mathison) at Portsmouth polytechnic coming from mostly African/Caribbean immigrant backgrounds. The group completed more than a dozen film projects based on the African diaspora, conceptions of truth and challenging dominant narratives in history, and confrontations of Blackness in media.

**Last Angel of History (1996), Directed by John Akomfrah**

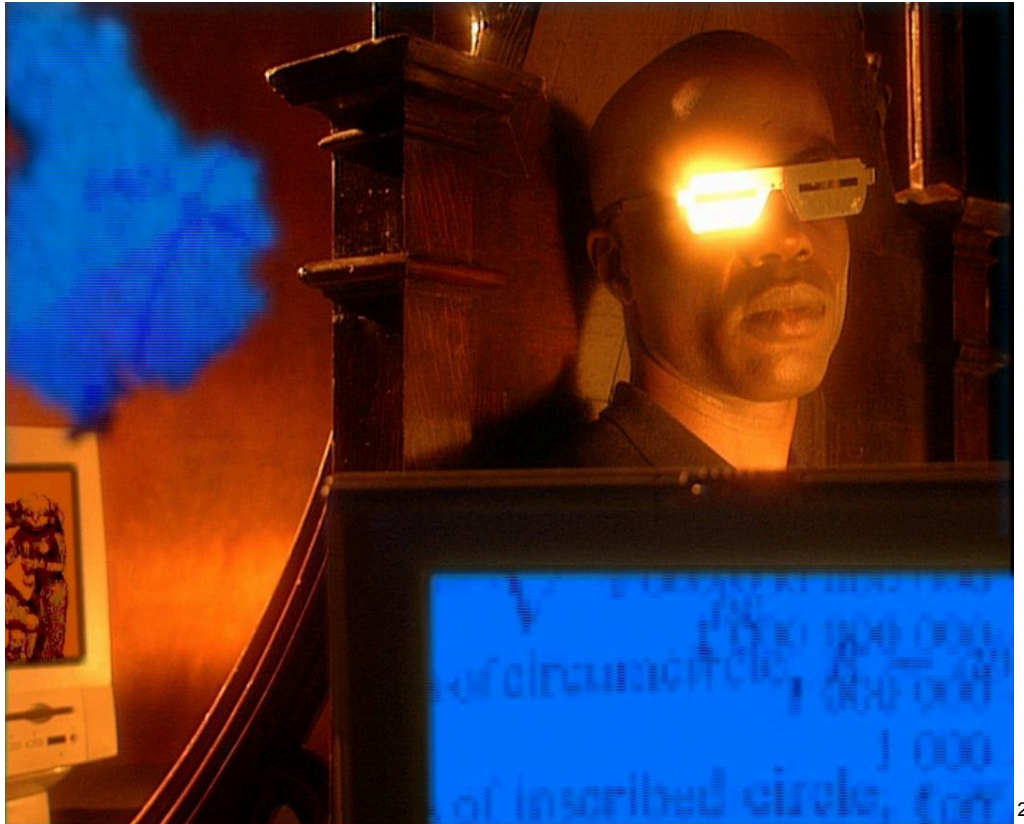
The Last Angel of History is one of the first films to explore Afro-futurism, a term coined in 1994 (two years before the film was made.) The BAFC created this docufiction to explore Afro-futurism through a spatial and temporal nomad named 'the Data Thief' who travels through

time and space using technology to collect information on Black histories and possible futures. The protagonist makes connections between Black music and science fiction, picking apart ideas of ancestral memory, alienation, and inherited trauma. The antagonist is “a virus called history” who seeks to infect the Data Thief with capital-H history, opposed to the lowercase histories found from hip hop, graffiti art, video/computer games and science fiction. in “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism.” Sofia Samatar writes:

”The depiction of History as a virus mounts a critique of progress, a refusal to accept the dominant narrative of History as a march from primitive savagery to enlightened civilization in which the black peoples of the world have been left behind. Afrofuturism insists on lowercase histories as a means of unlocking other futures, which are always located, like a secret code, in sounds and images from the past.<sup>1</sup> (176

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<sup>1</sup> Sofia Samatar. “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism.” *Research in African Literatures* 48, no. 4 (2017): 176. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/10.2979/reseafritelite.48.4.12>



### Handsworth Songs

Handsworth Songs was made in reaction to the way mainstream media covered the riots across England in 1985, particularly the Handsworth Riots in Birmingham which occurred after a white policeman killed an elderly Black woman named Joy Gardner. The film disrupted the mainstream coverage of this (which sought to either demonize or rationalize the rioters) by looking into the socio-economic climate that led to the riots, and pushed the boundaries of the public understanding of what it meant to be a young, Black, and British in the 1980s during this time of unrest, rather than simplifying it to civil disorder. The film used visual elements of newspaper reels, still images, on-location footage, and layered sounds to speak about the events.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Image: Still from 'Last Angel of History', Courtesy of John Akomfrah/ Black Audio Film Collective and LUX, London.

<sup>3</sup> LUX Work Database

In the documentary *Accessing Handsworth Songs* (an effort to make the film more accessible to deaf and blind audiences), Elaine Lillian Joseph talks through her process of creating an audio description of the visuals to Handsworth songs in a way that reflects the visuals without overpowering the complex and multilayered soundscape of the film, and educated on the making of the original soundscapes. In the documentary, Elaine interviews Trevor Mathison (founder member of Black Audio Film Collective responsible for 'Handsworth Songs' distinctive soundtrack) who speaks on the audio characteristics of the project:

“My job was not to try and compete with music that's in the film. It's finding a way of actually enhancing the dialogue, and the mood, and the set pieces, getting energy into the film. So that's the magic of it... I think is a layering. There's other things underneath it or on either side of it. So it's made up of different sorts of atmospheres. It's growing out of or growing into a different sonic landscape. When the guy is running down the road, and the milk cart goes past, and the police are chasing the guy, he is being hunted. And it was the sound of humpback whales that we've been playing around with. That was the through-line, the lament”<sup>4</sup>

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<https://lux.org.uk/work/handsworth-songs/>

<sup>4</sup>Clip from Audio Documentary about *Accessing Handsworth Songs*(9:39- 11:24)



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A scene in the *Handsworth Songs* contained footage from 1985, where a journalist pestered a Black woman about the disturbances on Lozell Road, asking about her if she had any relatives involved, looking for a story from her. The woman looked at the debris on the street and responded ‘there are no stories in the riots. Only the ghosts of other stories.’<sup>6</sup>

This reminded me of several of the in-class readings, particularly on the control over narrative and the loss of translation and communication through borders in the Ed Gomez’s 100 letters where messages sent across the US-Mexico border were never received. Time, distance, and alternate histories act as informational borders, disrupting these “stories” that are now ghosts of

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<sup>5</sup> Still from *Handsworth Songs*, Courtesy of John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective and LUX, London

<sup>6</sup> Clip from Audio Documentary About Accessing *Handsworth Songs* (22:30)

other stories” Although she was writing about the work *Last Angel of History*, Samatar’s summary of the BAFC focus can be applied to their other works as well, “Akomfrah and George emphasize access and freedom of movement: “on this future-internet, the space-time continuum has been realigned so that each image holds multiple traces of its past, held forever in a state of suspension.”<sup>7</sup>(176) This idea of images of holding traces of its past held in suspension, maybe becoming a “ghost of other stories”(Handsworth Songs) represents an idea of borders as un/chronological, unstable and inconsistent, yet holding memory and history. I would like to explore this in Part II.



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### Part II: Cyanotyped Community Quilt

<sup>7</sup> Sofia Samatar. “Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism.” *Research in African Literatures* 48, no. 4 (2017): 176. <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/10.2979/reseafilite.48.4.12>

<sup>8</sup> Still from *Handsworth Songs*, Courtesy of John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective and LUX, London

For the last 6 months, I have been driving out to Inglewood with my mom to the African American Quilters of Los Angeles meetings. The quilt guild has taught me several lessons about maintaining community, sharing knowledge, and connecting with (lowercase h) histories that reflect them. All quilt guilds have a shared tradition of creating opportunity/community quilts where the labor is dispensed amongst the members. When this quilt is done, guild members travel to other quilt guilds to sell raffle tickets for the chance to win the quilt, which becomes the main source of income for the guilds so that they can continue their meetings. Many of the women in AAQLA come from a background similar to my grandma; They grew up in Southern states and moved to California in young adulthood. I have witnessed these women discussing generational barriers (particularly in passing information about their craft to their community outside of their age range) and physical state borders and national borders, where they discuss materials, using fabrics from their hometowns and childhoods, mixing those textiles with new fabrics bought in LA and African textile patterns. The quilts that this guild creates are often historical, based on civil rights issues and Black figures. In a similar way to BAFC, AAQLA explores both their multiple histories and their existence as Black women.

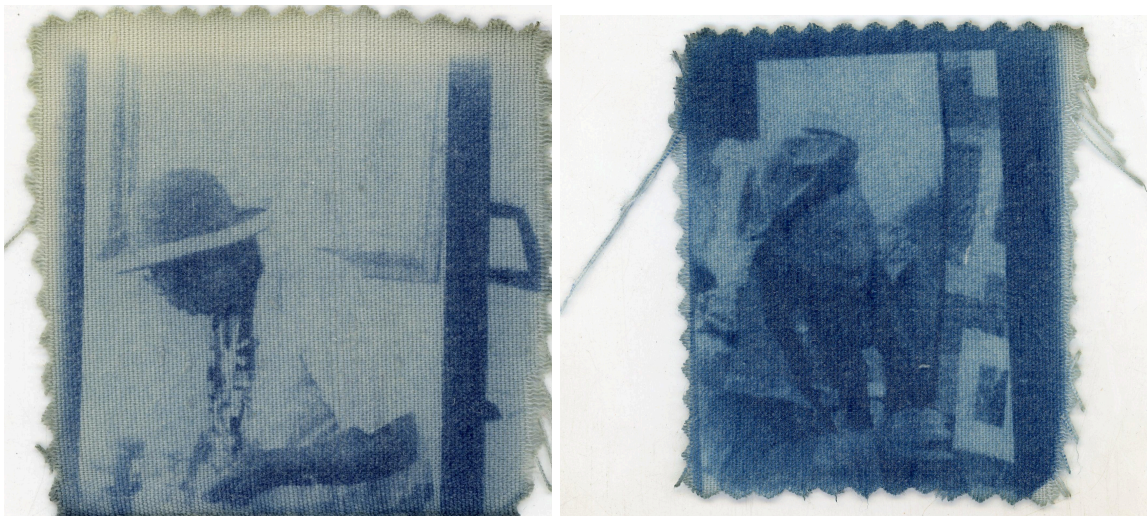
BAFC assembled different mediums and sources to create their films, often taking still images, or images from other sources and layering them with other sounds, images, and repetition. The way that I have witnessed AAQLA assemble their quilts requires lots of assemblage of fabrics with different histories and locational ties. I would like to similarly collect images from this community, asking members to collect photos that reflect their experiences, and combine them with my own photos that I have taken of their meetings, my families historical imagery from my grandma, and convert them to negative images that can then be printed using

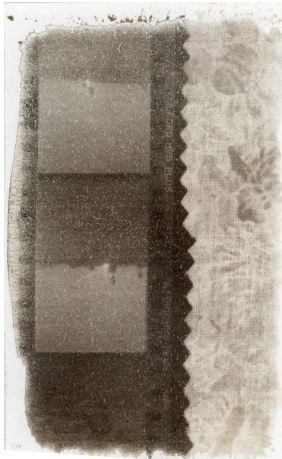
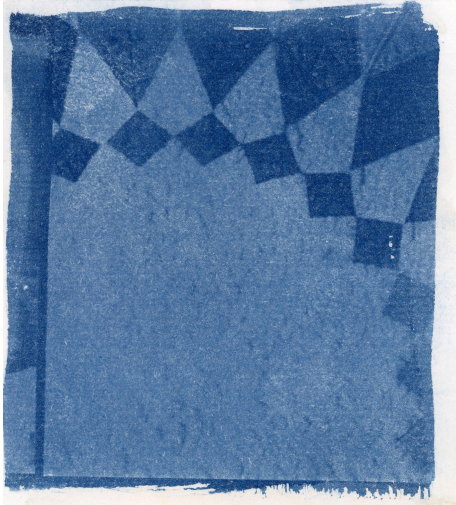
Cyanotype method to fabric. I am not sure what path comes next with these fabric prints (and I would love feedback on this for critique!!!)but here is what I have considered:

- ask the AAQLA community for help in assembling a quilt, similar to their community quilts, the goal here is to act more as a Data Thief (Last Angel of History) jumping through time and space to piece together the project “so that each image holds multiple traces of its past, held forever in a state of suspension.” (Samatar)
- create Cyanotype images as a community to then be taken back individually, and used in whatever way makes sense to those individuals (inspired more by Ed Gomez’s 100 Letters, traveling information)

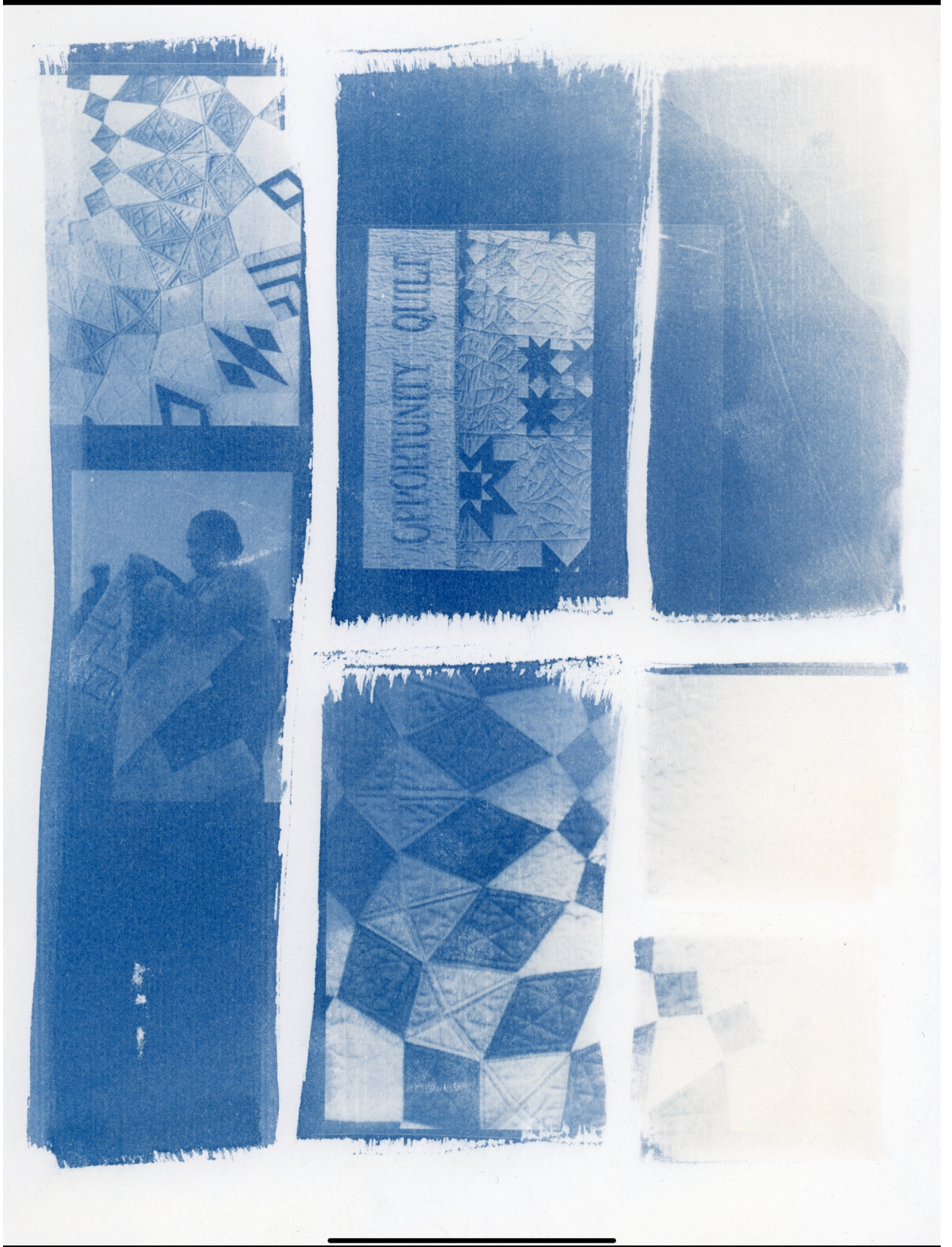
My goal is to explore the idea of borders as chronological/uncronological and unstable yet full of memory and physical (exploring the crossing of state and national borders for the materials,background, inspiration, and act of displaying the quilts.)

On the next pages are my recent experiments with cyanotype, Vandyke Brown, and Solarfast Dye on fabric and paper, all images are from (or enroute to) the quilt guild meetings.













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