

by Robert J. Mills

Death in the Streets, Blood on Your Hands: *Chocolate Babies* and the End of AIDS

ABSTRACT

This article considers Stephen Winter's *Chocolate Babies* (1996), a low-budget feature made amid, and in response to, the ravages of AIDS in New York City. Paying close attention to the film's conjunctural cinematic syntax, I argue that Winter here critiques a once-prominent consensus that rapid biomedical advancements were bringing about the epidemic's "end." Throughout, I put *Chocolate Babies* in dialogue with numerous critics who refused to accept the politically vacant terms of biomedicine as a neat conclusion to the decades-long struggle against AIDS. Winter's film, I ultimately suggest, extends such antagonisms, affirming the necessity of an enduring state of emergency.

Over the past four decades, the significance of screen media's role in an organized fight against the social, political, and corporeal devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic has been registered extensively. From the outset of the crisis in the early 1980s, it is by now customary to note, film and video practices emerged as crucial facets of a diverse queer activist project; amid the rise of an increasingly reactionary mainstream, cable access talk shows here provided much-needed platforms for communal debate, safer-sex tapes offered demonstrations of innovative preventive measures, and several waves of experimental video art deconstructed the dominant media's seemingly endless cycle of rhetorical fabrications.¹ To this day, scholars remain invested

¹ In an article first published in 1990, the activist and filmmaker John Greyson provides an extended list of such alternative AIDS media. See John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimaging America: The*

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in the nuances of this transmedial alignment. The contours of their research are notably broad, spanning considerations of the affective economies solicited by “direct activist videos,” the New Queer Cinema’s aesthetics of discontent, and even attempts to redeem once lambasted films such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) from the annals of a queer political history.² There remains, however, one underlying assumption binding this cluster of disparate interventions: that the relationship between the spheres of queer media production and direct AIDS activism was one structured by an ideological reciprocity.³ In this article, I set out to complicate this currently dominant paradigm of cinematic-activist alignment, offering a historical and conceptual extension to what has heretofore been figured as a relatively unproblematic intermedial coalition. If, as detailed above, an established cultural history suggests that the flow of resistant sentiments from the streets to the screen was largely harmonious throughout the first two decades of the AIDS crisis, this article switches course to contend that during the mid- to late 1990s, queer cinema served as a site through which a productive *discontent* with a dominant activist order was negotiated.

More specifically, this article makes a case for reading Stephen Winter’s *Chocolate Babies* (1996) as a singularly significant example of such cinematic antagonism. Produced during a period of the AIDS epidemic characterized by unparalleled biomedical progress (and an accompanying sense that the crisis years of AIDS were all but over), the energized political rhetoric cultivated by *Chocolate Babies* sits in tension with the mass resignation taking hold of contemporaneous activist communities. Whereas, by most accounts, the mid-1990s is said to have witnessed the effective demise of an earlier culture of organized queer opposition, *Chocolate Babies* sets out to affirm the necessity of an enduring state of emergency. The film’s narrative premise explicitly foregrounds such an intervention: following an underground group of multiracial militants as they interfere with the machinations of their corrupt government representatives, the tensions of a mid-1990s AIDS crisis are here amplified to the point of total, violent disorder. Throughout an episodic

Arts of Social Change, ed. Mark O’Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society, 1990), 60–74. For an indicative example of these cable access talk shows, see *Our Time*, episode 4, “AIDS,” aired March 3, 1983, on WNYC; for a safer-sex tape, see Gay Men’s Health Crisis’s *Midnight Snack* (Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto, 1989); for video art, see *A* (André Burke, 1986).

- 2 On these affective economies, see Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and Lucas Hilderbrand, “Retroactivism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 303–317, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-2-303>. On New Queer Cinema, see B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). And on *Philadelphia*, see Paul Sendziuk et al., “Moving Pictures: AIDS on Film and Video,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 444–449, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-038>. Another example of this recuperative work would be David Román, “Remembering AIDS: A Reconsideration of the Film *Longtime Companion*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 281–301, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-2-281>.
- 3 Alexandra Juhasz, for instance, in one of the first and most influential studies of AIDS media practices, writes of this reciprocity as a transmedial *alignment*; film and video practices were able to “change the face of [this] political history,” she argues, because “rapid changes in politics, theory, and technology align[ed].” See Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

series of insurgent acts and fantasized disruptions, *Chocolate Babies* plainly criticizes a then-prevalent queer alignment with pharmaceutical corporations and state logics. In the eyes of the film's enraged protagonists, the emergence of effective treatment by no means signaled the end of the crisis years of AIDS—rather, such developments necessitated a conceptual recalibration of this crisis itself. Indeed, in the program notes for the 1997 New York City Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the film's advertisement made much of its unprecedented vision of resistance: “*marvel* at the exploits of these queer avengers as they slap around conservative politicians,” this brief description states; “be *astonished* at the plight of the team's youngest member.” Couched in the language of bewilderment, such promotional material fixates on the film's departure from a standard set of queer politics and an associated body of oppositional cinema. *Chocolate Babies*, the advertisement goes on to conclude, “packs a super-powered punch.”⁴

Yet despite such praise, Winter's film remains something of an outlier to the numerous canons of queer cinema formed during the 1990s and thereafter. While *Chocolate Babies* was initially deemed a success following its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1997, receiving positive reviews and a number of accolades from the queer events and film festivals it was screened at over the next two years, little has been made of the implications and resonances of its radical resistant vision.⁵ In a number of taxonomic articles on AIDS-attendant cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century, for instance, the film is only fleetingly cited, mostly forgotten amid extended discussions of more familiar titles. Resisting any unproblematic alignment with either its cinematic or political contemporaries, *Chocolate Babies*' insurgent novelty here seems to have had the inadvertent consequence of obstructing its own entry into a periodized corpus. This was a production truly out of sync with the currents of queer thought dominant on its release—the fact that it was the debut feature from a then-unknown director only further relegated it to the position of awkward, unwelcome outsider. Broadly speaking, then, this article works to recenter *Chocolate Babies*' antagonistic political vision. If, as I have preliminarily suggested above, the film calls out for viewers to rethink some of the unifying assumptions structuring current histories of alternative AIDS media, then my work here fulfills the long overdue task of grappling with the production's complex (and, in many ways, unresolved) political commitments. As I will show, when figured as a response to the debilitating stratification taking place within AIDS activist communities of the mid-1990s, *Chocolate Babies* emerges as an invaluable document of maligned queer discontent.

In what follows, then, I set out to intervene explicitly in what Theodore Kerr has recently called the “limited scope” of an emerging cultural imperative to revisit the crisis years of AIDS. Since the late 2000s, Kerr argues, “the creation and dissemination of art and culture about the early days of

4 *New York Lesbian & Gay Film Festival*, programme guide, June 5–15, 1997, New York City, 9 (emphasis mine).

5 For instance, *Chocolate Babies* was screened at both the South by Southwest (SXSW) and Urbanworld Film Festival in 1997, where it received honorable mentions in the category of Best Picture.

the crisis in the United States” has proliferated, contrasting starkly with the decade of “silence” that succeeded the initial introduction of effective antiretroviral therapy in 1996.⁶ Pointing to a cluster of examples that include museum exhibitions, documentary films, and various nonfiction books, Kerr makes a convincing case for the existence of this newfound incitement to remember the epidemic’s brutalities.⁷ However, his work raises one central issue with the form frequently taken by these remembrances: this “first wave” of cultural productions, he deduces, is “primarily focused on the stories of white gay men and their allies.” “The erasure of Black and Brown bodies impacted by HIV . . . is part of an ongoing historical erasure,” he argues, one that speaks “poignantly about the moment we are currently in.” “At this point,” Kerr concludes, any potential benefits from this primarily white “AIDS Crisis Revisitation” are thus duly compromised, “too narrow to be truly instructional or liberative.”⁸ Indeed, by now such a criticism has been echoed extensively, taking precedence in the work of activists such as Ian Bradley-Perrin, scholars Jih-Fei Cheng and C. Riley Snorton, and Black queer critics including Tyrone Palmer.⁹ As Palmer explains, this collective, partial revisitation merely affirms what many have known and experienced for decades: “the longstanding difference between the goals of the LGBT rights movement and the ongoing Black freedom struggle.” “On the underside of the rainbow,” he writes evocatively, “lies the ghostly body of the Black queer.”¹⁰

For Cheng, however, it is the cinema in particular that has played an active role in the erasure of Black queers from contemporary histories of AIDS. In a recent book chapter on the same body of filmic productions that Kerr and Palmer address, Cheng highlights the way that these documentaries are meticulously constructed so as to jettison the “fact that the AIDS pandemic manifested precisely because of structural inequality experienced by non-white peoples.”¹¹ “There is a trend among recent critically acclaimed popular films addressing AIDS activist historiography,” he asserts, “whereby people of color have been nearly disappeared from the historical record.” He goes on, “I contend that this is because the white men who direct and

6 Theodore Kerr, “AIDS 1969: HIV, History, and Race,” *Drain* 13, no. 2 (2016), <http://drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/>.

7 These museum exhibitions include *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism* (New York Public Library, 2013). The documentary films include *We Were Here* (David Weissman and Bill Weber, 2011), *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012), and *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (Jim Hubbard, 2012). The nonfiction books referred to are Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Perry N. Halkitis, *The AIDS Generation: Stories of Survival and Resilience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8 Ted Kerr, “A History of Erasing Black Artists and Bodies from the AIDS Conversation,” *Hyperallergic*, December 31, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/264934/a-history-of-erasing-black-artists-and-bodies-from-the-aids-conversation/>.

9 Relevant work by Ian Bradley-Perrin, Jih-Fei Cheng, and C. Riley Snorton appears in Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, eds., *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). See also Tyrone Palmer, “Under the Rainbow,” *New Enquiry*, July 28, 2015, <https://thenewinquiry.com/under-the-rainbow/>.

10 Palmer, “Under the Rainbow.”

11 Jih-Fei Cheng, “AIDS, Black Feminisms, and the Institutionalization of Queer Politics,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25, no. 1 (2019): 171–172.

appear in these films are invested in telling a story about political progress since the earlier years of the AIDS crisis,” as opposed to examining “the root causes for AIDS as embedded in histories of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and socioeconomic inequality.”¹² More specifically, he suggests, the material process of editing has been employed to purge such documentaries of any evidence of unresolved Black queer discontent, orienting these retrospective accounts around an ecliptic (and thus insincere) narrative of queer achievement. These omissions, it is said, are active and repeated; writing about David France’s *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), for instance, Cheng notes (by contrasting the feature with the raw archival material from which it drew) how the director “left out the extensive activist leadership and on-camera discussions by Black women, people of color, and their white allies that relay their experiences and interventions into the AIDS crisis.”¹³ What viewers are left with, such scholarship makes clear, is a cultural archive of the epidemic that works—in line with the callous desires of the negligent state—to figure those crisis years as contained and resolved, to restore an inflated sense of justice to the most unjust, and enduring, of violences.

In recent years, there has been renewed attention paid to these previously absent Black queer narratives, with the work of the above thinkers—as well as that of activist groups such as the Tacoma Action Collective and television shows such as *Pose* (FX, 2018–2021)—striving to reconcile the historiographic conservatism of this earlier wave.¹⁴ Broadly speaking, this article aims to extend such work, figuring *Chocolate Babies* as a film harnessing affects, ideals, and fantasies that depart from an elsewhere reinforced historical consensus. Throughout, I contend, Winter explicitly antagonizes the liberal paradoxes of his moment, offering a generative reference point when considering the so-called end of AIDS. Moreover, if Cheng’s work points to one way in which the cinematic cut has been employed as a tool of historical occlusion, then my own writing goes on to map an alternative use of such a foundational cinematic technique within this history. For it is partly through its experimental editing practices, I will argue, that *Chocolate Babies* expounds its radical political vision. Thus, following a brief elaboration of the “end of AIDS” rhetoric that was gaining traction around the time of *Chocolate Babies*’ production and release, I propose that the cinema served as a uniquely valuable technology for the projection of Black queer alternatives at the turn of the twenty-first century. Bringing this film to bear on our histories of the epidemic in general, and on our histories of cinematic responses to the epidemic in particular, begins to move us past the racialized distortions plaguing current attempts to remember. It might also bring us closer to recognizing that the AIDS crisis continues to this day, displaced, as Palmer suggests, onto the expatriated figure of the “Black queer,” “the unthought of LGBT activism.”¹⁵

12 Cheng, 171.

13 Cheng, 172.

14 See Tacoma Action Collective, “#StopErasingBlackPeople—Historical Lands—a Statement from the Tacoma Action Collective,” *The Visual AIDS Blog*, November 29, 2017, <https://visualaids.org/blog/tacoma-action-collective>.

15 Palmer, “Under the Rainbow.”

“LIBERATION” AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In many respects, the gains made by North American AIDS activists across the mid-1990s were transformative in ways unsurpassed by any other period of the epidemic. With clinicians on the cusp of what appeared to be a conclusive medical breakthrough, much of this productivity stemmed from various long-standing oppositional groups redirecting their energies into treatment research. A “cure” for HIV became almost tangible throughout this era, that is to say, entering the horizons of an activist imaginary with a blinding clarity.¹⁶ By the spring of 1994, for instance, the floor of ACT UP New York’s once-fiery weekly meetings had become a stage for elevated clinical discussion; here, responses to the design of the latest AIDS drug trials were fielded, updates on specialist biomedical advancements given, and predictions regarding future outcomes made.¹⁷ The group’s debates pertaining to civil disobedience and public disruption assumed a secondary status in this context, positioned as an afterthought both on scheduled agendas as well as in imagined scale. For the activist Mark Harrington, such developments were said to represent a much-needed maturation. “It was great to get arrested . . . and do tons of zaps and demos,” he noted in a 2002 interview, reflecting on an earlier moment of activism, “and then move on to grown-up strategies.”¹⁸ “Unlike politicians,” Harrington suggests, “scientists were capable of rational discourse and open to changing their minds.”¹⁹ And indeed, this widespread, reenergized investment in treatment protocols eventually paid off. In 1997, following a successful trial run of a newly configured combination therapy, doctors reported a “substantial decrease” in AIDS-related deaths for the first time since the epidemic’s emergence.²⁰ Although this new treatment program was not a *cure* for HIV, but rather a highly effective means of obstructing its viral replication, AIDS was soon widely understood as a manageable, chronic condition. After almost two decades of sustained activist efforts and innumerable deaths, these advancements initiated the epidemic’s long-awaited dissipation as both malignant threat and countercultural nucleus.

Despite all of the developments made by this burgeoning investment in pharmaceuticals, however, the sense remained that many of these gains were partial. In this respect, Jeffrey Edwards writes of a “concern amongst some in the movement” that a treatment-oriented agenda was “blind to certain social and political aspects of science and medicine, in particular the relation-

16 Consider Phillip Berger’s report from the Eleventh International Conference on AIDS, which concludes by asking whether 1996 will be the year that there would be a “successful launch to a cure.” See Phillip B. Berger, “Hope and Caution: Report from the XI International Conference on AIDS,” *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal* 155, no. 6 (1996): 721.

17 In the minutes from one indicative meeting, the discussion moves from analyzing trial timeframes to critiquing exclusion criteria to lengthy considerations of a newly approved d4T antiretroviral drug. See minutes, May 23, 1994, ACT UP New York Records, box 6, folder 3, New York Public Library. The significance of this biomedical discourse is only affirmed by the fact that these discussions took place following the Treatment Action Group’s formal emancipation from ACT UP in 1992.

18 Cited in Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 322.

19 Paraphrased in Gould, 356.

20 Robert S. Hogg et al., “Decline in Deaths from AIDS Due to New Antiretrovirals,” *The Lancet* 349, no. 9061 (1997): 1294, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)62505-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)62505-6).

ship of science and medicine to people of color and women.”²¹ Mary Patten likewise expressed such a sentiment in a contemporaneous essay, rejecting the increasingly prevalent language of closure when discussing AIDS and writing instead of a shift in the epidemic’s demographics “to more and more poor people, communities of color, intravenous drug users, and women.”²² The impact and consequences of AIDS had never been universal nor singular, these critics argued. To take the politically neutral terms of biomedicine as a neat conclusion to this decades-long struggle was thus to sever ties with the once capacious, socially transformative agendas spurring action during earlier years. Nevertheless, the definitive end of the AIDS crisis was declared and assumed by many: following the introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapy, AIDS “no longer signific[d] death,” the conservative gay critic Andrew Sullivan suggested in 1996, consciously disregarding the fact that “many Americans—especially blacks and Latinos—will still die.”²³ The “existential urgency” once driving a culture of unified queer opposition largely dissipated under these conditions, giving rise to a solipsistic rhetoric of collective triumph.²⁴ Yet if, during this period, AIDS was undergoing such a comprehensive resignification, it was becoming increasingly apparent for those unable to access the immediate benefits of these medical advancements that the epidemic was not in fact ending, but continuing along distinctly racialized and class-based trajectories.

This is precisely the argument advanced in Cathy J. Cohen’s *The Boundaries of Blackness* (1999), which addresses the resurgent proliferation of AIDS in Black communities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Frustrated with both an activist and scholarly discourse wherein “whiteness is assumed to serve as the . . . ‘baseline’ experience of those affected by AIDS,” Cohen’s writing provides a necessary rebuttal to this period’s one-dimensional narrative of progress.²⁵ “Despite the discovery and incredible benefits of drugs such as protease inhibitors,” she observes, “we know that disproportionately more people of color will continue to be diagnosed with and die from AIDS.”²⁶ Offering an extended critique of the vested interests too frequently determining communal decision-making, *The Boundaries of Blackness* presents a revisionist history of the mid-1990s as a time giving rise to the stratification of an effective queer opposition. “The cohesion assumed and asserted previously” in both African American and queer communities alike, Cohen laments, was “tearing at the seams in clearly visible ways” at the dawn of the twenty-first century.²⁷ Thus, while managing HIV-seropositivity was a medical

21 Jeffrey Edwards, “AIDS, Race, and the Rise and Decline of a Militant Oppositional Lesbian and Gay Politics in the US,” *New Political Science* 22, no. 4 (2000): 500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713687969>.

22 Mary Patten, “The Thrill Is Gone: An ACT UP Post-Mortem,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London: Routledge, 1998), 401.

23 Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1996, SM52.

24 The waning of an earlier “existential urgency” is discussed by Palmer in “Under the Rainbow.”

25 Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 23.

26 Cohen, 339.

27 Cohen, 17.

possibility from 1997 onward, Cohen here maintains that there was a notable distinction in for whom that possibility could be effectively translated into a reality. Influenced by the contemporaneous writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as much earlier work on racialized health inequities by the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois, Cohen's intervention is singularly significant for the way it exposes the structural limitations of this period's organizational logics.²⁸ "In our current stratified existence," she asks, "how does any marginal group determine which members merit the support and mobilization of 'the community'? Whose issues are important enough to be . . . prioritized for action?" And, finally, "can the politics of any marginal community sustain anything other than a single-dimensional or single-axis approach to . . . liberation?"²⁹

This article takes such questions as emblemizing the broad concerns facing many during this moment of clinically defined progression. Across this period, after all, a breadth of publications emerged that launched a similar set of inquisitions into these established models of queer collectivity. Whether in Urvashi Vaid's claim that "rich gay and lesbian people [had] become the new powerbrokers of our movement" or in José Quiroga's more pointed assertion that a group of "middle-class white fags and dykes" had taken it on themselves to reframe the project of liberation, such discontent was pervasive.³⁰ Yet it was not only in scholarly spheres that such concerns were raised. Consider a cartoon first circulated in a 1995 issue of the *Bay Area Reporter*, a long-standing weekly publication serving the diverse queer communities of San Francisco (see Figure 1). In this sketch, a gathering of white activists stand atop an inverted triangular structure inscribed with the words "the queer movement." Imagined as a leisurely collective, these figures socialize on the frame's only horizontal platform, seemingly oblivious to anything other than the interactions they nurture. Below, in the shadows, a multiracial group of bodies clamor atop one another, attempting unsuccessfully to scale the diagonal slopes leading up to this coveted plane. A speech bubble coming from a member of the elevated elite proclaims the absence of these "queers of color" from their gathering while also decrying any blame: "*we* invited them!" Here, the sketch's provocative crux rests on its reader acknowledging the superficiality of these liberal gestures of inclusion; a neutralized discourse of civic universalism does little to reconcile the structural antagonisms materialized elsewhere in this tableau. In a register wholly aligned with later critiques by Cohen, Vaid, and Quiroga, the contours of this inverted triangle—elsewhere a recognizable symbol of queer solidarity—are here repurposed as a sinister technology of stratification.

28 See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>; and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

29 Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 19.

30 Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor, 1995), 215; and José Quiroga, "From Republic to Empire: The Loss of Gay Studies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 134, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/49629>. In recent years, these interventions have been reenergized by works such as Roderick A. Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); and Adam M. Geary, *Antiblack Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

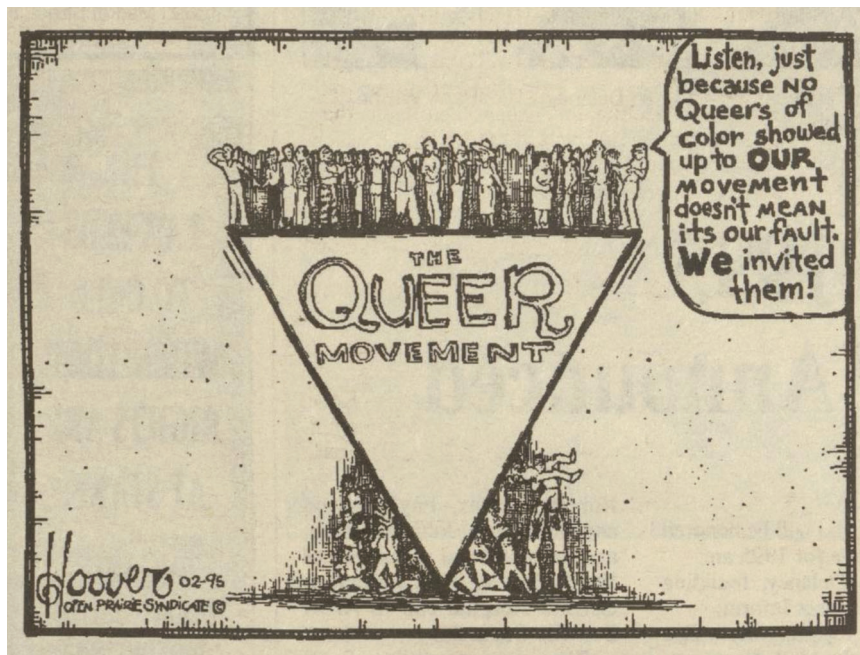


Figure 1. The inverted triangle reimagined as a technology of social stratification (*Bay Area Reporter*, 1995). Courtesy of the *Bay Area Reporter*.

Bound up in both this animated exposé and the numerous queer critiques published alongside it was thus the implication that alternative forms and sites of action were necessary in the face of these intracommunal tensions. As the *Bay Area Reporter* cartoon so acutely displays, participation in legitimized spheres of collective organizing was a privilege entirely off-limits to certain racialized bodies. The publicized advancements made in the fight against AIDS during the mid-1990s, this sketch suggests, were dependent on the active negation of a largely subterranean populace. In fact, a closer reading of this image might very well lead one to the conclusion that these veiled, laboring bodies were actually stabilizing the ground upon which a dominant white queer collective operated. Propped up against (and so propping up) the base of the upturned triangle, these exhausted figures point to a continuum of interdependence between their failing efforts and a liberatory movement's surface success. Indeed, for Cohen "this phenomenon of increasing stratification" posed a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of a conventional political sphere itself: "its resulting variation in interests has affected the ability of marginal groups to define and pursue a unified political agenda."³¹ Much like in the more recent work of Jodi Melamed, for whom our current order is defined as one expropriating a "violence on collective life itself," Cohen's writing signals the necessity of a resistant channel in some ways removed from the compromised networks of normative politi-

³¹ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 342.

cal action.³² Thus, it is this article's initial contention that, in the face of this mass disengagement from both an increasingly professionalized sphere of activism and the standardized forms of organization it depended on, cinema came to serve as a platform through which an antagonistic queer critique could be launched. Following Cohen, I do not make the claim here that this era's oppositional screen media pronounced anything close to a unified, or representative, agenda. My contention is much more specific: Winter's *Chocolate Babies*, I suggest, points to the various ways in which film provided individuals ousted from a generic sphere of political participation with the means of staging and soliciting worldviews that reflected their heterogeneity.

During the mid-1990s, after all, North American queer cinema became a site of extensive experimentation with regard to what this insurgent political grammar could (or should) look like. Take Shu Lea Cheang's *Fresh Kill* (1994), for example, a film that centers on an interracial lesbian couple living in a dystopian New York City. Amid a dramatized disorder that includes the imbricated issues of a global ecological crisis, a local epidemic of contaminated sushi, and the corruption brought about by an organized group of cyberhackers, the film's search for networks of survival and resistance is complex. Throughout Cheang's production, a maximalist aesthetic and overburdened narrative trajectory corrupts the feasibility of any singular or preconceived retaliatory model; the culture of civil disobedience initiated by ACT UP just a few years earlier, or a contemporaneous investment in biomedical solutions, would not even begin to address the extent of the problems here staged. In an entirely different register, films such as *Latin Boys Go to Hell* (Ela Troyano, 1997) and *Nowhere* (Gregg Araki, 1997) negotiate a prevalent political dispossession by unfolding in a manner both aleatory and subdued. For these films, a constitutive emptiness bespeaks a deep-rooted sense of alienation too frequently overwritten by narratives of universal queer achievement. Such sentiments also influenced a number of documentaries released during this transitional moment; from *Pride Divide* (Paris Poirier, 1997) to *Got 2b There* (José Torrealba, 1998), for instance, audiences were asked quite explicitly to reflect on the restrictions and exclusions plaguing dominant sites of queer sociality (from gay clubs to circuit parties and activist meetings). Despite their differences, all of these films establish formal, aesthetic, and rhetorical strategies that push back against a reductive account of this era as one of unprecedented queer progression. Acknowledging what Bradley-Perrin has called the "self-serving reciprocity between pharmaceutical companies and mainstream AIDS organizations," cinema here offers a window onto various alternative political horizons.³³

32 Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 78, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>. Melamed continues: "contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders." See Melamed, 77. For another account of the compromised horizons of established political networks, see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

33 This summary of Bradley-Perrin's work comes from the introduction of the edited collection within which it features. See, for this introduction and quote, Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, introduction to Cheng, Juhasz, and Shahani, *AIDS*, 14.

QUEER CONJUNCTURES, OR BLACK FAGGOTS AND THEIR POLITICAL AGENDAS

If one film is to emblemize this shifting sphere of cinematic-activist relations, however, it is undoubtedly Winter's *Chocolate Babies*. Throughout the film, we follow an underground group of genderqueer activists with AIDS as they organize and launch a full-scale assault against a state apparatus wholly indifferent to their enduring struggles. Shot on location in the streets and atop the crumbling tenements of New York City, Winter's debut feature sits somewhere between satire and sincerity, advancing a timely critique of liberal responses to the ongoing AIDS crisis in a manner both fantastical and sharp. With a complex plot involving closeted gay councilmen, countless emotional conflicts, and a series of violent disputes, the film establishes a disjunctive tone that is significant in that it marked a shift away from the largely realist political critiques offered by an earlier AIDS cinema.³⁴ "As most AIDS stories have [so far] been serious dramas by and about white gay men," a contemporaneous reviewer noted, "it's refreshing to see a political satire that not only revolves around men of color, but also refuses to label them as victims." "Aiming to be at once a riotous comedy and a sensitive, compassionate melodrama," the same reviewer goes on to claim, Winter's film "vacillates between wild humor and sentimental pathos"—a combination with "potentially outrageous" consequences.³⁵ From its premiere, then, it was clear that *Chocolate Babies* represented a departure from the countercultural norms adopted throughout the mid-1990s, its energetic defiance undercutting a then-prominent ideological consensus to frame discussions of the epidemic as already over.

The film's opening sequence provides a particularly prescient enactment of its reimagined insurgent economy. In this precredit introduction, the film's five central figures are shown confronting a suited councilman as he leaves his Greenwich Village townhouse. Adorned in colorful drag, the group surround him, obstructing his attempted exit, before beginning to press a range of issues pertaining to the ongoing AIDS crisis. "Let the record show," one group member states, "that 91 percent of AIDS babies are Black or Latino. You blocked their healthcare measures; what's up with that?" Before giving the official time to respond, another member chimes in: "Let the record show that people of color die in faster and in disproportionate numbers; you blocked treatment to the people." "There's death in the streets and blood on your hands," a third adds. The councilman offers nothing but customary deferrals to these accusations, attempting to move past the group. As he does so, however, one member pushes him back, announcing forcefully, "We are Black faggots with a political agenda. We your worst night-

34 There are, of course, a number of important exceptions to this rather broad historical claim. These include *Zero Patience* (John Greyson, 1993), which makes use of a curious form of cinematic fabulation in order to tell (or, rather, contest) the prevalent mythology of a promiscuous Patient Zero responsible for the unprecedented spread of HIV. There are also shorter works of video art that feel like significant predecessors to Winter's experimental tendencies, such as those by Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied* [1989] and *Anthem* [1991]).

35 Emanuel Levy, "Chocolate Babies," *Variety*, July 29, 1996, <https://variety.com/1996/film/reviews/chocolate-babies-1200446112/>.



Figure 2. “We are Black faggots with a political agenda. We your worst nightmare”: an activist (Dudley Findlay Jr.) confronts a city councilman (Bryan Webster) in *Chocolate Babies* (Frameline, 1996).

mare” (see Figure 2). Affronted by this physical escalation, the councilman retorts, provoking the final lines of dialogue in this explosive opening: “Who do you think you’re talking to?” “A murderer.” “And we gonna fight you—to the death.” In an unpredictable turn of events, the camera then cuts to a close-up of a knife being drawn, before rapidly alternating between a series of shots depicting each member of the group sacrificially slicing open their chests, staining their hands with blood, and smearing it on the councilman’s face. The images that follow are frenzied; overwhelmed and overpowered, the councilman flees, knocking the heretofore steady camera momentarily off-kilter as he forces an exit. Amid the layered sounds of hysterical yelling and screeching tires, the opening credits begin, bringing some semblance of order to this moment of otherwise unbridled chaos.

Lasting no more than sixty seconds, this expository scene stages *Chocolate Babies*’ insurgent philosophy entirely: with recognizable models of confrontation ineffective, the time has come for accelerated retaliative action. Setting the stage for his film’s repeated transgression of an established set of resistant measures, Winter’s opening provides a vision of queer insurrection that actively distances itself from the developments taking place in a parallel public sphere. In the diegetic world of *Chocolate Babies*, that is to say, there is no consolidation of what Steven Epstein describes as the waning activist energies defining the mid-1990s at large.³⁶ Rather, cinema here operates as a site where these energies come to be both maintained and appropriated, figuratively represented by the use of fast-paced editing to transform the individual actions of these militant group members into an invigorating affront. In fact, throughout this dialogue-heavy introduction, the various parameters of Winter’s reimagined resistant agenda come across plainly. Here, for instance, we see the activist group rejecting a new communal consensus of civility,

36 See Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 325.

adopting not only illegitimate but outright criminal forms. It is only once these civilities are transgressed—when, to use the words of Mario Mieli, “the repressive chains” of an established sociopolitical contract are broken—that these militants’ concerns can be effectively raised.³⁷ Likewise, the pressing issues of AIDS are spoken about in the persistent present tense throughout this scene, forthrightly refuting those elsewhere circulating assumptions of epidemiological closure. In this respect, the cinema is employed as a technology for distending an unevenly distributed (and unfairly precluded) temporality of crisis. Finally, throughout this scene, whiteness is decentered as the de facto voice of activist reason. If, three years following *Chocolate Babies*’ release, Cohen would critique a “single-dimensional” whiteness for claiming ownership over the epidemic’s key issues, the film’s introduction responds to that same reality by launching its own explicitly racialized counter discourse.³⁸ Through its compact opening sequence, then, *Chocolate Babies* extends an open invitation to engage with the radical worldview of these “Black faggots,” a worldview unhampered by the limits elsewhere set in place by the blinding promise of pharmaceuticals.

Let us dwell some more on this self-identificatory phrase. After all, it is during the very moment that one of these militant activists, Larva (Dudley Findlay Jr.), defines the group as a collective of Black faggots that the opening confrontation staged by *Chocolate Babies* begins its unprecedented transformation. Unfazed by the numerous facts presented before this announcement, it is only when faced with such a claim that the suited councilman first *reacts* to the gang; wide-eyed and silent, the official is visibly taken aback by such a comment, immediately dropping his rehearsed adjournments and performance of concern (see Figure 3). And rightly so: speaking from outside a standardized, generic frame of queerness, these activists unmoor their political project from any predetermined ground. Though the group’s race is a visible fact from the outset, Larva’s comment brings into play what Michael Gillespie has recently termed “the searing and inscriptional capacity of blackness”; this is not Blackness as an existential claim, he writes, but rather as a pronounced “sociocultural marker” demanding recognition.³⁹ Larva’s marrying of the modifier *Black* to the object *faggots* thus works to resituate the period’s broad struggles in a set of antagonistic relations not contained by any singular or unified discourse. As Fred Moten writes (in a different, though not unrelated, context: regarding “Black criminality”), such prefixed subject positions figure “as the gathering of an ensemble that works outside of normative harmony.”⁴⁰ The councilman’s generic script of negation falls

37 Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 177.

38 Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 19.

39 Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12, 1.

40 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 128. Consider, additionally, recent work by Rinaldo Walcott, which makes a compelling case for the conceptual antagonisms that are leveled, and the exclusionary racial imaginaries that are exposed, when *Black* is used as a typological prefix. See Rinaldo Walcott, “Black Cumjoy: Pleasure and a Racist Virus,” in *Raw: PrEP, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Barebacking*, ed. Ricky Varghese (London: Zed Books, 2019), 72.



Figure 3. In *Chocolate Babies* (Frameline, 1996), the councilman (Bryan Webster) is visibly taken aback by Larva's (Dudley Findlay Jr.) militant assertion.

apart under such a compound pronouncement; the multidiscursive properties of this retaliative quip necessitates an alternative route to redress.

How might we begin to tease out the political reverberations initiated by this opening act of radical self-determination? One answer could lead us to the work of Jafari S. Allen, who, in an article first published in 2012, writes at length of the politics underscoring a similar set of intersectional subjectivities. Opposing what he calls the “desensitized and sterile boxes of ‘race,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘nationality,’ discipline or genre,” Allen’s work sets out to ask what it might mean “to pose the question of black/queer/diasporas.”⁴¹ His writing makes much of the slashes (or what he calls the “porous strokes”) between these nouns, suggesting that such a framing “can be seen to conjoin the terms on either side or to push them apart, toward sharper individual focus.”⁴² Undermining a dominant cultural incentive to denote identity in the discrete singular, Allen goes on to make a fascinating case for the radical utility of such accretive positioning. The effect of this practice is the creation of what he calls “conjunctural moments,” by which, he writes, “I mean to index the temporal space in which the articulation . . . of sometimes related and other times opposing or unrelated discourses, practices, or trajectories reshape, reimagine, or alter our view of the present.”⁴³ Such a theoretical assertion strikes at the core of what we see during the repeated refashioning of pronounced identifications throughout *Chocolate Babies*: a desire to lay claim to realities extraneous to the sterile determinations of a generic socio-political fabric. In the introduction to Winter’s film, that is to say, assertive speech acts achieve the precise agency of forcing an elsewhere static political landscape into conjunctural motion. As Allen’s article concludes, “a truly rad-

41 Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (2012): 215, 211, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1472872>.

42 Allen, 217, 211.

43 Allen, 214.

ical or transformative politics has not resulted from queer theory thus far”; the “promise of the antecedents of black/queer/diaspora work,” it seems, lie rather in “scholarship, art, and activism” shaped by the “euphoric promise of . . . self-determination.”⁴⁴

Whereas Allen frames the political significance of these “conjunctural moments” through the punctuated assemblage of “black/queer/diaspora,” the critical race theorist Jared Sexton finds the cinema itself a more fitting exemplar. In the introduction to his 2008 monograph *Amalgamation Schemes*, Sexton employs a comprehensive knowledge of apparatus theory to parse a comparable concept he terms “the racial suture.” Drawing extensively on the film-theoretical work of Stephen Heath, Sexton here advances the unique argument that the cinema’s standard (i.e., classical) form can be seen as operating coextensively with “the historical imperative of [a] US social formation” that works to produce and regulate “putatively pure racial identit[ies].”⁴⁵ His claim abides by a fairly standard logic. Because the cinema’s photographic core provides a potentially boundless “movement in the visible field,” he argues, “a structural difficulty arises as to how this . . . disorienting, shifting plane . . . will function as a legible experience for any audience.”⁴⁶ For Sexton, such a compositional tension is entirely analogous to the sacrificial drama of subject formation—a process described by Lauren Berlant as the channeling of multiplicitous “negativity into a grounding experiential positivity.”⁴⁷ Likewise, the dominant method of mitigating this “structural difficulty,” via the cinematic suture, is figured by Sexton as an extension of those wider processes of sociopolitical “sterili[zation]” addressed above by Allen. The standardization of continuity editing (the systematic suture par excellence) across the early to mid-twentieth century, *Amalgamation Schemes* thus argues, should be considered a significant mode of identificatory governance. Recall the subjugating vernacular of Heath’s formative discussion, which characterizes continuity editing as intended “to contain,” “to regularize.”⁴⁸ By Sexton’s account, the “structural difficulty” that narrative cinema confronts (and disavows) at every turn thus both analogizes and itself extends a more far-reaching system of control, one that points back to a process of racialized dispossession that *Chocolate Babies* and Allen so fervently oppose.

Sexton goes further, however, in suggesting that because of this intrinsic chaos, the cinema equally offers the opportunity for moments of radical refusal. In a manner aligned with Allen’s discussion of the ambivalent strokes that can function to either reify or collapse established identity categories, Sexton writes that in addition to enabling a vision “complicit . . . with the hegemonic perceptual regime,” “the irreducible difficulties of cinematic space” simultaneously offer “radical possibilities for [its] disruption.”⁴⁹ This

44 Allen, 235.

45 Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiracism and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 19.

46 Sexton, 18.

47 Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

48 Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 45.

49 Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 19.

is an argument made elsewhere by Ernest Hardy, who writes of the cinema's capacity to "[shift] perspectives without warning," to experiment "with the rhythms and expectations of pacing and editing, resisting easy categorization." Such properties, he claims, are particularly attuned to capturing "the fluctuating and freefall experience of black queerness/queer blackness/whatever."⁵⁰ Thus, not only do Hardy and Sexton deem cinema a site through which we can come to *comprehend* the violence of a pervasive identificatory reduction, but they also characterize it as one where the standard grammar of such a process might find itself undone. In these accounts, it is made clear that the cinema has the intrinsic formal potential to amplify the provocative refashioning of prescribed identifications that are so boldly spoken in the opening moments of *Chocolate Babies*. Working through such claims, I contend, provides useful conceptual ground for advancing a reading of Winter's provocative cinematic project—one resting on what Kaja Silverman would call an "imaginary divestiture" from the stratifying protocols of our symbolic order.⁵¹ After all, the film quite explicitly raises its own concerns regarding the resistant potency of those elements so astutely derided throughout Sexton's work: narrative unity, linearity, and coherence.

CHOCOLATE BABIES AND THE CONJUNCTURAL CUT

Consider, for instance, a sequence that takes place shortly following *Chocolate Babies*' introductory confrontation. Here, the activist group is shown, for the first time, lounging on an abandoned rooftop—one that will be reclaimed, over the course of the film, as something of an operational base. For the majority of this sequence, members of the collective are engaged in menial tasks—one smokes a cigarette while telling tales of a recent hookup; another applies makeup while half-heartedly reading a book. As they do so, the camera pans slowly across and between them, capturing their witty repartee with methodical attention. At first, the narrative purpose of these shots is ambiguous; the registration of communal bonds and moments of cultivated sociality appear to be prioritized above anything instrumentalized or predictive. That is, however, until the group's conversation is interrupted by one member, Sam (Jon Kit Lee), who comes forward with an extensive plan to kidnap and blackmail the previously encountered councilman (for whom, we now know, he works). The group reject this shift in tone wholeheartedly. "You're such a rotten child," one states in a simultaneously disingenuous and patronizing manner, "when I was giving birth to you, I should have crossed my legs and inhaled." Yet despite the affront, Sam continues with his enthusiastic call to action: "We're talking about the real AIDS acquisition files. I'm the one who works there. I'm the one who knows what's going on!" As the group members dismiss him and continue with their lighthearted exchanges, the film augments its minor conflict by cutting variously between static images of Sam and panning shots of the other figures. Here, Sam (along with his meticulous plans for intervention) is positioned as an outlier to an otherwise collective

50 Ernest Hardy, "Young Soul Rebels: Negro/Queer Experimental Filmmakers," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 41 (Fall 2003): 24.

51 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 214.

consensus; with his frustrated demeanor projected onto this compositional rigidity, his inability to comprehend the group's apparent retaliative ambivalence is indexed clearly. The energized spirit of Sam's political imagination, it is apparent, fails to captivate the rest of the group, who are invested less in the gains achievable through these coordinated moves than in a divested economy of indolence.

Such a tension—between outward action and inaction, between cultivating an oppositional *event* and fostering an atmosphere of implicit *endurance*—emerges at numerous other junctures throughout *Chocolate Babies*. In one notable episode, an argument breaks out between Sam and his lover, Max (Claude E. Sloan), while the rest of the group sunbathes and picnics on the Christopher Street Pier. Taking issue with his partner's destructive drinking habits and casual embrace of death, Sam capitalizes on a moment's privacy to launch an intervention of sorts: "I don't want to talk about death anymore, Max. I want to talk about life." "They're doing great things with research now," he continues, referring to his partner's seropositivity, "you don't have to die." Such well-intentioned comments, issued in an effort to push Max into affirmative action, have the opposite effect, sending him into a fit of rage: "How many times do I have to tell . . . you? . . . They're not doing anything for *me*." Following an extended confrontation that concludes with Sam's university education being disparaged for its universalizing influence, Max storms off, leaving his lover alone, once again, in a lingering medium close-up. Throughout this heated exchange, *Chocolate Babies* effectively narrativizes the boundary points of this cited medical research, foregrounding the fact that the different, and differently raced, bodies of Sam and Max experienced the AIDS epidemic in radically distinct ways. Here, the film maps the irreconcilable tensions of these disparate worldviews onto the couple form, figuring the breakdown of this pairing as symptomatic of an impossible unity-across-difference. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Sam, the group's only non-Black, college-educated member, is repeatedly figured as an outsider among his peers. If Max's earlier response gestured toward his lover's inability to disengage from his embodied privilege, then a little later on Sam will address such a division himself. Standing once more on the abandoned rooftop, ridiculed by the group while noting the finer details of his broad activist agenda, Sam eventually erupts: "You've all got no respect—no respect for me as a gay Asian militant." While his comment serves as a point of humorous relief within the diegesis, it is not at all insincere. For *Chocolate Babies*, it becomes increasingly apparent, commits to establishing a vision of resistance entirely dismissive of these systematized routes to revolt.

If, then, Winter's film makes use of both narrative dialogue and expressive compositions to foreground its skepticism of a generic, state-aligned response to AIDS, then it is on a different representational scale that it sets out to provide its own alternative. Over the course of the film's eighty-minute runtime, that is to say, *Chocolate Babies* establishes an incremental editing structure that facilitates a wholly divergent sphere of political action; whereas Sam's spoken plans depend on a constantly derided set of methodological justifications, this distended syntax frequently frames the group's own interventions without any overarching logic. At various moments, for example,



Figures 4 and 5. *Chocolate Babies* (Frameline, 1996) frequently cuts between radically distinct planes of action.

the film cuts suddenly between disparate planes of action; in one memorable sequence, we move from an image of the most placid social quietude (wherein Lady Marmalade [Michael Lynch] sits on a toilet in a drug-induced stupor) to a frenetic scene in which fireworks are aggressively launched at a street-based political procession (see Figures 4 and 5). At other times, scenes of the group engaged in menial social interactions bleed into shots of individual members giving provocative political speeches to an offscreen audience. No coherent route is charted between these various spaces, registers, and modes of address. Likewise, a standard sense of narrative linearity is denied through the film's incessant recycling of these different sites, moments, and actions. The cinematic cut, it figures, is here employed as a means of forging connections in excess of any stated rationale; repeatedly, these acts of resistance emerge out of the blue, only tenuously bound to the events surrounding them. Thus, while Sam's retaliative projections are met, throughout the

film, with dismissal precisely due to the foreclosures inherent in their rigid calculations, the specific language of cinema here provides the appropriate grammar for materializing a resistant choreography unencumbered by what Roland Barthes would famously call the “reductive system” of linguistics.⁵²

This is not to say, however, that *Chocolate Babies* discards narrative order in favor of pure syntactic experimentation (something that an earlier wave of AIDS video art quite explicitly set out to do).⁵³ As a result of the forthright confrontation that opens the film, when the collective later act out—in various, and variously connected, ways—viewers are under no illusion that these activist energies are directed toward combating a wholly narrativized AIDS crisis. The *intent* of the group is clear throughout the film: to shock their elected officials into action. It is their means of *acting* on these desires that is experimentally figured. Rather than reading this disjunctive editing practice as working toward antinarrative ends, then, it would be more suitable to think of it as working to extend moments of logical disequilibrium, asking us to dwell in states of unruliness and connective disorder. For many Black queer activists organizing throughout the mid-1990s, after all, a set of totalizing oppositional imperatives were seen to have worked only to occlude the worldviews of individuals situated outside the parameters of the abstract universal. Holding onto narrative—which amounts, here, to holding onto context, to positionality—was therefore critical. Thus, while from Sam’s perspective the group’s unwillingness to invest in his insurgent vision appears as nothing more than a frustrating disregard for action writ large, it is apparent to viewers that their unorthodox interventions abide by a logic exceeding his limited justificatory frameworks. Editing, in this instance, becomes a means through which the film is able to communicate an alternative way of acting in (and on) the world, one unbound from the reductive protocols governing resistance in the conventional sphere of the social.

In a number of recent texts attending to Black queer media practices, the radical potential of the dissociative cut has been foregrounded extensively. Perhaps most notably, this mode of editing provides one of the most convincing examples of the speculative liberatory praxis outlined in Kara Keeling’s *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019). In a discussion on Arthur Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), for instance—a single-channel video installation featuring a montage of images that project a fractured survey of contemporary Black culture—Keeling argues that a particularly stylized form of editing (one she describes as “algorithmic”) enables the director to foreground “what in Black American existence has not been made to work in the interest of narratives of national or racial progress.”⁵⁴ Here, much like in Winter’s own embrace of the cinematic uncoupling of action from prerequisite, Keeling commends the way that Jafa’s innovative, disjunctive editing

52 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 8.

53 For a useful discussion of this earlier video art, see Roger Hallas, “The Resistant Corpus: Queer Experimental Film and Video and the AIDS Pandemic,” *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 41 (2003): 53–60.

54 Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 138.

practice rejects a politics oriented around a certain redemption within or reconciliation with an existing vision of the world. Instead, Keeling suggests, the editing choices at the core of *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* solicit a project of “radical contingency,” one that undoes the compromised principles of social cohesion structuring the world as we know it. “The film’s temporal mode draws on elements of improvisation,” Keeling argues, introducing an antagonistic “opacity into the calculations that govern Black life in the early twenty-first century.”⁵⁵ Though attending to an entirely different political context than that of *Chocolate Babies*—albeit one still plagued by “the modes of governance characteristic of neoliberal multiculturalism”—Keeling’s appraisal of the cinematic cut as a conflated site of connection and disconnection, a site of contact unburdened by the stifling weight of conventional political channels, proves useful when framing the work of this earlier production.⁵⁶ After all, in its refusal to disclose any singular blueprint, or justification, for the various insurgent acts depicted, Winter’s film makes similar use of the inferential cut to press upon the limits of radical intelligibility.

We can go further, however, in pinpointing the particular utility of this emergent cinematic grammar. Moving beyond Keeling’s focus on contemporary digital video, it is generative to situate the habitual editing practices of *Chocolate Babies* in line with some more specifically queer concerns. It would be appropriate, for instance, to describe the above aspects of Winter’s film as a series of *conjunctural cuts*. Circling back to the work of Allen, such a term opens up a sphere of inquiry wherein the repeatedly obscured logics connecting activist efforts across *Chocolate Babies* amount to a liberatory model “of multivalent and multiscale reclamation.” “At conjunctural moments,” Allen theorizes, “‘new’ ideas and practices emerge and take on added significance because of . . . a novel rearticulation.”⁵⁷ In other words, unconventional syntactic form complicates an inherited set of agential horizons. Thus, in cutting freely between images of radically distinct events and actions, it might be said that *Chocolate Babies* stakes a claim on a politics unimaginable within existing rational parameters, invoking what José Esteban Muñoz would call a “future in the present”—a practice, Muñoz claims, frequently dependent on “a utopian break in the narrative.”⁵⁸ In light of a pervasive realization, across the mid-1990s, that established methods of responding to the AIDS epidemic were intrinsically fraught, such a gesture of renewal should be taken seriously. Read through this framework, the tension situated at the core of Winter’s film—between Sam’s dismissed plans for cohesive action and a formal embrace of fissured resistant networks—appears to predict Allen’s later articulation of concern, as well as his call for epistemo-

55 Keeling, 142–143.

56 Keeling, 142. Consider, in addition to Jafa’s film, the work of Isiah Medina, whose *88:88* (2015) similarly fractures and fragments its diegesis in an attempt to “connect, disconnect, and reconnect inferences of what merely appears to us.” See Phil Coldiron, “Necessary Means: Isiah Medina on *88:88*,” *Cinema Scope* 64 (September 2015), <https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/necessary-means-isiah-medina-on-8888/>.

57 Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora,” 214.

58 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 49–52.

logical redress. Cinema, here, becomes a critical means of actualizing lines of thinking, acting, and communicating outside of the precluded limits of the present.

The significance of Winter's conjunctural editing practice becomes further charged when considered for the way it works to problematize the biomedical logics adhered to by contemporaneous activist communities. As the medical sociologist Catherine Waldby has noted, biomedicine has the tendency to present itself as a practice that merely *discovers* (as opposed to *produces*) knowledge of the world. "The mission of biomedicine," she writes, is "to re-establish the prophylactic function of the distinction [between nature and culture], to render it impervious to infection."⁵⁹ It is by now commonplace to recognize that such a mission serves only to extend sociopolitical hierarchies under the aegis of scientific objectivity, carrying out a veritable "biopolitical neglect" in accordance with prevailing systems of racial and sexual governance.⁶⁰ Relevant here, however, is the fact that this violent *anti-discursivity* is said to have found correlates in certain representative modes, particularly those anchored in mimetic realism. As S. Pearl Brilmyer summarizes, "Realist epistemology . . . finds an analogue in the ethically charged project of nineteenth-century" science.⁶¹ Stephen Heath likewise makes such a claim, suggesting that these two modes share a conception of language "as being self-effacing in the process of the presentation of things, in the reproduction of society."⁶² And it was indeed such self-effacement that led dominant AIDS activist organizations in the mid-1990s to become enamored by the possibility of these seemingly objective gains; such was, as Epstein writes, the "ever fragile optimism of treatment activists."⁶³ Yet what we witness throughout *Chocolate Babies*, I suggest, is a constitutive grammar that rejects such realist effacement, that asserts the inextricably contrived nature of its "presentation of things." The presumptive logics of biomedical epistemology, along with its ideological roots and inscribed limit points, find themselves expunged from Winter's conjunctural diegesis. There is no capacity for objective discovery in this process of constant relational overhaul.

Such an extended reading is only consolidated by the film's closing credits, where this cultivation of unforeseen coalitions is somewhat literalized. Here, following the customary acknowledgment of the cast and production crew, scrolling text extends thanks to a considerable group of indirect influences and precursors. The list is broad, consisting of seventy-eight names of varying relevance to the film's central concerns. Included, for instance, are a host of notable figures involved in histories of Black queer cultural politics;

59 Catherine Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1996), 18–22.

60 Shiloh Krupar and Nadine Ehlers, "Target: Biomedicine and Racialized Geo-body-politics," *Occasion* 8, no. 1 (2013): 3, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/target-biomedicine-and-racialized-geo-body-politics>.

61 S. Pearl Brilmyer, "Impassioned Objectivity: Nietzsche, Hardy, and the Science of Fiction," *b2o: boundary 2 online*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.boundary2.org/2016/10/s-pearl-brilmyer-impassioned-objectivity-nietzsche-hardy-and-the-science-of-fiction/>.

62 Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 18.

63 Epstein, *Impure Science*, 295.

names ranging from James Baldwin and Langston Hughes here sit among generic shout-outs to “(All) Gay Men of African Descent.” These citations continue into the sphere of independent filmmaking, pointing to the significance of outputs by directors such as John Cassavetes, Ken Russell, and Tom Kalin. At times, the list even acknowledges communities and issues well outside the purview of customary queer or cinematic parameters; “The Squatters of 13th Street” stands out in this regard. In offering such a postscript, *Chocolate Babies* can thus be seen to carry out a form of genealogical mapping that works in tandem with the conjunctural porosity of its established editing pattern. Lamenting what Tavia Nyong’o has recently called the “foreshortened archive” of queer origin stories, Winter’s closing gesture here confers the roots of his film’s radicality as dispersed and promiscuous.⁶⁴ While one could most definitely attempt to tease out the specific links between each of these references, the sheer number of them, as well as the incommensurable breadth of their differences, puts any such project into crisis. How do we feasibly gauge, for example, the comparative influence of Marlon Riggs and Terence Winter? Of Clyde Otis and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center? Attesting both to the varied lineages invoked throughout the film’s production, as well as to screen media’s more general capacity to stage unspoken negotiations of these lineages, here we once again encounter the cinematic as housing an unencumbered radical imaginary. In its closing credits as much as its sustained form, relational bonds remain unresolved throughout *Chocolate Babies*, forgoing, as they do, the deceptive tendrils of closure.

CINEMA AGAINST THE END

Indeed, it has likely become apparent over the course of this article that Winter’s film is largely uninterested in providing any idealistic, or even feasible, routes out of the activist deadlock identified by many throughout the mid-1990s. Taking advantage of the cinema’s intrinsic duality—one exemplified by Vivian Sobchack’s claim that the medium “simultaneously *has* sense and *makes* sense”—*Chocolate Babies* concurrently harnesses and rejects much of its narrativized politics.⁶⁵ At times, this simultaneity verges on the insincere; this is perhaps what the critic Emanuel Levy implies when describing the film as “potentially outrageous,” as loaded with “panache.” More often than not, however, it results in a caustic ambivalence, and this is surely what Levy suggests when noting the “jarringly awkward changes in tone from one scene to another.”⁶⁶ Instead of functioning as a cohesive cinematic manifesto, the film—from its introductory sequence to its closing acknowledgments—seems

64 Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 154. For more on this *foreshortened archive*, see the work of Keguro Macharia, who writes of such an issue as being intrinsic to the academic legitimization of queer studies in the mid-1990s: Keguro Macharia, “Queer Genealogies (Provisional Notes),” *Bully Bloggers*, January 13, 2013, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2013/01/13/queer-genealogies-provisional-notes/>.

65 Sobchack also notes that “Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard.” Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10–11 (emphasis mine).

66 Levy, “Chocolate Babies.”

primarily intent on circulating a disparate cluster of sentiments, agendas, and bodies that were eclipsed by prevailing narratives of the AIDS epidemic's imminent end. Though such an ambivalence may initially appear to compromise *Chocolate Babies*' political effectivity—negating, as it does, the scripted urgency of *acting* in opposition—a persistent affective vacillation here functions to level tensions that do not have easy or immediate solutions. Winter's film, it thus might be said, effectively circumvents the standard parameters of what a radical counter-cinema looks like, folding the ordinarily outward request for resolution (or recognition) into a recursive complication. And what I want to suggest here is that in doing so, *Chocolate Babies* makes space for a new form of queer political thinking: a form of thinking that severs ties with an established model of AIDS-related insurgency and works to center a structural antagonism embedded within these very oppositional projects themselves. In this respect, inasmuch as it offers any coherent retaliative agenda, the film's unique value lies in the way it materializes a disenchantment with resistance politics itself.

By way of conclusion, it is helpful to consider Winter's cinematic vision in line with recent work by Frank B. Wilderson III, whose interventions in the fields of both critical race theory and film studies seek to redress some of the guiding principles of both disciplines. Advancing a line of thought that has come to be termed Afropessimism (a name itself bespeaking a projected reconfiguration of political affect), in his 2012 monograph *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson writes fervently against the "illusory . . . aspirations to productive subjectivity" that plague twentieth-century radical thought.⁶⁷ For Wilderson, there is one fundamental issue with conventional notions of oppositional politics in the United States: too often, he argues, the intrinsic racial violence of the state is displaced onto a staged "conflict" able to be resolved.⁶⁸ Repeatedly and persistently, he argues, political thinking has worked to reduce the scale and depth of this anti-Blackness into a reconcilable, comprehensible issue; surface identifications are here said to negate the overwhelming breadth of this sedimented dispossession. Thus, Wilderson claims, despite an amplified (and misguided) sense of oppositional agency, there is no true "alternative" to be found within the parameters of our current "intellectual protocols."⁶⁹ Or, as Saidiya Hartman more provocatively frames it, "mechanisms of domination and subjection . . . have yoked, harnessed, and infiltrated the apparatus of rights."⁷⁰ Furthermore, and significantly here, Wilderson's writing posits the cinema as a key site through which this conceptual reduction takes place. Recalling the earlier-cited work of Sexton, for instance, Wilderson argues that cinematic narrative has had the tendency to "displace our consideration and understandings of the ontological status of Blacks (social death) onto a series of fanciful stories."⁷¹

67 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 39.

68 Wilderson, 149.

69 Wilderson, 6.

70 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 118.

71 Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*, 25.

What is needed, he offers in rebuttal, is a recognition that this dispossession is not merely conflictual but *antagonistic*—that which cannot, in any meaningful capacity, be overcome in the current order of things. What is needed, in other words, is a politicized film practice that resists closure and repair, instead working toward an insistent process of discursive collapse.

Wilderson's extension of such critical thought into the realm of the cinematic provides a generative platform on which to develop a conclusive reading of *Chocolate Babies'* complex resistant project. For though Wilderson is writing from a much different moment, his work inadvertently echoes a number of critiques developed in the context of a late 1990s AIDS crisis (critiques, we should remember, that were responding to the optimism of many with their own anchored pessimism). Recalling Cathy Cohen's inquisition into the "single-dimensional" agendas of queer liberation movements, as well as the hand-drawn cartoon in the *Bay Area Reporter* that foregrounded a prevailing communal stratification, it becomes clear that an awareness of the mechanisms of racial domination inherent in generic radical practice unites both these late 1990s critiques and Wilderson's argument. Thus, in retroactively acknowledging this value placed on a refusal to act *within* (or even *against*) a dominant social order, we can understand *Chocolate Babies'* commitment to a certain dissociative, conjunctural form as working to undermine any stable ground upon which a preexisting culture of AIDS activism could continue unfettered. Throughout the film, no retaliative action abides by a taken-for-granted knowledge of the world; rather, enactments of resistance are bound to an interrogation of the social fabric that so tenuously holds the world as we know it together. If, as Jack Halberstam writes, "we cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently," *Chocolate Babies* works tirelessly in the name of this latter prefigurative project: to extend both the horizons and depths of an activist commons.⁷² This is not, then, a film invested in empowering the currently powerless, in promulgating what Hartman would call "the atomizing . . . character of rights."⁷³ It is, rather, one serving to rupture a prevalent system of social relations wherein liberatory gains for some were contingent upon the subjugation of many.

Such an aversion to discourses of optimism and empowerment finds consolidation in the film's closing scene, in which, following an intertitle situating us one year after the rest of the narrative, we encounter many of the activist collective dead or dying. In this sequence's initial moments, centered on a reconciliatory conversation between Larva and Sam, the consequences of the past year are slowly revealed. "Jamela's dead," Larva states solemnly. "Lady Marmalade was killed too. When they found her in the hotel room, strangled under the bed, the only thing holding her head to her shoulders was skin." Following a series of niceties and the timespan of a cigarette, the film cuts away from this reunion to the rooftop upon which so much of the previous narrative action (and inaction) took place. There we see Max lying

72 Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, ed. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 6.

73 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 122.



Figure 6. In the closing moments of *Chocolate Babies* (Frameline, 1996), a chorus performs around Max's (Claude E. Sloan) catatonic body.

still on a couch, surrounded by a group who sing choral harmonies over his body (see Figure 6). He is not dead, but his catatonic stasis (as well as the rigidity of the shot's formal makeup) signals a jarring transformation from the unbridled enthusiasm he once exhibited. In this final moment, one returning us to the figures who once catalyzed the film's vision of resistance, the future is not left for us to idealistically conjure, to work into our own narratives of social repair. Instead, such finality—a finality in many ways beyond, and resisting, repair—ensures that the images we will recall of this activist collective are of a group fractured and bruised. If, in the queer world to which *Chocolate Babies* was first presented, many were celebrating the epidemiological transformations brought about by biomedical advancements, in its closing moments, Winter's film makes it abundantly clear that these new horizons for survival were by no means sufficient. What was needed throughout this cultural shift, *Chocolate Babies* ultimately suggests, was not a passive acceptance of this change of *circumstance* but a vision of an entirely new order. The world as we know it need not (and cannot) constitute the foundation nor the limit point for a truly queer liberation, Winter here asserts. And the cinema, it figures, proves crucial in facilitating a necessary departure from its suffocating impositions.

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