Spirit and Struggle: Landmarks of Black Sacred Song

[00:00:02] **Jalane Schmidt** Thank you for joining the University of Virginia Democracy Initiative's, Religion, Race & Democracy Lab and the Memory Project for this afternoon's event celebrating Black History Month. I'm Jalane Schmidt, director of the Memory Project. Today, we're screening two short films which highlight Black landmarks that resonate with the notes of African American spirit and struggle. Gospel music.

[00:00:26] **Jalane Schmidt** Guiding us through the sights and sounds are two very talented individuals from right here in our midst at the University of Virginia. Memory Project artist-in-residence Micah Ariel Watson is a filmmaker and award-winning playwright whose works center upon the blurred lines between sacred and secular in Black culture. Her films have been screened at numerous film festivals and she's the writer and director of "Black Enough," a web series streaming on YouTube. You should definitely check that out. Watson is a 2018 graduate of the University of Virginia. She majored in African American studies and drama, and she founded, produced and directed the theatrical production, "The Black Monologues" that so many of us enjoy annually. Watson's UVA undergraduate thesis project was today's second short film, "40th & State." After graduating from UVA, Ms Watson went on to earn her masters of fine arts at New York University's Tisch School for the Arts, and then returned to UVA as an artist-in-residence with the UVA Democracy Initiative's, Religion, Race & Democracy Lab, our co-sponsor for today's event. "Barky's," the first film we'll be screening, was produced during her artist in residency.

[00:01:39] **Jalane Schmidt** Scholar and artist Ashon Crawley, associate professor of religious studies and of African-American studies at the University of Virginia, specializes in the study of Black Pentecostalism in performance and sound studies. He is the author of the book "Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility" and he's also a poet, having last year published a collection of epistolary verse, "The Lonely Letters," a title that seems very appropriate to this time of Covid social distancing. His current book project investigates the role of the Hammond organ in African American sacred music, and he's a former choir director in the Church of God in Christ, so I know he'll have a lot to say about these two films.

[00:02:21] **Jalane Schmidt** The sounds of gospel music, a touchstone of African American religious life and culture, swirl through two landmarks which are the focus of today's short films. The first film, "Barky's," is set in Richmond, Virginia, a city that has gone through numerous changes since its 19th century days as a slave trading hub and the former capital of the Confederacy. The seat of Virginia's state government and then a robust period of reconstruction and then Jim Crow and its accompanying Confederate monuments, once a majority Black city whose population suffered the displacement of urban renewal highway and then white flight, it now has a plurality of Black residents and an African American mayor. Gentrification is encroaching upon established Black neighborhoods such as Jackson Ward, home of Barky's Spiritual Record Store, a retail outlet for gospel music and associated goods.

[00:03:13] **Jalane Schmidt** The title of our second film, "40th & State," refers to the address of the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ on Chicago's South Side, an African American neighborhood. During the early 20th century refugee crisis known as the Great Migration, rural Southern African Americans fled white supremacist predation and economic exploitation to settle in the urban north. They brought with them their distinctive southern musical styles, which they infused into urban Black churches they joined. One of

these congregations, Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, is a historic landmark for its role in hosting the 1955 funeral for young lynching victim Emmett Till, a pivotal event in the launching of the civil rights movement.

[00:03:59] **Jalane Schmidt** Please use the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen to submit your questions for discussion after the films, and let's now go to our films.

[00:04:24] [music]

[00:04:39] **Barksdale Haggins** I love music when it when it has a good message to it. When it's not a show.

[00:04:53] **Barksdale Haggins** Oh, boy, oh, I don't know that I have any favorites now, man. I like very much like persons like James Cleveland. Boy, person like that lives in your heart forever.

[00:05:08] **Barksdale Haggins** And I, like Sam Cooke, are one of the two I like. I prefer James Cleveland best of all. Mahalia Jackson - I love her. And uh, a number of them I like.

[00:05:23] **Barksdale Haggins** I've got so old now, I can't do nothing late! But I used to, I used to stay up two, three o'clock in the morning and because when I first go into business I used to go and play music for people. I had a record player and I go and play music hoping that the people would hear the music and would come to the store to buy it. And some of them would. And sometime I would take a few pieces of music with me and stay up two and three in the morning and get up and come to work. There no way in the world I could do that now, no-oh.

[00:05:51] **Barksdale Haggins** I knew I didn't realize that age takes its toll on you. Take it from me, miss, it takes its toll on you.

[00:06:01] **Barksdale Haggins** The first Sunday of each month, the persons having birthdays in that month stand. And I'm gonna stand and I'm gonna tell Her I'm 86 years old and thank you, thank you.

[00:06:19] **Barksdale Haggins** My name is Barksdale Wise Haggins. I sign my signature Barksdale W. Haggins.

[00:06:23] **Woman's voice in store** See, when God told me to write this number in my book one day I didn't know it was gonna be the day I needed it. He said go ahead and write your number in this book and there it is. See, God be telling you to do something. There it is. He speak to your spirit. And you gotta do it.

[00:07:09] **Barksdale and customer** [Illegible background chatter].

[00:07:10] **Barksdale Haggins** There was three other black persons decided to open a record shop. One of them used to come in regularly. He used to haul furniture for a furniture store. He used to come in every weekend and buy a record. So he decided to open up a record shop. And then was another person in Petersberg, he decided to open a record store and he became a real friend, and was one in Churchill. So there was three of them. So. And then when the Coliseum opened, they wouldn't sell us tickets. So they got me and said, let's get together and go down there and find out why they not gonna sell us

a ticket. So I got with them and went down there and met with the office and the people and to talk about getting the tickets and our location cause mostly a lot of the events were bringing in were Black events, and so why shouldn't we have tickets.

[00:08:09] **Barksdale Haggins** We left there, and those guys, and behind my back went back to the man and made arrangements so that they could get the ticket, and I didn't get 'em, and knocked me out. And I had been in business as long ... They wanted, they were trying to knock me out of business, cause I was the oldest establishment.

[00:08:25] **Barksdale Haggins** And uh, so I had come to find out, that I went down and they said yeah, we sell them tickets, and you ain't gettin' none. I said, well, all be darn and that's what they did, behind my back. and now, all three of them are dead. Gone. And I'm still here. That just goes to show you what happens to you when you caught doing dirt to other people.

[00:09:11] That's the best way when you fin dout that people are trying to hurt you. Just laugh and pretend like you don't know anything about it. In all the time they just sticking the dagger in your back. Ha ha!

[00:09:11] When I got out of the Army, my first day home, when I got up the next day after returning home from the Army, my father asked me, he said, what are you going to do Barky? I said I don't know. He said, why don't you open a record shop, because he had a radio repair shop three blocks up the street and he had been in business for years and he said people have been coming in asking about records. I said, okay, that's what I'll do. And so, from that day to this, that's how I got into the record business.

[00:09:48] There were poor white owned shops. And the strange thing is when I went up to the distributor, and letting them know that I had gotten the license and I opened a record shop, he said, well you won't be there long. Because he had this fixation in his mind that Blacks when they go in business, they'll be there for just a few months or maybe a couple of years, and then they're gone. And lo and behold, I've been here for sixty-four years and all the others are gone. All of them. All those white shops are gone. And he wouldn't, when I first went up, he didn't even want to sell me the merchandise.

[00:10:32] So I went to Baltimore, Maryland, and went to New York, and bought from suppliers there and brought it back to sell. And so he found out how determined I was, where he would sell me, but he said when you come and get 'em, come here real early in the morning before the other record store buyers come in. He didn't want me up there while they were there. It jut goes to show you how a person's minds are wrong!

[00:11:00] But lo and behold, I put up with sixty-four years of it. And all of them are gone! Every one of them. And I'm the only one around now. Life is interesting. It sure is.

[00:11:18] **Woman's voice in store** (Illegible background chatter)

[00:11:58] Between businesses subsidized from other investments that are made as I was going along, instead of relying, spending money elaborately on automobiles and other elaborate things. I was buying real estate. And so I'm using money there to subsidize this business, to keep this business going. But, we do have some dedicated customers who are dedicated, which is enabling us to stay also. We're blessed. I get the blessing every day. Every day I get the blessing.

[00:12:36] Years ago we was very busy. They had trolleys running up and down this street. You used to have to stand in the street to catch the trolley, going, going east and west. And then they did away with the trolleys, took up all the tracks, took down the lines. Now they got the buses. And, uh, during that transition period, when all this transition was taking place, the white people moved out and the city became predominately Black. Was a chocolate city, and now turning back to vanilla.

[00:13:14] And now we sell as many church clergy shirts, more of those than we sell the music. And I don't think there's any other ways around it. You just sell them.

[00:13:27] So we are blessed there. That's what's keeping us in business longer. There's no other place around here selling that type of merchandise. And we have a couple of nice people come in and mention to us and say, we hope you never go out of business. And it's nice of them to say that. We appreciate that.

[00:13:43] And we are fortunate to have a (?) that we do. Friends. Without a heart, you can't live, can you? And so she's the heart of the business. That's what's keeping the business alive.

[00:13:58] Help us, everybody, to hold tight to You when the turbulence of our flight everybody hits gets too hard to bear. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. That covers everything. Then another one here: Too short to be anything but happy. Falling down is a part of life. Getting back up is living.

[00:14:28] They were talking about, are you a preacher? Everybody's a preacher. The way you live your life, as a sermon. A sermon is a life, the way you live.

[00:14:57] Oh, it was pretty much like it is now when you go south, the open spaces, you know, the freedom, you just feel free. The soul feel free.

[00:16:30] And there's a guy in Chicago, he has it. I tried to get him to... he does nothing with it. I sure would like to see that, you feel me? You feel me? Yeah.

[00:16:49] He said before you call us, you've already heard the need. And we ask you, Lord, to go there and give strength and comfort, wounded in the spirit, in the name of Jesus, comfort their hearts, comfort in the name lost loved ones. Grief, spirit for crying out to you, Lord and said call on Jesus. And you will work it out. Touch him. Right now, we pray to touch that family right now in the name of Jesus and we plead the Lord because everything we need is in your name. Jesus in the name's comfort we need, and salvation we need.

[00:17:26] Naturally, the church family was very impacted by this tragic loss and the way that the loss occurred. And of course, there was certainly a lot of hurt expressed by the members of the church because in the Pentecostal church, church people are rather tight knitted together.

[00:18:02] And so when there is a hurt or grief, there is a feeling that it itself among the most all the people.

[00:18:22] I don't know who this may be the last time this may be the last time, this may be the last time, may be the last time, I don't know. Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.

[00:18:50] Right now when we think of terrorist activities. At 17, the terror was the same for me.

[00:19:06] Well, somebody hurt all of these people that have gathered both from curiosity and a sense of sorrow. Will somebody do and I think this is where my feelings of mortality still are based. There are so many people here.

[00:19:37] There's not really time for me to focus on why this funeral is taking place. It's more what could happen to all of the people who have come to witness because you recognize what the activity is and put you in a place where the only thing that you're concentrating on is what's in your mind and terror was what was in my mind.

[00:20:19] Given all that, all the dignitaries gathered here today, the system, any and all the face of God everywhere, we are here to celebrate. We are here because somebody snatched the life from a little boy, one of our own, a quiet, faithful, faithful member of this church, a sweet boy that the Lord called home little brother Emmett. The Book of Matthew, chapter eighteen. Go ahead.

[00:21:01] The disciples came to Jesus saying, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[00:21:08] They had a question. I said, Master. Who is the greatest? And Jesus called a little child unto him and said, I'm in the midst of them.

[00:21:25] Come here, boy.

[00:21:25] And said verily I said unto ye, except ye be, converted.

[00:21:37] And become little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

[00:21:43] You shall not enter into God's kingdom.

[00:21:46] Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child.

[00:21:57] A little child.

[00:22:01] And who so shall we see one such little child in my name you see me and who so.

[00:22:08] Who so!

[00:22:11] Believe in these little one must believe in me.

[00:22:22] But a milestone was hanged about his neck and that he would drown in the depth of the sea.

[00:22:33] For as much as he had done unto one of these, my little one, he had also done me.

[00:22:44] The Lord heart hurts too, he hears your cry. So saints, stay with me. Go fast to horns of the altar. Call his name. Have you ever had someone take from you, and the Lord was your provider? Have you ever had somebody falsely accuse you, and the Lord was

your lawyer? Have you ever lost a child to the schemes and the plots of the enemy and be overwhelmed with grief? Nothing can turn this around. But we've come too far to say to God, we've made it through the red summer, and all the red summer boy.

[00:23:37] We've made it through Mississippi lynchings, and I'm a Mississippi boy. We've made it out here in the South, and I'm a Southside boy. The Lord brought us through. He brought us through because we were annointed and filled with the Holy Ghost. But Lord knows I'm tired. He was beat up and cast into the river, but how do you know God will bring you peace? Oh yes he will. Peace shall fall upon all who believe in my name. Not just the bishop, not just the missionaries, but (inteligible)

[00:24:39] Your hearts are heavy today, but we can go one night, but joy shall come. I know you're vexed, but God says vengeance is mine. It is easy to turn to revenge, but it is not for us to take the law into our hands. The death, oh help me Lord, the murder of our son was cruel and it was brutal, but it is not our battle to fight. It is the Lord's.

[00:25:11] Somebody shout the Lord. Saints, I am here to remind you today the Lord don't make no mistakes. He will get the vengeance. Yes, he will. He'll get the vengeance.

[00:25:40] The unfortunate thing that brings change, however, and I hate to say it, is bloodshed. Most things that change bloodshed has to take place like Emmett Till, bloodshed has to take place like the killing of Martin Luther King Jr. Brother had to be shared by Jesus Christ.

[00:27:12] (music)

[00:28:21] (Inteligible) So I have no sorrow no sadness, just numb you know? Just numb, sitting in the audience.

[00:28:36] **Ashon Crawley** Hi, everybody. I'm a Ashon Crawley, and I am very happy to be in conversation with Micah Ariel Watson about the two films we watched, "Barky's" and also "40th & State."

[00:28:55] **Ashon Crawley** I'm very moved. And I guess where I want to start, I'm going to we're going to have a short sort of conversation between myself and Micah, and then we will open it up for audience questions. So if you do have a question, please do feel free to put it in the Q&A box and we will get to that momentarily.

[00:29:17] **Ashon Crawley** But there's this there's this great part of "40th & State" where probably no one else, maybe no one else noticed it. But when the men are shouting, there's this very, in the corner, there are these feet dangling. It's a kid, I think. And because they have the shoes that little kids wear when they're in church, and it made me think about what it meant to grow up seeing things like this on not just a Sunday by Sunday basis, but a weekly basis, Sunday, sometimes Tuesday, sometimes Thursday, sometimes Saturday, according to the the season in which we are in, sometimes it's convocations, sometimes it's district meeting.

[00:30:04] **Ashon Crawley** There's so much that happens and children are always present. Can you talk about what you apprehended from the world of pentecostalism? As a child that remains with you, what are the things that inform the way that you think about your own person and what are the ways that perhaps growing up Black pentecostal informs the way you think about form in terms of an artist, in terms of filmmaking?

[00:30:38] **Micah Watson** Sure, sure. Well, first, thank you so much for having me and for watching these films. And I think Black pentecostalism informs me in more ways than I realize. Something I've been thinking about really recently is improvisation in the way that that not only informs the actual congregational experience, but how that naturally makes its way into my work. So the way that I like to shoot, I like I do a lot of research and I think a lot. And then I kind of don't go in with a plan when it comes to these more experimental documentaries and films. And there have been moments when I felt, I don't know, a little ashamed of that, like, oh my. Like not being prepared enough, am I not doing things I'm supposed to do. But more recently I've discovered that's really a part of who I am and I'm actually creating space and allowing room for for improvization and for frankly, like for the Holy Spirit to come in and do what he wants to do on set in the moment so that it's not all unlike what I want to do and what my plans are, but like making space for. Yeah. The things that may not the things that I can feel as opposed to the things that I can see. So a lot of my work in the way that I think about art and life is very based on emotion and feeling and the visceral, you know, the things that might be tangible but inexpressible through words.

[00:31:59] **Ashon Crawley** I think it's great because. I think that feeling is one of the things that is is a privilege for thought in sort of the contemporary history of black thinking, if one considers Du Bois', you know, "The Souls of Black Folk." It's a it's a text about how he feels. I think it's a lot about grief. It's a lot about heartbreak. It's a lot about black folks were promised these things post emancipation and look at what has happened in the intervening years to all of the things that were promised and all the things that were not given. And so there's so much so much of black thinking, it seems to me, is about honoring and being true, about feeling. How can how do you work with feeling when some say that feeling is the thing that white supremacy targets? As the thing to exploit or extract from black folks, how do you how do you think that feeling is still in operation in your work in a way that's generative in a way that doesn't give itself over to white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy? Can you talk more about feeling?

[00:33:24] **Micah Watson** Sure. Yeah, it's a it's an interesting thing to discuss because I feel like it's hard to put words of something that you feel, but it's like, you know, when it's happening. So, like, I might be writing, writing a voiceover, writing like a piece of poetry or whatnot. And I may not be able to articulate I mean, I may not be able to articulate it in the form of like a piece of prose, an essay or something like that. But the way that, like two words together can capture a feeling is really interesting to me.

[00:33:53] **Micah Watson** I think I, I sense that more when I physically have a camera, like I just know in my body, like when it's the right shot or like when I need to go over it and capture something else and be in conversation with someone or ask a different interview question.

[00:34:08] **Micah Watson** And so yeah, I don't know, it feels like feeling creates feeling, like feeling we get begets feeling. And so I feel that hopefully someone else will feel. And then in the editing room, I really like to make sure there's a lot of space for people to insert their own emotional weight into the story that I'm telling.

[00:34:25] **Micah Watson** So in this film particularly, I try to allow space like where you're just you might be listening to a voiceover, but just by watching what the tambourine is doing or just by watching the feet, there's space for the body to feel and not just like take in

information. So I think, like, really sitting with images is something that I enjoy and also sitting with, like, small sets of words as well.

[00:34:49] **Ashon Crawley** Yeah. So they're like three different things that I want to say. One is that you talked about research as a part of your practice, right. That there's this understanding that somehow and I like to use jazzers like as the primary example when people think, oh, jazz is improvizational, it just means that people just play whatever. And it's like, actually, no, like you can only improvise so far as you have undergone of a serious study of the instrument that you don't have the certain the release from the anxiety about my playing the right notes at the right moment in the right rhythmic sort of pulse, unless you have practiced. And so you researching and then using the film, the film event as the occasion for thinking through that research process.

[00:35:47] **Ashon Crawley** It's literally, it seems to me thinking through as opposed to this is the way that it should be and it should be this listening in this scene. And I think that is it's very Pentecostal, to say the least. Of the two questions I'm going to ask, one is about form. But before I ask the question about form and the way that or the form that the film takes, I want to ask specifically about Magneto and what happens when we place a black customers at the center of our conversation of of black political and economic struggle. Often the story can be narrated that Pentecostals didn't have anything to do with the civil rights movement or a very sort of tangential relation to the civil rights movement. But many people make the claim, and I think it's a correct claim that what Mamie Till said, I need the world to see what they did to my baby was a flashpoint and a deeply a visceral flashpoint for black folks in the United States to really gather and to not begin because they had already begun the since black folks have been here, there has been resistance, but there is a specific flash point of resistance that emerges around this, what I'm going to call a static practice, this this practice of showing this practice of wanting for others to not just see, but to since viscerally the thing that happened to her child. I don't want to say if she wasn't Pentecostal, it wouldn't have happened that way. But I do want to say that it happened that way because she's Pentecostal Pentecostal testimony in, for example.

[00:37:49] **Ashon Crawley** I think that one of the things that she utilizes is the idea of testimony and testimony is not always about the goodness of the Lord. Sometimes the testimony is about things I'm going through and I need you all to pray with me.

[00:38:03] **Ashon Crawley** Can you talk more about why you wanted to make this film and why it had to be a film? It seems to me that is about honoring the place of the practice of Pentecostalism.

[00:38:20] **Micah Watson** Sure, it's really a form of internal reckoning for me, so my undergraduate thesis and a lot of my college years were about reconciling my blackness and my faith and Christianity, and a lot of that found its center and growing up in the Church of God in Grace.

[00:38:39] **Micah Watson** And when I came to college, a lot of what I was seeing in the organization didn't seem outwardly what I would associate with as something with being connected to the Black Lives Matter movement.

[00:38:51] **Micah Watson** I'm in this moment where I'm seeing all these young people not that older, not that much older than me getting killed and also me spaces where I'm seeing I mean, you know, having normal regular church services, but kind of not seeing the two Mixu intermingle.

[00:39:03] **Micah Watson** But what I later realized was that there actually was a lot going on in the church culture that I grew up in. I just couldn't see it because I just didn't my eyes and my heart weren't tuned to it in that way. So I think for me, this film is really about like reconciling with what it means to be black and what it means to be Christian, what it means to be resistive and sort of reframing what resistance looks like, because it was very easy for me to be like, oh, well, you know, if we don't care, we don't care about Black Lives Matter. Or I think also all that's informed by the fact that I grew up in the Midwest and the Midwestern culture can be very like suppressed.

[00:39:41] **Micah Watson** Maybe it's the word that I want to use. People are just like you don't do the most all the time.

[00:39:45] **Micah Watson** But that's a tangent. But yeah, I wanted to turn another lens to the church and really try to see, like, what resistance looks like and not go. Didn't want to go into this project, assuming that the Church of God in Christ wasn't a resistance force, but actually wanting to dig deeper into what that meant and what that looked like. I think when I was thinking early, when I was thinking about the film, I was taking Professor Harold Black Power Class.

[00:40:08] **Micah Watson** And I remember we did this reading and I was like, I read the thing and was like, oh, Bishop Ford was like helping people bring guns into Mississippi. I was like Bishop Ford, like X, Y and Z, like I grew up in Chicago. And so for me it was a lot of like discovery of what so many people older than me already knew.

[00:40:23] **Micah Watson** But I really needed to make it feel personal so that I could do that, that that work of digging into the tension myself of what it meant to be black, Christian, all these different things in a way that feels harmonious, not forced and truthful. So I hope that's that's making some sense.

[00:40:41] **Ashon Crawley** Makes perfect sense to you. The sad question to that is, do you do you think you still have it? That's the leading question I can tell you about. But that's unfair. What do you think? What do you do?

[00:40:57] **Micah Watson** I think that we still haven't moved forward in terms of that.

[00:41:01] **Ashon Crawley** There is not just the capacity for the practice of resistance to the normative. Do you think that. Kojak and black kind of customers, do you think that they are practicing of the modality or what are the ways? That's a better way to ask it. What are the ways in which you notice today of the lingering the lingering nature of the practice that made possible what Mamie Till was able to do? What of Lewis Henry Ford was able to do? What do you notice is still there that has been cultivated among Kojak and among Black Panther Costales?

[00:41:54] **Micah Watson** I think there are these like these cultural cultural gems that we hold onto that still seem to capture the spirit of resistance and ways that people aren't directly aware of. So I don't know that everybody, you know, while passing the offering plate, you know, is having these conversations about armed resistance and whatnot. But I do think there are ways that we're addressing things subconsciously. I think like the physical act of shouting and a physical act of like beating a tambourine, like you beat a tambourine. And there's something about that that asserts presence and resistance in and of itself. Just in terms of gesture, I think more conversations are being had among young

people, at least folks I know. I don't think that people are completely like, oh, my gosh, like nothing's happening. I never thought that was the case, that no one cared. And that and in that way. But I just always saw resistance and and the my church environment as being disparate things, but that later learned that they weren't.

[00:42:53] **Micah Watson** So I think it's there. It's subtle, but, yeah, it's still a thing.

[00:42:58] **Ashon Crawley** I mean, the shouting and the beating of the tambourine speaking the language. I have a tambourine. Some here somewhere busted out. I paint with tambourine. So it's kind of funny.

[00:43:13] **Ashon Crawley** Um, talk to me about form. Can you tell me about why black and white can you tell me about why the three movements. Tell me about what do you think form Careys in terms of messaging that coheres with or perhaps breaks with sort of the. I was going to say lyrical content. That's not what I like the. The scripting of it that can you talk to me about the relationship between those things?

[00:43:47] **Micah Watson** Sure. So I went into the project after after doing my reading and what not wanting to attack the film as if I were like I was wondering what I would make if I were there now, like me, my current self now, not if I was like born in nineteen fifty five, were born in the forties, but like me as Micah. And so with that in mind, I wanted to make a lot of space for collage. A filmmaker I'm really inspired by Joseph and his work is heavily based on collage and yeah, taking images from images that seemingly wouldn't go together, images that are sort of like in the same realm and and putting putting them together in a way that, yeah, that is incredibly visceral, like points to feeling more than it points to a strict adherence to traditional structure. I just happen to like three something about three field holy the trinity. It feels complete. It's a way to it was a way for me to break up the film in a way that.

[00:44:46] **Micah Watson** Allowed for different movements and allowed for different spaces, and I could have, for example, like intersperse the shouting with some of the more recreation scenes, but I wanted to give special space and special time for each of those things and sort of create this this build that starts with where we were and points as to where we could be in terms of pairing like the shouting with hip hop beats and and whatnot. So, yeah, collage is something that that deeply informs the work. But I also wanted to make sure that there were that we could see like the distinct movement so that there was a progression in the film in terms of like the actual color and choice of films that I did shoot it all in 60 millimeter.

[00:45:26] **Micah Watson** It felt I it felt necessary because that's the first thing that I learned about Cuba and more than ever.

[00:45:31] **Micah Watson** And I wanted to sort of I'm really nostalgic person, so I wanted to carry that into my last project, Eva, but also in this idea of creating something that could have been made in nineteen fifty five, although as a category like twenty eighteen esthetic, I think just naturally using black and white kind of allows us to float between spaces. And also from a practical standpoint, I shot in a lot of different locations and a lot of different cities and it allowed for a little bit more cohesion, even with all the collage. So nice of.

[00:46:05] **Ashon Crawley** What's on the horizon for Micah? What are you what are you working on that excites you? What are some questions that you are currently trying to work through, think about?

[00:46:18] **Micah Watson** Sure, working on a few things, I'm always too busy as a person, finishing up a short for the memory project that's based on a plaque I saw at Memorial for slave laborers, and that was really thinking through what memory looks like for black women and what it means like carry memory and your body. So I was working on a dance piece and another film I'm working on at the feature. It's called Preserve's, and that also deals with memory and the body and Pentecostalism and Kansas and all these things that that that make me who I am. And, yeah, kind of answering questions that I started working through with at Penn State and will probably continue working through the rest of my life as long as I, you know, as long as I'm making art. Also working on my Web series, "Black Enough" the second season of it. So we shot the first season a couple of summers ago here in Charlottesville, and now we're headed into the second season.

[00:47:11] **Micah Watson** Prayerfully we'll be able to shoot it the summer. Well, we'll see. You know, Covid willing, but, yeah, that's that's been exciting. So a lot of writing, a little bit of shooting and just trying to make everything.

[00:47:24] **Ashon Crawley** I did not ask, even though it's in my notes.

[00:47:28] **Ashon Crawley** So "Barky's" is what I really appreciated about "Barky's" and I think it shows in deep relation to "40th and State" in so far as both are trying to think about white supremacy, both are trying to think about the effects that whiteness has on physical space, what it does to time, and also both are spaces of gathering. And so in "Barky's" you have, you know, Barky talking and sometimes you see his hand and yet you hear this person. I think the last name was Wilkins. I'm not sure. But the person was talking about the Lord told me these numbers. And and so there's this conversation that's happening and it doesn't have anything to do with what's happening at the register. And so it became clear to me that Barky's is a space of gathering in a way that is different from but shares relation to the way the Black church is a space of gathering. Can you talk about the ideas that "Barky's" that the film "Barky's" conveys for you?

[00:48:42] **Micah Watson** Sure, well, to your point about Barky's being a space of gathering, I immediately, immediately felt that when I walked in, there wasn't there weren't a whole bunch of people coming in and out. But every time someone came in and out of that store, there was a conversation. And it wasn't just something casual like, oh, look, do you have this like Winan CD? It would be something about people's personal lives, about what's going on in their church, about what they the products that they might need later. So I got the sense that there was a deep community built around gospel music, which I have personally found to be true, and my church experiences and my my deepest friendships. Gospel music really becomes this thing that unites and also propels people forward to think about their own art, think about their own lives, and also have the power to bring people back together.

[00:49:29] **Micah Watson** So that's really that's one thing that I wanted to capture through "Barky's." But more like his spirit, it's a it's a portrait film. He's just the the nicest, sweetest man just just ever. I just I couldn't get over that. So while, like, visually, a lot of the shots were close on his hands, some stuff at the store.

[00:49:49] **Micah Watson** But I just wanted to show his resistive power, the the enduring power of that community, not unlike Roberts Temple Church, God in Christ. So, yeah, I just wanted to make a film about endurance. Really.

[00:50:05] **Ashon Crawley** It's endurance, but I also wonder what our political economy of racial capitalism does to a place like Barky's in a place like Roberts Temple in the storefront churches in Chicago, that there is also gentrification that occurs in these neighborhoods where, like he said, he said there was white flight and then, you know, vanilla flight, they're coming back right there is, which means there's this displacement of community. And he talks about how the store isn't as busy as it used to be. And part of that is about just literal geography then or like space and people's proximity to the street where Barky's is, and so they're not necessarily going there because neighborhoods are being displaced and also because of different formats that music takes, digital. And in the age of Covid, you know, it's people have to have church digitally.

[00:51:06] **Ashon Crawley** And I do think that post-Covid whenever that is, hopefully this year, that's my dog wagging her tail against the window. Stop it. That I hope that post-Covid happens sometime soon. But I think that more people will opt for streaming services than even before because people are at least more acclimated to something like Zoom in order to have a church service. And so I do wonder what on the one hand, these are spaces of gathering, but also they are spaces they they are spaces of gathering that are made possible by a very specific racial and economic context. And I am wondering what will happen in the next 10, 20 years. As you know, the divide in terms of economy continues to increase in terms of poverty and wage exploitation. And, it seems to me that Barky's is an example of what we might, what might be on the horizon. Can you say more about, can you say anything about that, not more?

[00:52:28] **Micah Watson** No, I mean, the thing that comes to mind is just how heartbreaking the idea of these spaces not being a bank potentially is. That's really heartbreaking because being in the physical space of Barky's meant something to me, even as someone who didn't grow up in that community or being in the physical space of Roberts Temple, being in a physical space of the of these churches.

[00:52:48] **Micah Watson** And I yeah, I really think we're we're going to lose something. Like while I love to stream my church services and listen to sermon podcasts and whatnot. I'm really going to I mean, I hope I never see a world where the Black church doesn't have gathering spaces, whether that be literal churches or spots like Barky's. I feel like there's something so important about the physicality of gathering with one another that seems to be critical to what the Pentecostal experience has been to me, just being in close proximity with people who are sharing a similar glorious religious experience.

[00:53:25] **Ashon Crawley** Yeah, I just I appreciate the work that you do that you are doing and I appreciate the, the thoughtfulness that goes into the research, then that becomes the occasion for the improvisational impulse in the film process. And it was a complete joy to actually talk to you about the work that you are doing. And so I think we're going to transition now to a wider Q&A. And I think that Professor Schmidt is going to take care of that.

[00:54:04] **Jalane Schmidt** Hello, thank you, Ashon and Micah, for that discussion, I want to turn to a question that came in for our from our audience here, if I can. First, I've got questions of my own, but I want to hear from the audience first here. And there were a couple of audience members, one of whom who self-identified as a white, privileged woman, its her words, and asking if you, Professor Crawley, can expound a little bit more upon emotion is what white supremacy uses to...then kind of finish the sentence as this as this applies to Black folk?

[00:54:46] **Ashon Crawley** Well, in an anti-Black racist world, white supremacy utilizes anything in order to exploit and extract resources and labor from Black folks, including emotion. And so it exploits things like the joy of when folks were enslaved. They would say, oh, we can tell that they are content because look at how happy they are. Look at the songs that they sing, look at the joy that they have. And so it takes the joy practices that the world did not give us. The world cannot take away. And it attempts to exploit that emotion. To say this justifies our system of inequity that hasn't gone away just because the Emancipation Emancipation Proclamation was signed. We are still live in a deeply anti black world where anti black racism is sort of what Christina Sharpe would call the weather it's just the thing in which we exist. And sometimes it's more or less intense. But because of that, because we live in a fundamentally anti-Black world, then it can use things like emotion, which is why I was so interested in asking Micah to talk more about how feeling, even though it can be and often is a target of white supremacy to exploit Black folks. Why is feeling so deeply important to the work? And I think it's I think it's there.

[00:56:16] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah. All right. Thank you for that. Yeah. Well, if I can kind of slip in here with some of my own questions, this was fascinating for me. So I noticed that just briefly, Micah, the camera flooded by AA Rayner Funeral Home, you know, which was the mortuary that received Emmett Till's body, battered body from Mississippi and of course, Mr. Rayner advised Ms Mamie, Emmet's mother not to view her son's mangled body, remember him as he was, nor to show the body in an open casket funeral, which would be a traditional that's traditional Black mortuary rites is an open casket funeral. And of course, Ms Mamie famously rejected this advice and bravely decided to, she said, let the world see what they did to my boy. Of course, this was the signature moment. So so this this funeral home was itself the subject of a documentary a couple of years before your, you know senior thesis. And then also there was, of course, even earlier, there's a PBS American Experience documentary, I want to call this to the audience's attention, "The Murder of Emmett Till." And it's available streaming online free until the end of Black History Month, which is this Sunday. So definitely go and see that "The Murder of Emmett Till," excellent treatment. So I just I wondered about how you see your film in relationship to, you know, other other cinematic treatments of this of this event and what what. Yeah, what how are you in conversation with those other works? Or are you just you just feel like, you know, there was really a need for doing something that's just kind of completely different?

[00:58:10] **Micah Watson** Yeah, I think that goes back to our conversation about feeling, I think like a lot of documentaries, that's something that I guess I don't experience when watching that. And so I wanted to make something that seemed more visceral and where there wasn't so much it wasn't, so my mom does this, da-duh, da-duh, da-duh and I don't have the word for that. But it's not something that's so contained that allows more space for us to insert ourselves into it. So, yeah, I think that's where my my work differs from, from other treatments I've seen of the of the Till story. There's an Oscar winning short called My my Cousin Emmett or My Nephew Emmett, and I remember that came out close to the time I was making "40th & State" and I said, oh, my gosh, look, my film doesn't matter X, Y and Z. But after seeing that film, I think it's important to have something that's more narrative, a little more glossy and also something that I feel like we can touch and and relate to on a, I keep saying visceral, but on a visceral level.

[00:59:10] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah. Yeah, right. Yeah. There's also the film. I don't know if this is the same one, the film called "Dar He," which of course is the famous use of humes of Emmett's uncle, pointing to his accusing the lynch, the lynchers in open court, which was completely ran counter to the standards of Jim Crow at that time. It's just uh, quite a

moment. You had mentioned kind of feeling and this sort of thing. We had another kind of question from the audience. Just just if you could say just a bit more about your choice of black and white. You know, you've mentioned kind of bridging these times together. But can I say a bit more?

[00:59:51] **Micah Watson** Yeah, I also wanted the film to feel like it could have been pulled out of an archive so black and white, seemed necessary to achieve that aesthetic. I wrote an imaginary sermon and tried to make that sound like a little grainier too, so the black and white paired with that, like the goal was that. It could have been pulled from from somebody's library basement or something, which in a sense creates this sort of this almost magical imaginary space in terms of like time. Because if you pulled that out of something, I think that it would be probably be like why, why do I hear this music? Why do people look like this? We are we using these camera angles, et cetera, et cetera, so black and white seemed to support that. Also, on a practical level 7266 is the cheapest like film stock you can get for 16-millimeter, and so you know like a student, trying to make a film and hopefully it worked for me.

[01:00:44] **Jalane Schmidt** Great. Wonderful. So it's kind of going on with talking about the filmmaking itself, you mentioned collage as a as a model for your filmmaking and and yeah, and I like that kind of the the kind of artsy feel of the of the 16 millimeter black and white, and allowing us to kind of float between space and time. And I wonder, like, what decisions did you as a filmmaker make and as a Pentecostal too, which of course you're Pentecostal this is your this is this is you all the wonderful parts that make up Micah Ariel Watson, you know. What decisions did you make in bringing together this vintage funeral footage from 1955 with contemporary praise dance or a kind of more choreographed form of sacred movement? What sorts of decisions did you make with that?

[01:01:46] **Micah Watson** Yeah, something I was thinking about was like what COGIC culture was like in the 50s and then what COGIC culture is like now for me, I grew up as a praise dancer, like that was my thing, my my first introduction into art. So it seemed natural for this exploration of what it means to be COGIC or grow up COGIC or what have you. I feel like I needed to have dance in there in that way. And so I'm literally forgetting what your question was from the beginning, because I'm just going off on a tangent. But can you remind me of what your question was?

[01:02:21] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah, yeah. It's the when you were bringing together this vintage funeral footage and somebody was asking actually more about the funeral or about the sermon as well, somebody wanted to know about that, they assumed it was it was archival. So we'd like to hear more about that. And how did you in kind of splicing that together or kind of bringing that together, collage form, as you said, you know, with contemporary praise dance, a kind of more choreographed form of sacred movement?

[01:02:47] **Micah Watson** Right. OK, yes. I wanted to make space for both. And even like with the praise dance, dancer Rosa, who I know from from Wichita, I didn't give I didn't give her space and time to really choreograph a whole lot. I would give her a word or a feeling or an idea, and I'd be like, dance that. And I love, love, love doing that with dancers to see what comes out of their body naturally, which inherently is related to the idea of shouting. You hear, you hear the piece of a sermon that really gets you here on that that crazy run. And you want to go off and you feel like you're in relationship with the Holy Spirit in this physical way. So, yeah, I think using praise dance and using archival footage, that was a way to bridge the two worlds for me and really think through what protest and what remembering felt like for me in a really personal way.

[01:03:39] **Micah Watson** And I guess I can speak more to the sermon too. Yeah, I, I could not find a recording of Bishop Ford's sermon. I imagine maybe somewhere out there it exists. I couldn't find it for myself in the time and resources that I had. But I took that as an opportunity to not only make this something where I use the camera, but also use my love of writing and my experience as a playwright. So I just tried to imagine what Bishop Ford might have said. I watched a lot of his sermons. I used what I know just from being a COGIC kid, you know, natural cadences and phrases that people use to tie certain ideas together. And I also gave myself some liberty to insert my own ideas into what might have been said.

[01:04:24] **Micah Watson** The funny thing about actually recording that, so that the guy who did the recording, I'm Jay Thurston, he's not that much older than me, was old enough to have grown up hearing Bishop Ford before he died or hearing his voice. And so I was like, oh, do that. He's like, oh, you want me to do my Bishop Ford voice? And I was like, Yeah. And so even though it doesn't sound exactly like Bishop Ford, the idea that even his memory can tie the past to the present.

[01:04:50] **Ashon Crawley** Well, when I first watched it, I thought it was him, so. I just assumed. It sounds like him. I'm older. I was alive, and I would go to Memphis when Bishop Ford, I actually met him in the convention center in the hallway, like on a Monday after the convocation was over. He layed his hands on me and said you're blessed, something like that that. Yeah, like, I remember. And his voice is something that is so unique. And so when I watch the credits of the film, the first time, I was surprised that it actually wasn't Bishop Ford, because he does actually the sound of his voice really, really resonates with Bishop Ford a lot, so it was successful in that way.

[01:05:34] **Micah Watson** Thank you.

[01:05:36] **Jalane Schmidt** Wonderful. Wonderful. Yeah. I noticed it was kind of getting back to this emotion question and the kind of visceralness that you wanted to have infused in your film, which very successfully done by the way. I was struck by the the trauma of the survivor, the account of the woman who attended the funeral, and she used the word terror. And so I was just and then also that choice that you made, the camera choice that you made as as the preacher is kind of intoning his sermon and vengeance is mine, you know, referring to the Lord, you know, and then the camera cuts to a clenched fist, you know, saw that that was really, really nice. But also saying, you know, it's not our battle to fight. It's the Lord's. Don't take judgment into your own hands, you know, so that kind of caution, I mean, I saw the preacher kind of kind of trying to tow this line, you know, and keeping in mind this is before, you know, the Montgomery bus boycott story. I mean, this is this is kind of the kickoff, so I mean, so there's not as much of a model of kind of long term, very overt, you know, public resistance and this sort of thing, so I was anyway, that was a that was kind of interesting choice. I think, you know, of the juxtaposition of what the preacher is saying with just the feeling that is in that in that clenched fist and that we got we got from the audience a question that kind of goes on that mode that it seems that the central emotion exploited by white supremacists is fear. And so how does sacred black music free the listener from the power of that threat? Someone is asking.

[01:07:22] **Micah Watson** That is a good, really rich question.

[01:07:26] **Micah Watson** The first thing that comes to mind is my own experiences with fear, whether that be like physical terror just from being a person with a Black body or from

more personal experiences. But the first thing that I do is I listen to gospel music and what exactly that that sounds like kind of depends on the situation or the mood. But there's there's this relief that happens for me. And hopefully that's something that is felt in the film as well. But, yeah, I think it's really about release and creating a safe space for ourselves. The the sonic sonic landscapes that we create and are allowed to be, not even allowed to be a part of, but the sonic landscapes that we create for ourselves can provide a lot of safety, emotional safety and some ways maybe even physical safety. There's just something that feels so comforting about like it might be hearing that organ or it's hearing that choir or for me, like the thing, the memory that I always hold so dear. It's my grandfather, like he like he moans his prayers, like sitting next to him hearing that.

[01:08:29] **Micah Watson** And so in that space, I don't feel like like fear exists. There are spaces that where lament is necessary and critical, but it's something about that lament feeling like it's not being watched. It's something about that feeling like it is free to be and express itself how it needs to without sort of be these outside eyes. So, yeah, for me, gospel music creates that space, whether that's me listening to it in my headphones or listening to it with friends or a live performance or whatnot. But yes.

[01:09:00] **Jalane Schmidt** All right, well, we could go on and on. I have so many this just brings up so many rich topics for conversation.

[01:09:09] **Jalane Schmidt** And I want to thank our filmmaker, Micah Ariel Watson and our discussant, professor Ashon Crawley for this fascinating exchange. It's really nice to have an artistic point of entry for experiencing Black History Month. So I want to thank you, the two of you, for kind of walking us, walking us through the spaces so rich. And I also want to thank the folks that made this event possible, namely our UVA Democracy Initiative staff, Jessica Kimpell Johnson from the Memory Project for corralling us all together, and Ashley Duffalo, who's behind the scenes here at the Religion, Race & Democracy Lab, our tech host.

[01:09:49] **Jalane Schmidt** So I want to say to the audience, one week from today, Wednesday, 12 noon, March the 3rd, please join the Memory Project for another event, Marching Toward Emancipation, where we'll celebrate Charlottesville's Liberation and Freedom Day, which commemorates the arrival of Union troops.

[01:10:05] **Jalane Schmidt** So watch your follow up email for links to registration for this and other upcoming events, as well as resources about today's topic and a link to a recording of today's discussion. Thank you for joining us.