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Derrais Carter

Portland State University, derrais@pdx.edu

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Black Wax(ing): On Gil Scott-Heron and the Walking Interlude

Derrais Carter

Abstract

The film opens in an unidentified wax museum. The camera pans from right to left, zooming in on key Black historical figures who have been memorialized in wax. W.E.B. Du Bois, Marian Anderson, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Duke Ellington stand out. The final wax figure, a Black man, sits with an empty card box in his right hand and a lit cigarette in his left. The film's narrator appears: a slim, afroed Black man. He sits to the right of the figure. The only living person in a room full of bodies, he reaches over to grab the cigarette. To his inanimate companion he nonchalantly says "Oh. Thank you very much. Needed that" and ashes the cigarette.

The afroed, cigarette-ashing narrator is poet, novelist, and musician Gil Scott-Heron. The film is *Black Wax* (1982), directed by Robert Mugge. *Black Wax* is equal parts concert film, social documentary, and political statement by the poet. Set in Washington, D.C. and released in the midst of singer Stevie Wonder's long campaign to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, Scott-Heron's film feels, in part, like an extension of Wonder's wider effort. The year prior, Wonder held a massive rally in the city to demonstrate national support for the creation of the holiday. Reportedly, over 100,000 people attended. Wonder, building on mounting support of the proposed holiday made his song in honor of MLK Jr.—"Happy Birthday"—an integral part of his upcoming tour with Bob Marley. When Marley fell ill, Scott-Heron stepped in to lend his talents to Wonder's cause. He would then participate in the Washington, D.C. rally that featured speeches from Diana Ross and Jesse Jackson (Cuepoint).

Between live performances of various songs from his catalogue, Scott-Heron stages walking interludes wherein his wiry frame ambles through the city. Most are sonically accompanied by verses from his song "Washington, D.C." He also folds in excerpts from his poems, personal reflections, and critiques of President Ronald Reagan's administration. Scott-Heron ambulates a historically sedimented reality; namely that Washington, D.C. is a segregated city and that America, more broadly, is a divided nation. Against the backdrop of national monuments, his stroll stages critiques of the country's racist past. In *Black Wax*, song becomes walk becomes interlude becomes critique.

Throughout the 1970s, Scott-Heron used his politically conscious poetry and music to mount strident critiques of social relations. Songs like "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", "Winter in America", and "Home Is Where the Hatred Is" reflect the artist's larger concern with the stories Americans tell ourselves about who we are. This carried over into the 1980s. In his 1981 song "B-Movie", Scott-Heron examines the ascent of Ronald Reagan, from actor to president. For the poet, the distinction is false, since Reagan "acted" his way into office. As an "actor in chief" Reagan represent a politically conservative regime that began before his entry into the White House. Reagan's conservative politics were present when he was Governor of California and clashing with the Black Panther Party. Scott-Heron seized upon this history in *Black Wax*, tracing it all the way to the nation's capital.

A tour is "a journey for business, pleasure, or education often involving a series of stops and ending at the starting point" ("Tour"). Tours can offer closed-loop narratives that creates for participants a "safe" distance from the historical conditions which makes the location they are visiting possible. Scott-Heron undermines the certainty of that formulation with this wandering. In song and stride, he fashions himself a tour guide. This is not in the sense of taking the viewer into the "hood" to evidence urban decay. Rather, the poet's critical amble undermines a national memory project that removes race from histories of the nation's capital.

Scott-Heron, self-styled Bluesologist, traveler, wanders through the world with a marrow-deep knowledge about the historical dynamics animating Black life. Walking richly informs how he relates to space. For Michel de Certeau, "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered [...] it is a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian [...] a spatial acting-out of the place [...] and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions" (97-98). For Scott-Heron, the "relations among differentiated positions" is informed by his identity as a Black American. His relationship to race imbues him with what Black geographer Katherine McKittrick calls a "black sense of place." According to McKittrick,

a black sense of place can be understood as the process of materially and imaginatively *situating* historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter [...] [it] is not a steady, focused, and homogenous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differentiated perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geographies and their inhabitants. (949-950)

Scott-Heron elaborates on McKittrick's concept through a series of walking interludes wherein he refuses a national narrative of harmonious racial progress. He dismisses an American fantasy of race, and it is not new. In "What America Would Be Like without Blacks" writer Ralph Ellison dissects the ways that Americans have historically tried to "get shut" of Black people, all while actively thriving on Black America's cultural contributions. Scott-Heron's *black sense of place* is articulated through a series of ambulant interventions that (subtly) acknowledge national violences while highlighting the often unspoken presence of Black people thriving in the nation's capital.

Visually, the poet sequesters national monuments to the background. Reducing their scale and stripping them of their dwarfing capacity while also actively not naming them. He miniaturizes them. This allows him to centre his critique of national history and politics. For Scott-Heron, the Capital Building and the White House are not sites to be revered. They are symbols of an ongoing betrayal perpetrated by the Reagan administration.

The scenes I examine here are not representative. That isn't my project. I am much more interested in the film as a wandering text, one that pushes at tensions in order to untether the viewer from a constricting narrative about who they might be. According to Sarah Jane Cervenak, "wandering aligns with the free at precisely those moments when it bends away from forces that attempt to translate or read" (15). In this regard, I offer this reading as a suggestion. It does not work towards a particular end other than opening the process(es) through which we make meaning of Scott-Heron's filmic performance. In effect, don't worry about where you are doing. Just be in the scene. Invite yourself to view the film and elaborate on descriptions offered here. Wander with him. Wander with me.

In his first walking interlude, the poet strolls along the Potomac River with a boombox hoisted upon his left shoulder. He plays a tape of his song "Washington, D.C.", and as the opening instrumental creeps into audibility he offers his own introductory monologue:

yeah, I forget what Washington did on the Potomac. This is the Potomac. Black folks would sometimes refer to that as the Po-to-mac [...] This here is the Potomac. Saw a duck floating out there a little

while ago. Yeah, somebody said now that Reagan is in charge we're all ducks. Dead ducks. You dig it?

Walking along the Potomac, his slow gait is the focus. He stares directly at the camera and speaks to the viewer, to us. His (willful) forgetting of what George Washington "did on the Potomac" suggests that major figures in American history do not hold equal significance for all Americans. In fact, for Scott-Heron, the viewer/we might also do well to forget. His monologue smoothly transitions into the first verse of "Washington, D.C.":

*Symbols of democracy, are pinned against the coast
Outhouse of bureaucracy, surrounded by a moat
Citizens of poverty are barely out of sight
Overlords escape near evening, the brother's on at night
Morning comes and brings the tourists, straining rubber necks
Perhaps a glimpse of the cowboy making the world a nervous wreck
It's a mass of irony for all the world to see
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.*

*It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.
(mmm-hmmm)*

He feigns no allegiance to Washington, D.C. or the city's touristic artifice. As the lyrics indicate, poverty stricken Americans' proximity to physical symbols of national wealth belie the idea that democracy is successful. For him, poverty is as symbolic as monuments. Yet Scott-Heron does not visually exploit Americans living in poverty. This isn't that kind of tour. Instead, he casts his gaze on the "symbol[s] of democracy" that celebrate the "outhouse of bureaucracy" that is Washington, D.C.

As the poet continues his stroll along the Potomac, the Jefferson Memorial appears in the background. He has no interest in it. He does not name it, nor does he gesture to it in any way. Instead, he focuses his attention on the camera, the viewer, us. While the camera lags slightly behind him, rather than turn his attention to the river that he walks along, he looks over his right shoulder to re-establish eye contact with the camera. His indifference is reinforced by the nonchalant stride that never breaks. The Jefferson Memorial nor the Potomac River are objects to marvel at. They hold no amount of significance that would require the poet or viewer/us to stop and ponder them or their alleged importance. With eyes and feet, he keeps them where he wants them ... in the background.

In another interlude Scott-Heron, still holding the boombox atop his shoulder, appears in the courtyard area of an apartment complex. The repetition of his outfit, boombox location, and music give continuity to the scene by the Potomac and the unidentified neighborhood. His outfit is the same one he wears when walking by the Potomac and the boombox remains on his shoulder. Reciting the next verse of "Washington, D.C.", it seems like he's walking through a tableau.

*May not have the glitter or the glamour of L.A.
It may not have the history or intrigue of Pompeii
But when it comes to making music, and sure enough making news
Or people who just don't make sense, and people making do
Seems a massive contradiction, pulling different ways
Between the folks who come and go, and one's who've got to stay
It's a mass of irony for all the world to see
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington, D.C.*

He strolls along the sidewalk, the camera zooming in on his face. Over his right shoulder two Black kids pose on their bikes as men stand around them. The camera rotates clockwise, giving a slight panoramic view of the apartment building in the background. Residents crowd the doorway, a combination of what appears to be overlapping greetings and farewells. The ambiguous actions of the people in the background smoothly contrasts with the poet's lean frame while his focus on the camera/viewer enlarges his presence.

The scene also includes various people sitting on park benches. We do not know if they are residents or visitors. In many ways, the distinction does not matter. What we see is comfort in the faces and bodies of the Black people immediately behind Scott-Heron. On one bench we see two people. The first is a Black man who hoists his right leg up, resting his foot on the bench. As the boombox plays and the poet raps, the man taps his knee and snaps his fingers. Similarly, a Black woman in a red dress sitting on the same bench responds to Scott-Heron's presence and his music with a committed head bob and toe tap. On another bench, three young Black men nod coolly as they watch the poet recite the remainder of his verse.

*It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.*

He walks us through the partially-animated tableau wherein the folks sitting behind him subtly reinforce the message he directly communicates to the viewer/us.

In another interlude, three scenes are cut into one. In the first, the Capital Building looms in the distance as Scott-Heron enters the frame. He gestures toward the building and notes the ways that tours distract visitors from the *real* Washington:

Let me tell you, those tours are all the same. They bring you around to places like this [gestures toward the Capital Building]. They might even tell you who the jackass is on the horse or the guy on top of the building, but they never show you the real Washington.

Should've been around the 15th of January. That's when Stevie Wonder was holding this rally. It was about 50,000 gathered there. They were trying to demonstrate and make Dr. King's birthday a national holiday. But it's always the same. The Capital. The Hoover Building. Maybe sometimes they'd even show you the Washington

Monument [gestures towards the monument in the distance]. But that's not a look at the real Washington. The one I'd like to show you is something special. You wanna see what's happening in the nation's capital? Come with me... (*Black Wax*)

Since the standard D.C. tour leaves out the *real* Washington, the poet primes the viewer for the *real* thing. His mention of Stevie Wonder allows the poet to connect the viewer to that *real* Washington, Black Washington. This is the Washington that boasts Ben's Chili Bowl, Howard University, and Scurlock Studios as cultural institutions. This is the Washington that would welcome the creation of a holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. The scene quickly transitions to Scott-Heron walking down the streets of a presumably Black neighborhood. This neighborhood is outside the purview of tour mobile routes. There is nothing remarkable about the neighborhood. Nothing monumental. The street is lined with row houses. In the background, Black pedestrians passively observe or go about their day. One young Black man smokes a cigarette as Scott-Heron casually walks past him. For Scott-Heron, these folks are the "life-blood of the city" yet he does not speak with them, perhaps because his point is not to put these people on display but to formally acknowledge who gets left out of official narratives. The segment concludes with a return to Heron's stroll along the Potomac, where he picks up another verse to "Washington, D.C.":

*Seems to me, it's still in light time people knifed up on 14th street
Makes me feel it's always the right time for them people showing up
and coming clean
Did make the one seem kind of numb
It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington D.C.*

Conclusion

I'll end with this. In a final scene, the poet walks in along the front gates of the White House. He holds a little Black girl's hand and smokes a cigarette. Together they stroll along the gates of the White House. Their movement, from right to left, suggest a return. A going back to. However, this return is not nostalgic. It is accusatory. It is a reckoning with the unrealised promises that America doles out to its citizens. He notes:

the protests that are launched in this country are not launched necessarily against the government. They are launched in terms of the fact that this country has rarely lived up to its advanced publicity. This is supposed to be the land of justice, liberty, and equality and that's what everybody over here is looking for. (*Black Wax*)

Perhaps, then, Gil Scott-Heron leaves his viewer/us not with a push to March. No. Walking against the miasma of national nostalgia perpetuated through tourism is one way to maintain a *black sense of place*.

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