

SEPT 2020

[All Issues »](#)



Find the RAIL in print
Subscribe now
A message from Phong Bui
Publisher and Artistic Director

ART

MICHAEL ARMITAGE with Toby Kamps

DAWOUD BEY with Lyle Rexer

TORKWASE DYSON with Robert R. Shane

MAX HOLLEIN with Phong H. Bui

TONY OURSLER with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve

ARTSEEN

Summer McCorkle: *des abends*
By Ann C. Collins

Isaac Aden: *Vespers and Auroras*
By David Carrier

(Nothing but) *Flowers*
By Alfred Mac Adam

George Ortman: *Against Abstraction*
By David Rhodes

erotics: towards a poetics of the liminal
By Lucia Hinojosa

Our World is Burning
By Olivia Gilmore

Don Voisine: *Time Out*
By Robert C. Morgan

Torkwase Dyson: *Studies for Bird and Lava*
By Jason Rosenfeld

Film

A Rich and Revitalizing Legacy: Ephraim Asili's *The Inheritance*

Asili's debut feature fuses fiction, documentary and bold formal experimentation to exuberantly and innovatively remind us of the legacies of Black thinkers, activists, and artists.

By [Esmé Hogeveen](#)



Ephraim Asili's *The Inheritance*. Courtesy TIFF.

Midway through Ephraim Asili's debut feature *The Inheritance* (2020), which premiered in the Wavelengths section at this year's Toronto International Film Festival and subsequently was the Opening Night film for the new Currents section at the New York Film Festival, a group of young Black housemates sit around a kitchen table and attempt to make consensus-based decisions. The topics discussed range from whether the household should be shoe-free to where to relocate the RPRR (the "revolutionary people's reading room," their library) to which local artist to invite to their first "consciousness raising" event. Though many of the interpersonal dynamics—excitement, patience, and frustration—are common to most roommate check-ins, the party's aims transcend comfortable cohabitation. Inspired by the communal ideologies and radical histories of MOVE, a Black liberation group formed in Philadelphia in 1972, and the Black Arts Movement, the housemates strive to form their own community, space, and outreach project in latter-day Philly.

Inspired by Asili's own youthful experiences participating in a Black Marxist collective, *The Inheritance* chronicles the formation and activities of the emergent House of Ubuntu, as the young people name their collective living and organizing project. Fusing experimental, dramatic, and documentary styles, the film flows effortlessly between the story of Julian (Eric Lockley) taking possession of his late grandmother's home and a history of MOVE, including cameos from members Debbie Africa and Mike Africa Jr., Asili has described his approach as "speculative re-enactment," and the result is an engaging blend of recognizably narrative scenes; pedagogical interventions, as when characters read aloud from an alternative Black canon; direct accounts and archival footage of Philadelphia's Black activist history; and vivid formal experimentation.

The film begins with Julian moving into his grandmother's house and sorting through her impressive collection of books and records by Black artists, thinkers, and activists. Julian invites his girlfriend Gwen (Nozipho Mclean) to

join him and the two begin to transform the space into a hub for intergenerational social, political, artistic, and musical praxis. Shot on Super 16mm, *The Inheritance* is rich with ideas, as evidenced in several scenes that feature Julian and Gwen reciting from texts such as Julius K. Nyerere's *UJAMAA: Essays on Socialism* (1968) and a zingy conversation between Gwen and a friend about how irritatingly performative it is when university-educated people preach about higher education not being worthwhile. Book and record covers—Angela Davis's *Soul and Soledad* (1971), Sonia Sanchez's *Morning Haiku* (2010), Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), to name a few—are frequently featured in portrait-style shots, almost as if receiving their own reverent close-ups, and in situ, being held, read, or handled by members of the House of Ubuntu.

As the group's socialist activities develop, shots that seemed surreal early in the film gain a new depth, quite literally, by acquiring more physical, historical, and artistic context. For example, early in the film, Julian and Gwen appear sorting texts and reciting them in front of monochrome red, yellow, and blue walls. This palette of primary colors explicitly references Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), a film about five citizens discussing revolution, loosely based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (1872). As *The Inheritance* progresses, we catch sight of a poster for *La Chinoise* prominently displayed in the background and shots that initially showed Julian or Gwen alone against the brightly hued walls widen to include other characters, furniture, and objects, confirming that Julian's inherited home is indeed real and not a mere symbolic sanctuary. In other words, a setting that first seemed abstract, or like a constellation of literary, political, musical, and filmic references, becomes a more deliberate and established site for human exchange. Similarly, near the start of the film we see Gwen in front of a blackboard with lines from Audre Lorde's poem "Neighbors": "We made strong poems for each other / exchanging formulas for our own particular magic." At first a more abstract prop, the blackboard recurs with differing quotes throughout the film and eventually gets used as a pedagogical tool during group discussions and when the House of Ubuntu hosts guest speakers.

The exigent political content of *The Inheritance* is not explicitly addressed in the film, although the stakes of Black community could not be clearer after a summer of unrelenting police brutality and almost inconceivably resilient Black-led organizing. Instead, Asili skillfully interweaves context and footage about MOVE, a movement that prioritized communal living and Black, environmental, and animal rights and welfare, and which was targeted by extreme police violence. In a 2015 NPR piece called "Why Have So Many People Never Heard of the MOVE Bombing?", journalist Gene Demby explains: "MOVE's quasi-Rastafarian, anti-technology, pro-animal-rights worldview doesn't neatly fit on any part of the political spectrum."¹ MOVE was led by John Africa until he was killed along with ten others, including five children, in a police bombing in 1985, which also destroyed 61 homes. Establishing shots of West Philadelphia punctuate *The Inheritance*, and as the film's citation-heavy approach merges with shots of neighborhood street corners, murals, plaques, and parks, one is reminded of how so much of what is inherited is—for better or worse—not necessarily officially bequeathed or even acknowledged.

Footage of Black women's immense contributions are at the fore of Asili's script. Though *The Inheritance* shows dozens of book, record, and poster titles in slow pans and direct shots, the viewer is left to identify authors, artists, and sources if unfamiliar—gaps in recognition that some audiences will likely link to the occlusion of Black, especially liberationist and women-penned, works within the cultural mainstream. Footage of Shirley Chisholm's 1972 presidential bid, including her incitement "to form coalitions of people in the society to move together to make that particular group or that particular segment infiltrate that segment and turn it around" made me ashamed and disappointed that I hadn't previously heard of her bold campaigning. Chisholm's dry remark that "if you want to indulge in rhetoric...

I call that ego tripping. You can't change the system by ego tripping" feel, of course, prescient as ever this fall. Other shots feature beloved Philadelphia poets Sanchez and Ursula Rucker, the latter reciting a poem at the House of Ubuntu in a scene that mixes the scripted world of the roommates with real, present-day revolutionary characters.

Deeply refreshing in form and content, *The Inheritance* dodges any heavy-handedness by maintaining focus on the motivations and challenges of organizing with lovers, peers, and artists. Scenes of Julian, Gwen, and their comrades-cum-roommates explaining they've rebranded rent as a "cost share" and striving to align on issues from artistic platforming—"We want to integrate and not alienate," Julian reminds the group—to chore lists to speculating about which housemate stole someone else's missing spirulina showcase the giddiness, hard work, creative exploration, conflict, collaboration, mundane chores, thoughtfulness, and rigorous self and peer education that go into intentional co-living and solidarity. Where some of the scripted dialogue could sound stilted, Asili's attention to the overlapping earnest and comic dynamics amongst the housemates maintains a keen momentum. Meanwhile, shots of Philadelphia sites and literary legends intermingled with historical and contemporary footage of Black activists give *The Inheritance* added complexity. Without ever seeming contrived, the meta nature of the scripted scenes and voiceover quotations serve as a reminder of how histories sometimes have to be actively recalled and re-remembered. With *The Inheritance*, Asili exuberantly and innovatively reminds us of the richness of engaging those legacies.

Contributor

Esmé Hogeveen

Esmé Hogeveen holds an MA in Critical Theory and Creative Research from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and is based between Montréal and Toronto. She is a staff writer at *Another Gaze: Feminist Film Journal* and her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *Canadian Art*, *Frieze*, and *Hazlitt*, among others.

[@ Follow @brooklynrail on Instagram](#), and see what's happening in our community.



THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture

The RAIL

- About the Rail
- Staff
- Supporters
- Contributors
- Store
- History
- Archives
- Contact Us

Get Involved

- Sign up for our newsletter
- Subscribe
- Donate
- Advertise
- Submissions

Follow

- Instagram
- Twitter
- Facebook
- RSS