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Between Time

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Signature

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Date
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“The creative effort should be directed not at making a thing look like itself, but at using the capacity of the camera to make it look like what the audience should feel about it” (Deren 202).

Abstract

*Between Time* is an intimate conversation between transgender artists on their own terms. The film is a ritual in entering the past and writing the future from the present moment. Conversations weave through natural landscapes and present as both intensely personal and connected to a greater story about the vastness of trans experience.

Project Description

*Between Time* is a 27 minute exploration into the minds and lives of five transgender artists. Craft and gender merge to express a unique textured portrait of each artist while creating a larger conversation about transgender experience. Through stylistic editing where audio and visual are rarely in sync, scenes play out as both meditative and ritualistic, creating new associations specific to this film reality. Natural landscapes function as another character in the film, offering pause, grounding, and a metaphorical sense of the inner self that reveals itself naturally in these spaces. By collaging visual and audio footage, breaking down a trusted reality, I set up the audience to drift into an internal experience of trans history and identity sharing, as opposed to passively consuming an external “factual” body logic where gender is often falsely explained or cruelly simplified through the lens of biology and cisnormativity.
Introducing the artists

Ria: xi/xir/she/her, cartooneer and visual artist
Oliver: he/him, musician with a concentration in viola
Sinclair: they/them, musician with a concentration in bass
Grace: they/them, photographer, painter, and jeweler
Evan: they/them, filmmaker

The film presents each artist in short 2-3 minute segments that are interconnected to create a fluid cohesive conversation. Although the majority of those involved in the project did not know one another beforehand, there is a familiarity that is experienced between them in the collaging of the images and content.

Structurally, Between Time moves cyclically or in a spiral. The film opens with a shot of a mirror in a field and closes with the moon reflecting off ocean waves at night. In each sequence we hear audio from the artists layered together, connecting them to these landscapes. This literal mirroring, presented visually and through the soundscape of the opening and closing sequences, moves us back and forth between time with the understanding that you never experience a reflection the same way twice.

Still frames from the opening and closing sequences of Between Time
In the first half of the film, we are introduced to each artist primarily through their craft as how it relates to personal history, experience of gender, and being embodied. The second part begins once I reveal myself as the filmmaker, speaking to this process of creating the film as my own art. Footage of me editing along with images of me entering into shots from off screen are seen while audio of a phone conversation between myself and Oliver, the violist, is heard. Oliver responds to my reflecting on the vulnerability involved in the making of this film exclaiming, “you’re experiencing it along with us, or we’re experiencing it along with you.” From this point on we spiral back to each artist, only this time moving into deeper conversations around trauma, abuse, healing, dissociation, gender dysphoria, hormones, racial identity, fat identity, discrimination, and healing from destructive patterns. None of these topics were known going into the work but rather evolved from my time filming with each person. Part of my desire in making this film was simply to devote my skills and time to create safe and pleasurable filmmaking experiences with other trans people. I wanted to know the outcome of focusing on an intentional space where there was no desired expectation from anyone beyond opening up to presence of self with the camera. The openness and safety created between us, along with sharing trans identity and certain language and experiences around that, is what allowed for these conversations to occur.

Still frame from Between Time of filmmaker editing footage
In the film, there is a very personal story happening inside the whole that is essentially about the magic created in relationships between trans people when personal experiences become both a mirror and site of growth and strength in the connecting. This undercurrent is felt particularly in scenes between myself and Oliver passing two pocket knives between us. In the sequence, I am holding the knives across my chest on a beach while sitting underneath a tree. Over the course of time, I uncross my arms and the location suddenly changes to me now holding the knives within a dimly lit fort while sitting across from Oliver. I hand the knives carefully over to him and then later in the film we are seen passing them back and forth. Similarly, artist thoughts and experiences are connected and amplified using camera movement, connection between similarly framed shots, landscapes and home spaces that connect the artists visually, and repeating water soundscapes.

Still frames of pocket knife being exchanged (left) and of an upside down tree (right) from Between Time

Still frame image sequence of cut between Sinclair in their NC home (left) to the interior of Grace’s NY apartment (right) in Between Time
There has been a lot of fascination about what it means to be transgender and often the prodding questions that come from cisgender people create a lot of rigidity and need for trans people to define themselves in a specific way in order to keep hold of agency over their own body and experiences, which is so often taken away. I am thinking specifically about the pathologization and medicalization of trans bodies and the narratives still necessary to access desired and life sustaining health care and how this narrative continues to play out in every day lived experience. By not focusing on physical transition and rejecting any direct questioning concerned with defining gender for each person, it created the space for deeper and more nuanced experiences to be explored. Sometimes our conversations revolved around gender, other times not. My devotion to the project was always about approaching our time together as an opportunity for healing where each person’s needs and desires were prioritized in the creating and documenting of the art practice, ritual, and conversation.

**Research Analysis**

Throughout my studies in the Integrated Media Arts program I became greatly inspired by documentary works that utilize surrealism, mythology, fantasy, and ritual to expand our ways of experiencing what is real. Hybrid and experimental documentaries offer the chance for audiences to access history in more poetic and emotional ways. I find this quote by filmmaker Marlon Riggs resonating deeply with how I approached my own project. In speaking of his film *Tongues Untied*, Riggs described it as,

“dealing with the weaving, in terms of our lives, where truth, fiction, fantasy, fact, history, mythology really interweave to inform our character, psyche, values and beliefs. Changing my mind about traditional history has been part of my evolution. Before I
considered history and mythology, fact and fiction as separate and obviously discreet. Now I don’t think so in terms of how they inform us and work within us to make us who and what we are as individuals and as a culture, as a group, race, and nationality” (Kleinhans and Lesage 122).

I understand my film as a continuation of this greater work of weaving that Riggs is speaking of, and as building upon a foundation of filmmakers like Isaac Julien, Maya Deren, and Chris Marker who all asked viewers to step outside their own reality and enter into the carefully crafted ways of telling the truth on film as presented by each artist.

Experimental and hybrid documentary are crucial to storytelling practice within marginalized communities as a way to take back the narrative from outsiders who have attempted to capture and exploit stories in order to feed them back as the one true experience. Coming to this work as a transgender person, I sought to build creative trust among the collaborators in order to create the most meaningful and true work. Finding the delicate balance in truth telling where our most personal thoughts and stories are allowed the opportunity to be told on our own terms in our own voice was the ultimate guiding force of this project.

Being heavily inspired by the films of Maya Deren and her writings on film, I believe her influence is felt throughout the work. When I first began to ponder this idea of how to tell trans stories without a timeline and with more focus on the emotional resonance versus the factual evidence, I looked to Deren’s films and writing. “One tries to make a film which one can see over and over, as one might read a poem or enjoy the same, unchanging painting long after one thoroughly knew what it was ‘about’” (Deren 161). In my experience, the display of a transgender story in film was not poetry but rather evidence. I came to this work with that longing to find the right environment and intimacy that would lead us to capture what is internally felt and experienced as gender versus some tantalizing proof of being not cisgender, of
being separate somehow in your body experience from everyone else. I utilized Deren’s approach repeatedly; her drive and motivation around experimentation with the tools of filmmaking inspired me to push myself beyond my own creative patterns. I believe my film reflects this sentiment in which Deren exclaims, “My work has constituted an exploration of the medium of film rather than the fulfillment of a preconceived goal” (199). Although, perhaps my film is an exploration of both the medium of film and of gender itself without any preconceived goal.

Throughout the entire process of envisioning this work it was a challenge to sustain my dedication to experiment. I struggled with wanting to better explain what it was I was trying to do but held fast to that stubborn part of me that was devoted to the process and ready to just let go of expectation and allow the film to become.

There is a great parallel that occurred for me between creating the space for that deep presence within the process, and in learning how to trust and build deeper transformative connection with others. Outside of creating the film, I was engaged in a lot of my own healing around gender and finding a deeper sense of wholeness in myself after understanding much more about how trauma can create a fragmentation of self. During this time I discovered Adrienne Maree Brown’s book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* and found her writing a comfort as it focused on interdependence and the strength of our relationships as vital to building sustainable activist movements. I did not notice the connection between what she had written about and my own creative process and collaborative desires until I discovered a passage from Maya Deren’s writing where she specifically spoke about the concept of emergence. It felt like such a powerful and magic moment to see this in her text from 1940. For Deren to be using this theory of emergence, which had been resonating so deeply within me in recent months,
created this unbreakable connection for me in understanding how my creative process and personal life were interconnected. In the introduction to *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Brown exclaims, “emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine” (13). Deren speaks similarly of the “emergent whole” stating,

> “It is in this process which makes possible the idea of economy in art, for the whole which here emerges transcends, in meaning, the sum total of the parts. The effort of the artist is towards the creation of a logic in which two and two may make five, or, preferably, fifteen; when this is achieved, two can no longer be understood as simply two. This five, or this fifteen—the resultant idea or emotion—is therefore *a function of the total relationships, the form of the work* (which is independent of the form of reality by which it may have been inspired)” (65).

Deren always seemed to be concerned with form and creating new meaning through ritualized ways of expressing her world through film. Objects, bodies, and spaces take on new meaning in the context of her films and cannot be understood anymore by the logic of our reality. I thought about this a lot going into each shoot, creating an extensive list of potential acts that might gain us access into the past, present, and future versions of ourselves. I also began to wonder how each person and landscape within the film, along with the connections made in the edits, formed out of our own very separate lives, act as an emergence in and of itself. In the film, I attempt to blend our art practices, emotional lives, and histories together in such a way that the truth of them can only be felt and understood in that merging. Truly at times I do not feel understood or like my gender experience or desires make sense at all until I see myself reflected, and then joyfully amplified, in the image of my trans loved ones. Through the weaving and connecting of textures and feeling within the film, I believe a similar mirroring and amplification occurs.
Thesis Production Process

“Rather than a linear narrative of progress, what we really seem to be dealing with are cycles of visibility over the past one and a half centuries that have had and continue to have direct, often negative, impacts upon the lived realities of trans people. Visibility, this supposed cure-all, might actually be poison. At least part of the poisonous nature of this problem may be due to the fact that, for the most part, these cycles of media visibility have been outside of the control of trans people. Whether in ‘gender novels,’ in which cisgender writers claim a stake in telling our narratives without us, films, in which the few non-murderous or non-comedic trans characters are inevitably played by cis actors… or the entire genre of invasive trans documentaries made by cis filmmakers, we have been rendered powerless by media representations of our own narratives” (Page 144).

There is a wounding that has happened in documentary filmmaking where trans people have been exploited and stereotyped for entertainment or education. Even as a trans person myself, I continually battled with my own doubts about whether I was the right person to create a film like this. That pain of being misrepresented and misunderstood was present throughout the whole process of creating. It took a great deal of strength and consulting with my own integrity to create the many carefully worded proposals written up and meticulously edited before I found the confidence to actually propose this idea to others and begin filming.

The idea for this work was born from a desire to see beyond the filmic tropes surrounding trans experience where bodies are essentialized into a before and after story in order to be made comprehensible to a cisgender audience. In my initial writing about the project, I focused a lot on the idea of time and breaking free from a linear timeline in order to find wholeness from this trope, which felt like the source of so much internal fragmentation.

Transgender people are often portrayed in a perpetual movement through time, constrained and expected to fall into a binary gender assignment as either male or female in order to find social validation and safety. The overplayed linear narrative, where transgender experience is simplified into a uniform story of physical transition to the “opposite” gender from
the one assigned at birth, pits one story of our lives against another, creating a fracturing, a before and after. Additionally, it denies visibility for those of us who desire to live between or outside these two points and negates the opportunity for trans people who go through medical transitions and find societal acceptance as the “opposite” gender to be seen fully in their history. The undercurrent and intention of this film engages with that fracturing in the hope of creating more expansive ways of understanding transgender narratives and embodied experience.

My approach in honoring this intention was to focus on more emotive and expressive ways of sharing history that were less concerned with facts and time and more interested in feeling and the connections made between time and people. I specifically chose to work with artists so as to use their craft as a gateway into creating a type of visual, audio, and tactile history weaving. This decision, along with collaborating to create ritualistic performances for the camera, forms a language all its own within the film. Filming ritual and watching ritual be performed is never the same as participating in it yourself. In that sense, it is a strong metaphor for the internal and deeply felt personal experience of gender identity. I find that the rituals within the film reflect that inner world which is shared in the conversations throughout the film. At times we can witness and be drawn into a ritual, while other times we experience frustration or separation as movements, sounds, or actions distract from the flow and pull us out.

It was challenging to be dedicated to an approach that breaks free from a linear timeline while also deciding to create a film. Film as a form inherently falls into a linear way of experiencing story so it would be necessary to find ways to disrupt this. I believe in the end that my film holds together in more of a cyclical fashion, as I mentioned in the previous section, than a linear one. Part of that is experienced through the opening and closing sequences, along with
the repeated use of water audio and imagery, and also the more ritualistic sequences that are woven throughout.

Much of my process leading up to production and during filming revolved around my desire to avoid encapsulating a person within one type of story. I thought a lot about the camera movement within Isaac Julien’s film, *Looking Langston*, and how we as viewers are rarely allowed to gaze fully upon the bodies on screen before the camera moves away. While this was a strong metaphor for the searching within Julien’s film, on another level it made it difficult for the audience to completely encapsulate the image and experience of being a black gay man. Viewers are forced to search, as well as left wondering.

This desire to create a similar distance with the audience and their gaze upon trans bodies in my film inspired me to invest in a steadicam so I could expand my camera movement for the work. I found it physically challenging while also inspiring and liberating to work with this equipment. Being able to move around a space in this new way allowed me to explore in ways I had not before. There was a steep learning curve with it as well but I found my shooting improved greatly as I went along and was able to review footage I had shot. I concluded that I nearly always had moved the camera too fast. Building strength in my body to physically hold the shots and move slowly with intention also became part of this process.

I see my attempts to honor my initial desires and dreams for this film scattered throughout the entirety of it. It did not form into exactly what I may have initially imagined but the intention is there. I became surprised by how valuable the conversations came to be for me. I believe the film views like an honest reflection of where each of us is at in this moment with nothing holding us to that, in that sense I really do feel it speaks to being whole through time.
My intention with the film now is that it grows from this iteration. Initially, I had another collaborator who was unable to film with me last minute and I would very much like to include her in the work as well. I feel that the current version does not have the representation within the film that I envisioned and I want to make sure the conversation is more encompassing before sharing it further.

When I began, I also planned to include more reflexivity with each person by allowing them to engage with the footage I shot of them and respond to it on camera. I diverged from this idea because timing made it difficult to accomplish. Also, once I began to edit the pieces it was hard to figure out at what point I would want another person to be involved versus when I simply needed space to make sense on my own of what I had filmed. Ultimately, what I realized is that no matter what project I work on it will always be from my own perspective and lens. I can involve others as much as possible to make sure there is consent involved, evaluating this at each stage and considering each person’s individual needs, but truly accepting that responsibility of creating in your own vision is just part of the work of being a filmmaker.

Audience and Exhibition

_Between Time_ is an experiment of a film and was created specifically for the people who participated in the work. As it came together, I realized that these conversations feel really valuable to share within the larger transgender community. My desire at this point is to eventually screen the film at festivals that uplift trans people and in smaller community settings. I potentially see this work going beyond these spaces into more general documentary film festivals, such as the Duke Documentary Film Fest, which feels like a good space for it.
considering three of us in the film are from North Carolina and uplifting trans people in our state feels crucial in this moment. Ultimately, my first priority is for the transgender community to experience and enjoy the film.

**Bibliography**


Filmography


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