

Unnatural Disasters

Unfinishable (Inter)(in)animation

Helen Hill (1970–2007) was a white experimental animator/filmmaker and social justice activist from Columbia, South Carolina. Her filmmaking gained national attention after an intruder entered her New Orleans home and murdered her on January 4, 2007, also shooting Hill's husband, Paul Gailiunas, several times as he protected the couple's son, Francis Pop, although both Gailiunas and Francis Pop survived. Hill's was one of a spate of murders in the city that included the shooting of the twenty-five-year-old drummer of the Hot 9 brass band, Diner-al Shavers, on December 28, 2006.¹ These two fatal shootings, along with many others, remain unsolved.

Hill began making animated films as a fifth-grade public school student at a moment when, in the wake of desegregation's implementation, the majority of white students began attending "Segregation Academies," and segregation became a primary concern of her final project.² After graduating from Harvard University in 1992, Hill relocated to New Orleans with her classmate Gailiunas. She then completed a master of fine arts at CalArts in 1995 and moved to Nova Scotia while Gailiunas finished his medical degree. There she made films and taught animation before returning to Mid-City, New Orleans, in 2001. While Gailiunas founded an affordable health care clinic, she taught animation through the New Orleans Video Access Center and cofounded the New Orleans Film Collective.³ The couple was involved in a variety of community activist projects, including Food Not Bombs, sometimes attending protests against racist and gentrifying local government policies, and the meetings of an antiracism group, "Eracism."⁴ They participated fully in the creative landscape of New Orleans: in Mardi Gras and Halloween, punk anarchism, and a DIY culture that Dan Streible describes as "rooted in anti-corporate

grassroots practice.”⁵ For Hill, this landscape involved undoing the infrastructures and inevitability of patriarchal capitalism and war.

COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICE AS UN-WAR MAKING

Nothing more clearly illustrates Hill’s understanding of the link between unmaking the mutually reinforcing structures of war and capitalism on the one hand, and her community-based and participatory animated media practice on the other, than a hand-drawn flyer that she produced to advertise her millennially framed instructional film, *Madame Winger Makes a Film (A Survival Guide for the 21st Century)* (Helen Hill, 2000). She reproduced this flyer in black and white in *Recipes for Disaster: A Handcrafted Film Cookbooklet* (2004, revised and reissued 2005) and in color on a watercolor calendar that she made for her mother and stepfather (figure 19). It features four comic strips of different possible landscapes in the future. The first features an apocalyptic scene of war. Nuclear bombs rain down from the sky; trees are burned; fish are skeletal; buildings are ruined; a matchstick corpse lies splayed and alone; antennae poke up from an underground bunker, as the caption asks, “Will you be trapped in a tiny underground bomb shelter?” The third, more utopian, scenario asks, “Will you be making your way in a better world, where all work and industries are devoted to serving basic human needs?,” and links peace and human thriving to a full restructuring of society. The “Beauty Emporium” has been replaced with a “Free Medical Clinic” that is open twenty-four hours a day; an expensive film lab has become a free food bank; “TV REPAIR” is replaced by the cozy-looking Shelter #394; a café provides “free vegan hot lunches.” And the final caption asserts the importance of access to creative outlets that exist outside of capitalist circuits, juxtaposing the question “Will you be surrounded by big machines you don’t understand?” with a TV ad stating simply, “Coke!” as well as a projected “Digi-Pro” ad, while a child cries out in a speech bubble, “Please help! I just want to draw with a pencil and paper!”⁶ A close-up diagram of the bunker on the following page of *Recipes for Disaster* adds a small footnote that recognizes both the financial and technological factors that inhibit collective participation in filmmaking and encourages readers to overcome these obstacles in an environment that is imagined as a war-scape. The footnote urges, “In this new century of changing digital technology, you may want to hide out in your own homemade film lab/bomb shelter. Or you might take the barest of materials into your kitchen and make a lovely little flick about something you love. Filmmaking is so fun, so get going.”⁷ The image visualizes both present and future. If the future bears some traces of nostalgia for a predigital and handmade past, it also imagines the antidote to war in terms of a restructuring of an antiwar society through adequate food and easy access to both health care and creative expression. And as Streible suggests, it is *The Florestine Collection* that “best encapsulates this connection between [Hill’s] art and activism.”⁸

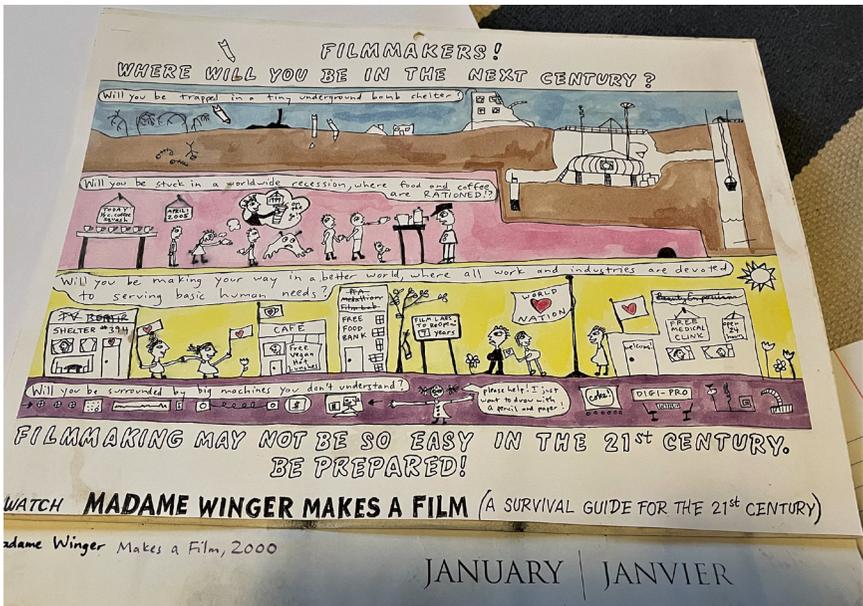


FIGURE 19. Helen Hill, page from calendar.

Historian Tiya Miles, who participated in a feminist collective with Hill and was one of her roommates at Harvard, suggests that Hill's mode of being resonated with the opening line of one of Hill's poems, "It is as though . . .," for she was always experimenting with self-presentation through dressing up.⁹ Hill was a dedicated thrifter and trash-picker, and on Mardi Gras morning of 2001, she discovered a fairy-tale-like pile of over a hundred discarded handmade dresses. She took them home to wash and repair. As a filmmaker who prized the handmade, collage, and vibrant colors, she felt a kinship with the maker and decided to make the dressmaker the subject of her most ambitious project, which would ultimately be released as *The Florestine Collection*. By talking to neighbors who lived near the trash pile, Hill learned that the dressmaker was Ms. Florestine Kinchen, also known as "Sister Kinchen," an African American deaconess who had recently passed away on February 12, 2001, at the age of ninety-five, shortly before Mardi Gras day.¹⁰

Although Hill often completed films within a year or less, *The Florestine Collection* was unusual in that she began it in 2001 and then worked on it over the next six years through a series of life-changing events, including childbirth, a year's displacement from her New Orleans home to Columbia after Hurricane Katrina, and a return to New Orleans in August 2006. In 2004, she received a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to support the project. The grant application provides some sense of how Hill thought about the dresses: "I washed the dresses and tried them

on. They fit. They not only fit, but in a very particular way that I prefer: loose on top and cut just above the knees. And they were quirky and lovely, just my style.”¹¹ But Hill’s film was only one part of a much more elaborate community-based project that set the dresses in motion in a variety of ways: “Besides entering the film in festivals, I hope the film will begin a community project. I love the dresses and I wear them, but I do not need all 100. I plan to display all the dresses at the New Orleans premiere screening and give many of them away.” She continued,

The Dress Project would be a small grant to encourage people to create their own unique wardrobe. Four people would be chosen from anonymous applications. Each person would receive a small grant (one hundred dollars) to help cover costs. Each member of The Dress Project would design and make 4 everyday outfits and one holiday outfit. . . . This project would honor Ms. Kinchen and bring back the lost art of hand sewn dresses. People would be chosen based on a unique vision and a desire to design their own everyday clothes, regardless of sewing ability. The group would be encouraged to help each other out, in a sewing bee atmosphere.¹²

Handmade zines would also tell the story of the dresses to “inspire dress clubs in other cities.”¹³

This project had always set out to explore interracial dynamics between women across generations, media, and class lines through attention to objects both discarded and found. But the film and its paracinematic offshoots acquired new dimensions after the breaking of the levees on August 29, 2005, caused approximately 1,500 deaths and rendered millions of people homeless, with the city’s Black population disproportionately affected as a result of environmental racism.¹⁴ Watching these events on television in Columbia catalyzed in Hill a deepening commitment to include the interracial and spatial dynamics of New Orleans in the “Florestine Project,” a term I use to differentiate Hill’s expansive work in progress from the film that was ultimately released under the title *The Florestine Collection*. The film Gailiunas completed is moving and beautiful in its own right, but this chapter considers how it might be possible to distinguish the film by Gailiunas from the open-ended possibilities suggested by Hill’s work in progress. Nevertheless, even as I mark a distinction between the works in question, the two undoubtedly overlap, and *The Florestine Collection* offers a helpful glimpse of some of the material with which Hill was working. The posthumous film opens silently with a sequence of Hill’s film footage damaged by flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina. These images, which materially embody the devastation Hill and her family went through, soon give way to colorful scenes of Hill’s signature silhouette animation as Hill’s lilting voice describes her discovery of a pile of handmade dresses and her desire to make a short film about them. Gailiunas’s voice soon takes over. Interspersing a musical soundtrack that includes songs by both Hill and Gailiunas, he narrates Hill’s murder before returning to other topics, including the discovery and restoration of the dresses, Hill’s search for the dressmaker and her family, her plan for the

film, her relationship with New Orleans, her life with Paul and their son, and their experience of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Visually, the film combines silhouette animation, frame-by-frame abstract experiments using the dresses' fabric, and home movie footage and family photographs, often flood-damaged.

The Rockefeller grant Hill received for the project had emphasized project completion. Archival notes show this emphasis spurring Hill on in the midst of crisis, in spite of the flood having destroyed and damaged both much of her work and Florestine's dresses, which she recovered, cleaned, and repaired a second time. One of several "postKatrina *Florestine Collection* scripts" begins: "But I still had a grant and with it, an obligation to make my finish an animated film."¹⁵ Over the objections of her family, Hill insisted upon returning to New Orleans on the one-year anniversary of Katrina, wanting to participate in the city's rebuilding and develop the community-based work that the Florestine Project was becoming. Hill, often in collaboration with Gailiunas, found a variety of ways to do this. Every year, for example, Hill and Gailiunas made a flash animation online calendar for "Gothtoberfest." In October 2006, their calendar, entitled *A Monster in New Orleans*, features a green monster in striped shorts wandering through the black-and-white photographs that Hill had shot more than a year after the hurricane.¹⁶ One of those images (figure 20) features a tree surrounded by a circle of wooden crosses, some of them hung with beads, and in the tree hangs a hand-painted sign featuring a quotation from Ivor Van Heerden, a South African-born professor at Louisiana State University and a hurricane specialist whose university contract was terminated after he identified the Army Corps of Engineers' failure to act on structural flaws in the Hurricane Protection System that had been identified as far back as 1976. Van Heerden had argued for a variety of responses to Katrina's devastation, including a coastal protection and restoration plan, and a "truth and reconciliation" commission. He suggested that such a commission "could operate not by branding scapegoats but by encouraging those who have special knowledge of what happened to explain what they know without fear of retribution so that the same mistakes are not made again"; but this reference also establishes a direct comparison between the South African system of apartheid and everyday life in the United States of America.¹⁷ The painted quotation contrasts the military's neglect of the people of New Orleans with its enthusiasm for war, declaring simply, "If we had the will & one month's money from Iraq, we could do all the levees and restore the coast."¹⁸ In his book-length reflections on what went wrong during Hurricane Katrina, van Heerden repeatedly returns to comparisons between the abandonment of New Orleans citizens and the organizational infrastructure and funding to support the war in Iraq. He cites the Reverend Isaac Clark's statement in the Convention Center: "We are out here like pure animals. We have nothing. . . . Billions for Iraq, zilch for New Orleans," and comments, "Look at our huge effort in staging for the invasion of Iraq. Every contingency was thought through. I'm talking about just the war here, not the ensuing occupation, many aspects of



FIGURE 20. Still from Helen Hill and Paul Gailiunas's flash animation online calendar made for Gothtoberfest, *A Monster in New Orleans*, October 2006.

which might have been prepped by FEMA itself. In fact, it would be pretty easy to draw an analogy between the government's failed preparations for the predicted disaster of Katrina and the botched occupation of Iraq. War we're good at. The best. We stand alone. But then what? Of course, questions were raised in Louisiana about the fact that roughly 40 percent of the state's seven thousand National Guards were on duty in Iraq.¹⁹

Hill's murder terminated her six-year-long attempt to find ethical ways to learn about, animate, and uplift Florestine's interior life and creative practice, and to do so in comparison with these aspects of Hill's own life and in dialogue with both Florestine's community and the interracial history of the city. Although the exceptional conditions of Hill's death have led to exceptional critical framings of her work, situating Hill and this project more firmly within film history and the history of New Orleans clarifies the evolving nature of *The Florestine Collection*. This chapter seeks to establish the multiple traditions in which Hill was working and to understand some of the ways they interacted with each other.

Daphne Brooks describes New Orleans as a place where codes of belonging, of the local and the foreign, have historically intersected with racial codes in complex and changing ways that shaped the city's creative and performative dynamics.²⁰ Brooks explores how New Orleans's risky performances that crossed lines of race and gender, at times overlapping with the "racial misogyny" of minstrelsy, nevertheless created a unique "polyvalence" of cultural categories at the very moment

when these categories were being fixed and helped to generate the city's "fleeting opportunities for self-defining agency."²¹ Hill was fascinated by New Orleans' performance cultures, and the Florestine Project, in particular, was a site-specific endeavor. She also explicitly reflected in script drafts on her sense of being "at home in" but not from New Orleans, and of feeling "in exile" from the city after Katrina.

Here, I build on the work of Anne Major, who has astutely highlighted how Hill's murder produced a discourse of rosy, romantic, and beatific sweetness derived from the colors, heart imagery, and humor permeating Hill's films at the expense of other important critical conversations.²² While acknowledging the influence of the American avant-garde, Streible argues that the qualities John Canemaker describes as "angelic sensuality, sensitivity, and fun" also set Hill apart from that movement's tendencies toward "conflict, internecine grudges, denunciation, and darkness" and put her in a category of her own.²³ Though offered in the spirit of eulogy, this affectionate language of exception is also gendered, and it inhibits Hill's work from taking its rightful place in film history. Sweetness, color, love, and craft are undeniably strong elements of her films, but this chapter emphasizes how these elements interact with Hill's other filmmaking influences, including Lotte Reiniger, New American Cinema, Third Cinema, and experimental feminist filmmaking. Immersion in Hill's archive and attention to her unfinished—and potentially unfinishable—film project reveals a community-based feminist filmmaker grappling with a series of complicated issues, including the histories carried by material objects; her own emplacement as a white woman in histories of racial injustice; and the role of animation in engaging these issues.

*THE FLORESTINE COLLECTION:
FINISHED OR UNFINISHED?*

The Florestine Collection both is and is not a finished film. By one account, it was finished posthumously by Gailiunas using the materials that were in process at the time of Hill's death, combining Hill's plans for the film with Gailiunas's elegiac explanation of why he, and not Hill, completed the work. Gailiunas was meticulous in his efforts to keep Florestine in view and to give proper credit to those members of her community who had assisted Hill in her research efforts. But the film inevitably, given the circumstances, becomes primarily a work of mourning for Hill, even as Gailiunas sustains a sense of another incomplete film haunting the one he completed. As I discussed the film's completion with Hill's wide circle of family and friends, it emerged that the film component of the Florestine Project was incomplete at the time of Hill's murder in part because Hill had been experiencing a "block" on the film and had rethought it more than once.²⁴ Over several months, as Gailiunas and Lewis made different parts of Hill's paper and

audio archive gradually available to me, my sense of “the film” has kept evolving throughout the writing process.

According to IMDb, the film was completed in 2011, but already in 2008, an announcement for an exhibition of Florestine’s dresses at the McKissick Museum in Columbia, South Carolina, had promised “a premiere viewing of the finished film in conjunction with the exhibition.”²⁵ The finish line for this film is, then, a moving target, and for complex and generative reasons. An opening title describes the work as “a film by Helen Hill completed by Paul Gailiunas.” Yet in the final minutes, Gailiunas states, “And that is how the story must end: an incomplete film and an incomplete life.” Gailiunas’s production notes confirm both his and others’ ambivalence about how to deal with the entwined issues of authorship and endings. A working draft of the script from September 14, 2007, ponders the issue of authorship and toys with the possibility of “a film by Helen and Paul.”²⁶ Elsewhere, after a screening for friends, Gailiunas notes, “Randall: Maybe contextualize earlier (at the beginning) so that people understand that film is finishing Helen’s film (maybe in titles),” and later adds, “(A film started by Helen Hill Completed by Paul Gailiunas?).”²⁷ Gailiunas wonders in the same notebook on June 18, 2009, “Do I need to say it is ‘incomplete’ as I wrote? Film feels complete.”

Hill’s post-Katrina scribbles confirm that she was fully reimagining her film: “Get going.” “Rewrite script and storyboard/index cards.” “Draw draw draw ink paint.” For me, studying *The Florestine Collection*, neither as the finished film that it ended up being nor as a projection of the work it would have been, but instead as the overlapping, messy fragments of an interrupted work in progress that increasingly deemphasized the final work in favor of building relationships with the people involved, has meant disrupting scholarly business as usual. It has involved moving my attention from a finished film to an uncatalogued archive and still-developing conversations; finding a method for writing about a film that hovers in a confusing grammatical space; and holding on to what that grammar might reveal while attempting to get a sense of the order of things as Hill’s work changed and developed over time. It has meant writing in relation to an evolving object of study (the films, the dresses, the Dress Project, and the posthumous exhibition) and to an evolving cast of both “filmmakers” (Helen, Paul, friends and family, and Florestine’s community) and “missing” people (Florestine, the filmmakers who shot the film’s found footage and the people in it, the family members who didn’t respond to Hill’s invitations, and Hill herself). The shifts and conversations that have defined this project have left me with questions I am still pondering: Who has the right to throw things away or take up discarded objects? What is the difference between a person’s refusal to participate in historical research and the resistance given to knowledge by a material object discarded for unknown reasons? What kinds of making and thinking do missing people and found objects provoke? For whom is this work when it is written or

made?²⁸ Gailiunas's ending directly addresses these issues when he knots together the technical skills of the animator, the needlewoman, and the doctor through the language of stitching, leaving love for the broad community created by the film in the place of the irreparable: "Now I want to resurrect her, to mend her wounds, to take care of her, but I can't. So instead I have taken the frayed and flooded pieces that remain of the Florestine Collection and I have stitched them together with love, for you, for her."

The temporal location of my object of study is close to, but not, what linguists describe as the *past irrealis*, associated with counterfactual historiographic modes, where temporal pastness and speculative realities encounter each other and can be confused.²⁹ Janine Marchessault rightly suggests that *The Florestine Collection* resists the concept of "Katrina time," which binds New Orleans inescapably to social collapse, through its emphasis on Hill and Gailiunas's persistent investment in collective being. I agree with this assessment, not least because the very idea of "collection" is etymologically rooted in the act of bringing together.³⁰ But Marchessault also sees *The Florestine Collection* as "profoundly place bound" in contrast to the "anywhere" and "fantasmatic escape and reverie" of Hill's earlier film *Mouseholes* (1999), in which animation seems to resurrect Hill's deceased grandfather, Poppy, as an animated mouse. Here I would depart from Marchessault's reading. Hill had included *Mouseholes* as a work sample with her Rockefeller grant application, noting, "The tone and mood of *Mouseholes* is most similar (of my films) to the mood I imagine for *The Florestine Collection*. Both tell a personal story."³¹ Activating a variety of media formats, Hill was beginning to explore across multiple times and spaces the relations among lived personal experience, local and transnational histories, the continuously provisional project of living in community, and experimental film.

The unfinished film's archive raises the question of how fairly to account for work that a filmmaker has not released into the world and that is spread across a variety of provisional and nondefinitive plans in the form of scripts, notes, letters, shot material, storyboards, sketches, unedited audio recordings, plans for collaboration, and so on.³² This issue becomes particularly charged in the neoliberal academic landscape described by Imani Perry where a scholar's professional success can be linked to taking strictly positive or negative positions on complicated objects or issues, leading to oversimplification of complicated questions.³³ The dresses that Hill found, took home, cleaned, twice repaired, and animated are what Perry calls "vexy things," hovering between recovered histories and appropriated objects and therefore demanding "nuanced deliberation."³⁴

Unfinished works are useful because the uncertainty surrounding them suspends hasty critical judgments and creates more patient spaces for sifting through nonlinear material and engaging in thought and dialogue. Hill's archive suggests a filmmaking philosophy, expressed more in practice than in words, that rejects the territorialization of film and challenges scholars to reflect on how film history

is shaped by the prioritization of completed objects and by who or what gets lost in the process.

UNFINISHING AS FEMINIST,
DECOLONIZING METHOD

Unfinishing is an essential quality of Hill's late work, drawing critical attention to the imagined duration of a filmmaker's relationship with the subjects she films. It had also always been part of her ongoing film activism. Hill's day-to-day anti-capitalist work involved enabling the community-rooted cultivation of individual creativity, often through an informal collective process of viewing and discussing unfinished films. She clearly understood film finishing in a deliberately provocative way, closely bound up with the feminist art and practice of making clothes, sharing food, and chatting.³⁵ In a hand-drawn flyer from 1999, made shortly before she moved from Nova Scotia to New Orleans and republished in her collectively authored handbook for DIY filmmakers, *Recipes for Disaster* (2005), Hill announces, "All ladies film bee! For chemically driven handicrafters (includes free tea) . . . like a sewing bee, you see."³⁶

A description of the first session, held in Halifax, Canada, in March 2000, explains, "You buy and shoot one cartridge of black and white film TRI-X super-8 film. . . . A subject of clothes (fashion, sewing, knitting, fabric, accessories) would help us with the program description, but your own inspired themes are more important so feel free to film anything." A more general description follows:

Each person will shoot one roll of film, then bring it to my house where we will hand-process it in the bathtub. Then, on a Sunday afternoon, we will all be together for the film bee, for tea, cookies, biscuits, cucumber sandwiches, chit chat and to finish our films, by painting colours onto them, scratching away on them, and bleaching out the parts we don't want. We'll keep screening them to check our progress. For example, you could bleach away a shot and then draw little yellow stars on the clear leader. The idea is to finish the film by manipulating it rather than by editing it.³⁷

This event demonstrates Hill's long-standing interest in the relation between sewing and filmmaking, and her sense that sewing provided a preexisting model for her project of building creative feminist communities.³⁸ Though *The Florestine Collection* foregrounds particular parallels between a seamstress and a filmmaker, including her own practice of making movable puppet joints with a needle and thread, this flyer situates those parallels within a larger feminist experimental tradition that is simultaneously creative and destructive, and includes recursive filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh and Leslie Thornton, and films such as Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* (1973), in which Nicolson runs a filmstrip loop through her sewing machine and projector until it breaks.³⁹ *Reel Time* claims filmmaking as belonging to the sphere of women's work while also highlighting the potential

violence of feminized labor. Prefiguring Hill, Nicolson refuses the often-unrecognized, feminized, and skill-intensive labor of stitching images into commodified completion, ending her work instead by shredding it.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as Miles makes clear, sewing not only unites women but also divides them along lines of race and class through infrastructures of servitude and enslavement within racial capitalism. Hill participates in this feminist tradition of radically questioning without wholly discarding the shared, complicated feminized experiences out of which collective futures might be built. As Hill wrestled with the value of film finishing and commodifiable products through a language of crafting, she simultaneously reflected on the differing reasons why people handmake clothes.⁴¹

The film bee's description juxtaposes Hill's colorful animation and the stark black-and-white palette of hand-processed live-action film. Filmmaker and former student Heather Harkins explains that Hill was attracted to black-and-white Super 8 both because she could easily hand-process it at home and because it allowed her to experiment with extreme contrasts through variable exposures.⁴² Hill's black cutout silhouettes function, among other things, as an aesthetic bridge between animated and live-action worlds. Working across a variety of forms, Hill prioritizes being together in real time for continuous screenings of incomplete work, as well as bleaching, scratching, and painting, actions likely to reopen, remake, or undo images that may have seemed "done," both chemically and conceptually.

Elsewhere in Hill's archive, these same "finishing" techniques are advertised as part of the interminable and unforeseeable afterlife possessed by all films, establishing a deliberately open timeline for film objects that makes room for at-times violent transformations and renders all films potentially unfinished. A "Welcome Back to School" flyer made by Hill advertising an "experimental animation show" at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) features a fragment of a found filmstrip.⁴³ Its first frame announces, "LET THIS HAPPEN TO YOUR FILM!" Film finishing appears as a potentially passive and continuous affair involving submission to the actions of others, including the act of spectatorship. Subsequent frames feature a boy's face overlaid with words such as "SCRATCHES," "WEAR," "DIGS," "RUBS," and "FINGER MARKS," and with the interventions these words describe.

Though clearly traumatized by the damage the flood inflicted on her work, Hill recognized that her family had survived when many others had not. She also possessed perspectives on the unforeseen life of images that allowed her to make something of the flood's chemical and indexical inscription of itself on her films.⁴⁴ This shaped the Florestine Project's trajectory, which registered not only Hill's own point of view as she filmed her community but also, however abstractly, the water itself that, through structures of environmental racism, had killed, displaced, dispossessed, and traumatized massive numbers of people of color.

Post-Katrina, Hill's notes use arrows to highlight the words *community* and *unfinished projects*. One scrap includes a "What I miss" list: "the kids coming by," "home movies," and "undone projects."⁴⁵ These connections resonate strongly with

Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's embrace of "unfinished" and "unordered" works and their rejection of the "fully rounded film."⁴⁶ Like Hill, they call people to show movies in homes to small groups, to de-specialize film knowledge through demystified "basic instruction," and to reject films that are "born and die on the screen."⁴⁷ They too imagine films as "unfolding" acts, a "detonator or pretext" for activity beyond the film, performing both "destruction and construction."⁴⁸ There is, of course, a limit to this comparison. Hill was a committed pacifist, and, although Lewis describes her daughter as having been "fierce," Hill's playful animated films are far from "violent works made with the camera in one hand and a rock in the other."⁴⁹ Yet in both cases, experimental filmmaking is unafraid of and indeed "implies failure," a practice where "the possibility of introducing variations, additions, and changes is unlimited."⁵⁰

Hill had studied Third Cinema in Spring 1994 as a CalArts MFA student, when she took animator and queer activist Margery Brown's "Politics of Culture: Feminist and Third World Animation Theory."⁵¹ Particularly important to Hill was Brown's statement: "People often approach animation with fewer prejudices and with an expectation of being entertained, so it can be an effective medium for social statements."⁵² Hill filed the syllabus and notes from this class, often recirculating the course's ideas in conjunction with production practice. Hill's teaching notes state, "Everyone got in a circle and we passed around a needle, spool of thread, watercolor paper, loose limbs and clear tape. . . . Everybody sewed together a loose limbs hinge to take home. . . . I went through the handout, explained about storyboards and explained Marge Brown's idea that animation is good for making political statements."⁵³

In her Rockefeller grant application in 2004, Hill displays clarity about her timeline and confidence about finishing films in general and the filmic component of the Florestine Project in particular: "This project is certainly feasible as I have made over a dozen films and understand the process of filmmaking from start to finish. With the financial help and encouragement of a Film and Video Fellowship, I believe I could finish the film within a year."⁵⁴ While this emphasis on finishing may have been strategic at the time of writing, the grant's expectation of completion motivated Hill in the wake of Katrina. Yet new script fragments register the extraordinarily traumatic impact of the hurricane on Hill's family, community, and work in progress, which combined with the ordinary challenges of being a new mother. These experiences shifted her priorities toward aspects of the film that had always been more relational and unfolding than teleological.

REFRAMING THE FLORESTINE PROJECT

Hill's peace activism had focused on alleviating hunger; building interracial community in her home; supporting media access and DIY culture, particularly through affordable celluloid filmmaking; and championing the universal right to creative education and self-expression in life. These themes informed Hill's initial

plan for the Florestine Project, which included a more explicit engagement with issues of racial inequity than her earlier work. After Katrina, this element becomes ever more pronounced, inflecting Hill's use of "found" objects and silhouettes and inviting dialogue across animation, experimental film, community media, and critical race studies.

As Hill's Rockefeller grant application explained, "Through personal storytelling, I will explore the themes of race in New Orleans, coming home to the South, and the dwindling of handcrafted work." She continues, "[Gailiunas and I] are both community activists and eager to learn the politics of this eccentric, southern city. We are surprised to see how seldom African Americans and white people mix socially, even within the activist and artistic communities. As a white person and a community activist in a predominantly African American city, I feel it is important for me to take part in breaking down racial barriers. This film will be one way for me to address these issues. I hope it will inspire dialogue during the process as well as at screenings of the finished film."⁵⁵ Hill had planned to compare Florestine's habit of piecing together "parts of skirts or shirts to make the dresses" to another "find" that occurred during that same Mardi Gras: "a grocery cart full of found films. . . . Many were beautiful home movies, forever lost to families."⁵⁶ An elaborate storyboard that Hill gifted her mother shows Hill moving from segment 12, "Found film of small acrobatic girl. Found home movie clips," to segment 13, "Silhouette animation of dresses hanging on line" (figure 21).

Yet this storyboard—presumably pre-Katrina because it makes no reference to the hurricane, but post-February 2005 because it incorporates material that postdates Hill's meeting with Florestine's church community—contains elements that become increasingly important to Hill's post-Katrina plans and complicate the relation between Hill's two discoveries. New Orleans' culture of cross-racial performance appears in segments 3 and 4 through "Silhouette animation of Skull Gangs and other older Mardi Gras traditions" and "Silhouette animation of hands catching Mardi Gras parade throws," including a thrown Zulu coconut. The city's racial segregation and colonial history is visually registered in segment 10, "Maps of New Orleans (returning home to the South)," which features a black-and-white animated globe pasted over a map of the city; and an early script fragment reinforces Hill's awareness of these issues as she narrates a Canadian visitor's surprise at the "kitschy remnants" of slavery to be found in the city's tourist zones.⁵⁷ With the exception of segment 22, Hill planned to dedicate the remainder of the film (segments 14 through 30) to a multidimensional celebration of Florestine's creative life, imagination, and spirit. She was working with no fewer than five aesthetic forms, each form functioning both independently and in relation to the other dimensions of the planned film.

Though the second half of the storyboard does not use found footage, it includes Super 8 documentary footage that Hill had shot and developed. In addition to her early use of footage of Florestine's house in segment 5, footage that also includes



FIGURE 21. Helen Hill, *The Florestine Collection* storyboard.

images of Florestine's nephew, Dwight Carter, at her house, Hill planned to include footage of Florestine's grave in segments 25 and 26. Bridging documentary and animated components, Hill planned to add a "scratched-on-film glimpse of a spirit" and a "scratched-on-film flower" to the hand-processed graveyard shots. Thus she invited viewers to travel between the indexical and drawn traces of Florestine's world, and between the distinct technical skills of Florestine and Hill, both by dissolving the scratched flowers into live-action collage shots of the actual dress fabric and through the analogy she establishes between "found" dresses and films.

In sequences 17 and 18, Hill employed abstract drawn animation to represent Florestine's interior dream space: "Florestine Kinchen falls into a dream of falling flowers" and "Falling flowers form into dress patterns." Even before Katrina, and in tension with her own analogical paradigm, Hill was working to distinguish Florestine's motivations for fabric reuse from those of Hill's DIY community, as shown in a flood-damaged page where she notes: "reason for DIY → Ms. F.K's reason."⁵⁸ Katrina forcefully underscored the political importance of this differentiation. One post-Katrina *Florestine* script fragment begins with reflections on the freedom to

move with one's possessions as a racial privilege, giving the emerging film a quite different tone: "For two long weeks, we watched New Orleans on television. . . . As we watched the people of new orleans [*sic*] chanting for help and being called refugees, Paul realized that the evacuation was the ultimate white flight. Many people with the ability left with all their resources, leaving New Orleans to fend for itself. A few days after the hurricane, many of the people left behind tried to walk out of New Orleans, into Jefferson or across the river to Algiers. They were blocked by police, who explained that they didn't want another Superdome/ a Superdome problem in Algiers."⁵⁹ This new version of the script also contains Hill's notes on a January 11, 2006, episode of NPR's *All Things Considered* in which John Burnett discusses the uneven impact of Katrina on historically Black universities and the displacement of long-standing Black communities by white people after the storm: "deeply African-American city, Xavier Dillard, oldest Black neighborhood, highest proportion of native born Blacks in any Southern city . . . after Katrina, not welcome back, 2/3 Black before the storm, now mostly white." On the other side of this paper, Hill scribbled: "New Orleans was drowning before Katrina . . . corrupt police department, public housing system, public school system." She was determined to go back to the city, and her notes suggest a film becoming much more explicitly engaged with racism and the infrastructure of inequality.

Though this evolution could easily have moved the film in the direction of documentary realism, these issues instead seem to have moved Hill more deeply into the abstraction that marks segments 19, 20, 27, 28, and 29, which feature collage shots of the pattern combinations in Florestine's found dresses, as well as close-up montages of her designs' distinctive features, such as loops of thread instead of buttonholes and decorative sleeve and hem edges. After Katrina, Hill developed this element during a California-based residency, suggesting that it continued to matter within the more explicitly political framework of the evolving script. She produced images that Gailunas describes as "very nice moving dress collage—faster and faster with chaos."⁶⁰ Though this footage documents the beauty and color of Florestine's dresses, it simultaneously disrupts viewers' access to them as consumable, sentimental objects, holding at a distance what Miles calls "the contemporary market in Black heritage items."⁶¹

Hill did not readily identify with the documentary film community, although she engaged with it in March 2006 when she and her damaged films participated in the Orphan Film Symposium in Columbia. Within that community, there is a well-developed dialogue about the history and ethics of incorporating found films, including home movies, into new works.⁶² While amateur material can, as Jacqueline Stewart has shown, supplement absences in film archives that reflect racial biases in archiving decisions, it also raises complex issues about authorship, privacy, and the relationship between public and private histories, especially when the provenance of the objects is unclear.⁶³ Hill's film in progress put these questions about film into dialogue with the dresses that she had come upon and

taken. Though found movies may seem clearly to differ from Florestine's dresses because of film's indexical qualities, the clarity of this difference is complicated by what Jaimie Baron describes as the "noise" that unprovenanced found movies convey. The distinction is then further blurred by Miles's discussion of clothes making as a form of self-expression and assertion in situations where other forms of communication and being are blocked, and by her claim that another person's things have the potential—albeit not guaranteed—to generate empathy and "social glue" and to operate "in the service of compassion and communal life."⁶⁴

Hill's comparison of found films and dresses activates questions of how items of clothing communicate across time and who does or does not have the right to throw things away privately. Since 1988, unless a state and city pass local ordinances to the contrary, the curb has been legally designated as a space where the right to privacy disappears and trash left there has been declared to be "public domain." As the Supreme Court put it when defending "warrantless trash searches," "It is common knowledge that plastic garbage bags left along a public street are readily accessible to animals, children, scavengers, snoops, and other members of the public."⁶⁵ Historically, Miles reminds us, trash is an equity issue: "Compared to other groups with a stability afforded by earnings, wealth, or racial privilege, Black people's possessions were more likely to wind up in dump pits and rag bins as families lost elder members, moved on, or were pushed out during the height of Jim Crow segregation and racially motivated violence"—something that is equally relevant today.⁶⁶

When considering the status of objects within the context of animation, it is important to note Miles's observation that discarded "moveables," including possessions like dresses, can contain traces of the personhood of people who have lived in the shadow of an institution—slavery—that treated people like objects.⁶⁷ "In the U.S. South," Miles suggests, "dress 'became a language' in which enslavers and enslaved were fluent"; and such objects have the potential to "speak" in a way that allows historians to "backstitch a path" to the owners.⁶⁸ Writing about a sack decorated with embroidered text written/sewn by an enslaved woman but found by a white woman at a flea market, Miles states, "Saving this sack so that it could arrive at a point where we can together reflect on its meanings has required an all-hands-on-deck ethos despite the complications of racial politics. The sack still carries a burden of layered power relations, but it also contains within its preservation history a model for repurposing that past and for regenerating relationships as we engage in work of shared purpose across racial and regional lines."⁶⁹ Florestine's dresses "speak" of a life lived at a later moment in history than that of the sack, one that began in 1906 and ended in 2001. Although the racialized histories of trash as well as of appropriation provide important backdrops for grappling with the complexity of "found" materials, especially across racial lines, Miles pointed out to me in conversation that many things have yet to be determined about Florestine's dresses: not simply why they were thrown away but even *if* they were thrown away.

For it remains an open possibility, especially given that Hill found them on Mardi Gras morning, that the dresses were set out not as trash but as a gift to the people of the city on a day of dressing up, a fitting way to honor the life of a recently deceased dressmaker who had partly defined herself, like Hill, through her clothes, most notably on religious feast days.⁷⁰ There is an incomplete, dispersed, and ongoing story of the dresses Hill found—some were distributed to friends after Hill's death, a couple are in the McKissick Museum, some Hill lost in the flood, and some are carefully folded in the home of Hill's mother, awaiting archival decisions—as well as uncertainty about whether the dresses Hill found represented the totality of Florestine's collection. Perhaps people had already helped themselves to some of Florestine's dresses before she arrived; perhaps some still remain in the possession of Florestine's family. These gaps in knowledge are part of the unfinished legacy of Florestine's sewing, Hill's film about it, and indeed this essay about the film.

In the wake of Katrina, Hill planned for Gailiunas to map the narrative's key locations to give increased attention to the spatial politics of the city and her film. She had also begun to explore the temporal complexities of her animated objects, including Florestine's dresses, twice salvaged by Hill, and the flood-drenched remnants of Hill's own creative life. In a page of notes on the topic of "What Was Learned," Hill muses: "how strange houses are → time capsules, frozen time / After the flood, nature healed while the insides festered away." Her notes return to this theme of preserved time—"How strange and fragile houses are / There was shelter and now these time capsules"—and then a document entitled "New Script," full of crossed-out and reworked sentences, contemplates how such a concept might open the film:

~~I lived in New Orleans before the hurricane.~~

It seems a long time ago, before the hurricane, when I used to say to Paul,

~~Imagine if everyone left New Orl~~

I think if all the people left New Orleans for a week, nature would take over.

No problem. It'd be easy. It's already trying, it's already half done.

Silhouette in a car.

Time lapse . . . too tall sunflowers and paper houses.⁷¹

Such speculative, temporally unconventional thinking, where past, present, and future exist in imaginative connection with each other, aligns with Hill's animation pedagogy. For example, in the "Absolutely Required Animation Survey" that she always assigned at the end of her courses, she asks students, "If you had to change places with one of the animators whose work we saw, which one would you choose and why?"⁷²

Hill's answer would almost certainly have been Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981), who inspired her use of cutout silhouette animation, including in this film, where she planned to use silhouettes to depict Mardi Gras, her own discovery of the dresses, Florestine sewing and cooking in her home, and Hill's interviews with Florestine's

congregation. Reiniger's role in avant-garde film history has been underestimated because of critical biases against narrative animation, work for children, and women's filmmaking, and because of an oversimplified view of her use of what Katherine Rochester describes as "oriental ornament."⁷³

This is how Hill explains her decision to use silhouettes in her Rockefeller application for the Florestine Project: "Pioneered by the German animator Lotte Reiniger, this style of animation involves the movement of hinged paper cutouts, cut from black paper and lit from behind. I feel this delicate, old-fashioned style would be appropriate. Also the absence of details seems appropriate since I never met Ms. Kinchen."⁷⁴ Though Hill invokes Reiniger, the filmmakers' approaches are distinct. While Reiniger saw silhouettes as "a true and unquestionable likeness of the sitter" representing with "complete accuracy" the portrait's subject, Hill emphasizes her silhouettes' absence of detail to underscore that she did not know Florestine, thereby distancing herself from the history of racializing and stereotyping operations enacted through drawn outlines that Kara Walker has so rigorously and persistently engaged.⁷⁵

Hill's use of abstraction in her puppets interacts with the way the labor and art of the puppet animator position her in relation to those she animates. Reiniger describes the puppeteers of Chinese shadow theater as "players" because they do so much more than manipulate their puppets, and regarding the animation of animals, she advises, "You must not copy a naturalistic movement, but must feel the movement within yourself, for when you will have to animate an animal, you will have to be that animal, moving as it does."⁷⁶ This idea of the animator becoming or enacting (two different things) the animated subject anticipates how Hill's most influential animation teacher at Harvard, Suzan Pitt, understood the relationship between animator and subject: "One thing that many people don't understand about animation is the way the animators . . . the artists who create the motion for a given character are really the actors."⁷⁷ Hill's Florestine Project raises the question of how this paradigm works when the character is a Black woman, the animator a white woman, and the context New Orleans, with its long history of cross-racial performance.

Hill described herself as "a romance activist," and while the proliferation of hearts in her animated work is partly responsible for the rosy version of Hill that I hope to revise, her work undoubtedly invites viewers to move between hearts and history, love and sentiment.⁷⁸ Writing about the transmission of love across generations of enslaved African American women through material objects, Miles states boldly: "We forget that love is revolutionary. The word, cute and over-used in American culture, can feel at times like a stuffed animal devoid of spirit. . . . But love does carry profound meanings."⁷⁹ Lauren Berlant suggests that the word *love* "is the enemy of memory," a feeling that can, when channeled through what they call "institutions of intimacy," organize "life and the memory of life" in ways that frequently disappoint or fail. As Berlant shows in their study of American

melodrama and sentimentality, there will always be excesses and displacements within these sites of failure, landscapes of feeling inextricably bound up with issues of race, power, and history.⁸⁰ And yet these excesses, these “smoldering remains” of sentimentality, can also function, they suggest, as “a resource, an unfinished event,” “archives of tactics for being undefeated,” places from which to imagine how “to become not-something” and “to unlearn a way of being.”⁸¹

Hill’s unfinished project of animating the silhouette form and the handmade, multipatterned dresses of Florestine Kinchen—patterns that, depending on context, might invoke West African clothing design, jazz rhythm, an anticapitalist culture of the homemade, poverty, or the patchwork clothing that is a hallmark of the American minstrel show—emerges as a film in progress being constructed out of the “smoldering remains” of American sentiment.⁸² Like the patterns of Kinchen’s dresses, the silhouette too is laden with cross-racial histories. This makes the silhouette a polyvocal medium with the potential, whether intentional or not, to (inter)(in)animate image histories involving the craftwork of white middle-class women from the South, physiognomy, the pioneering portraits of Moses Williams, Sojourner Truth’s insistent control over her own image, and Kara Walker’s fearless engagement of the violence of interracial “love” and stereotype.⁸³ In the absence of a finished film by Hill, it is not possible to know definitively how she would have formally engaged these polyvocalities, but her archive makes clear that she was increasingly attentive to them.

In addition to attending to the diverse meanings of the dresses and the silhouette form, Hill’s Florestine Project became increasingly engaged with the spoken words—and silences—of Florestine’s community. Dialogue with Florestine’s community had always been a part of the project, as the 2004 Rockefeller application makes clear: “I hope to include some recordings of Florestine Kinchen’s family and friends. The Reverend of her church is arranging a meeting of some of its older members to tell me about Florestine Kinchen.”⁸⁴ Though the film *Gailiunas* finished includes only snippets of the recordings that Hill made on February 13, 2005, at the Second Free Baptist Mission Church, the tape made that day did survive the hurricane.⁸⁵ The original recording reveals much about Kinchen and her circle—about the things she said and liked to do, about how she moved and related to others. It also reflects some aspects of how Kinchen’s community regarded Hill’s project, how Hill’s conversations with church members shaped Hill’s subsequent plans for the film’s development, and how openly Hill shared with the church community her concerns about the project, her questions about Florestine, and her aspirations for the film.⁸⁶ Though it is impossible to know how, or even whether, Hill would have finished the film had she lived, these recordings help to fill out a picture of Florestine Kinchen while also giving some sense of the direction in which Hill’s project was moving and a taste of the voices she hoped to amplify more.

Miles suggests that historians need “to learn the language absences speak” in order to resist “the default in which historical gaps feed contemporary

forgetfulness.”⁸⁷ And for this reason, as I conclude this essay, I turn to the voices of Florestine’s community, to the memories as well as refusals that they shared. Leonie Mims notes that Florestine was usually late for church; Frank Moran describes how, when the choir sang, she did “her famous Kinchen step.” Lorraine Payton reports that Florestine loved to cook and to sew quilts as well as dresses, although her eyesight had been failing late in her life. She never accepted a ride home, sometimes saying, “I’m old but I’m not cold!” Vera M. Dyer remembers that Florestine carried a cloth pouch of chewing tobacco “like the baseball players do . . . and she would put it in her jaw”! Beverly Ray, Pastor Warren Ray’s wife, reports that “she got sick all of a sudden and then she died. Before that, she never missed a Sunday.” Mrs. Ray adds that Florestine’s death came as a real shock. With Reverend Ray’s brother and choir member Ronald Ray, Hill discusses the possibility of returning to the church for a choir rehearsal, perhaps to record either Florestine’s favorite songs or the songs sung at her funeral. Lori Adams gives her explicit approval for Hill’s project, stating, “I think it’s wonderful that you’re doing a story because she was beautiful and she had such an infectious smile. . . . I’m glad you’re doing this and I’d like to be able to see it when you’ve finished.” Florestine’s nephew, Dwight Carter, says that his aunt was known by her family as “Aunt Ticy,” that she was one of seventeen children, and that her son, Kinchen, preceded her in death. Carter offers to take Hill and Gailiunas to the house that Florestine had lived in, and that visit is documented in flood-damaged footage included in the finished film. In many of the conversations, Hill expresses her concern to connect with living family members, and when she finally meets Carter, she exclaims, “I’m so glad to meet you because I wanted to make sure it was ok with the family.” A few moments later, she adds, “I’d love to meet any living relatives. I wonder if I should get your phone number. . . . That would be great if I could interview your mother or [Florestine’s] grandchildren if I could.” Carter’s silence in response to her questions about further family meetings, which contrasts with his openness to showing Hill and Gailiunas Florestine’s home, suggests that not everyone was as glad to talk about Florestine or to Hill as those who appear on the tape are. I want to end by lifting up the unknown stories carried by the silences of those who chose not to stay after or attend the service, who refused Hill’s invitations to talk, whom she did not know to invite, or who had already passed away. In those silences lie other stories, perhaps some too difficult to tell, or simply not for viewers of Hill’s film, about Florestine, her dresses, and the worlds we continuously make and undo.