



## ***The Fits: A Structure of Feelings***

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What alternative knowledge about the expressive and perceptive dimensions of "black" film, viewer, and video essay bodies might videographic criticism provide? This work uses *The Fits* (2015) to explore this question and the relationship between the material coherence of its filmic components, the manipulation of its audiovisual data, and its preteen protagonist's body.

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### Creator's Statement

In a way, my sensorial thinking about the place and affective attributes of Blackness in the “black” film and video essay began six years ago when I became curious about how the affordances of nonlinear video editing software might allow us to analyze how certain film bodies are often racialized and categorized as “black,” even when their directors are not. I was deeply interested in Vivian Sobchack’s (1992) extension of Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) philosophy of perception, specifically her phenomenological account of a film having an embodied existence and her later work (2004) on the multisensory meaning-making cinesthetic subject. Inspired by her theorization of cinema as a corporeal dialogue between film and viewer, I began to wonder three things. First, how were identity categories implicitly present in the ways meaning was made through embodied (film and viewer) viewing? Next, what if video essays participated in this exchange through their own embodied practices, by responding to film’s gestures with affective and rhythmic articulations in their sensuous language? Lastly, how might dominant discourses of black embodiment complicate the theoretical frameworks we use to understand the film body?

When I came across Anna Rose Holmer’s *The Fits* (2015), I was struck by how it drew Black girl dance choreography into conversation with the recurring trope of mass psychogenic illness, which, in the context of girlhood hysteria cinema, often operates as a charged site where unresolved anxieties and contradictions related to gendered embodiment, sexual desires and norms, and adulthood play out. To my mind, this juxtaposition both echoed and unsettled a longstanding visual grammar of contagious hysteria that privileged white femininity as its aesthetic default and preserved racialized notions of childhood innocence. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) and *The Falling* (Carol Morley, 2014) don’t explicitly engage race; however, the films’ aesthetic choices are historically tied to classed ideals of white femininity, and these details

shape how the characters' hysteria is expressed and interpreted as corporeal protests against patriarchal authority. My early videographic exploration of these tensions, "Fits + Starts: Gestures Towards Feminine Development" (2018), used Sobchack's framework of situated embodiment to concentrate on these gendered dimensions and the video essay form's capacity for expressing this embodied resistance. Still, I found myself compelled to consider how the film's portrayal of the mysterious illness-as-girlhood rite-of-passage was shaped by the intersections of blackness and gender. But I remained unsure what, if anything, in *The Fits*' representation could be read as specifically Black, beyond the racial identities of its characters.

I aimed to explore whether videographic "material thinking" (Grant 2014), in allowing us to explore gendered experiences of embodiment, might also offer expressive pathways for revealing the aesthetic and affective contours of cinematic blackness and how these intersect with the recurring tropes of hysteria in girlhood narratives. Even so, I also considered whether such inquiries risked reinscribing essentialist assumptions—framing race as a fixed signifier rather than a fluid and context-dependent construct within cinematic affect. To examine these concerns more closely, I drew from scholarship by Gillespie (2016), Gates (2018), and Raengo (2012) that the idea of "black" in "black art" and "black film" was often about matters of representation and reception: chiefly the verisimilitude or authenticity of the film's symbolic framework, its connections with black communities, or its status as a catachrestic extension of the actors' or filmmakers' bodies. Thus, my video essay "*The Fits*: A Structure of Feelings" searches for this expressive grammar and what it might reveal about the formal architectures of black hysteric girlhood imagery in Holmer's film.

Patricia White (2017) similarly argues that *The Fits*' portrayal of embodied Black girlhood both resists conventional readings of hysteria as a form of gender protest and calls for a more intersectional interpretation of the girls' gestures. For White, examining how race complicates gendered protest in the film means not only attending to how resistance manifests symbolically for these young dancers in the context of #BlackLivesMatter, but also unpacking the complex meanings associated with sensationalized images of Black bodies marked as unruly, needing containment (2017: 26). Rizvana Bradley (2018) takes a different approach in her consideration of choreography, protest, and dance in *The Fits* in two striking ways. First, Bradley reframes American state-sanctioned systems of oppression as a kind of choreography rehearsed across institutions and against which Black people's embodied resistance takes multiple forms, including the gestures of black social dance. Then, she examines and critiques Susan Leigh Foster's (2003) work on the choreography of

1960s lunch counter protests, which posits that the activists choreographed non-violent responses in anticipation of racist violence from citizens and state agents to challenge dominant narratives that constructed their Black bodies as inherently threatening. Citing Foster's eleven questions about choreography and protest, Bradley challenges the idea that all movement—whether trained, virtuosic, or everyday—is equivalent, by arguing that this flattening of embodied experience wrongly suggests choreography can fully shape protest's meaning. Instead, she draws parallels between the rich gestural vocabulary of Black social dance and the improvisational nature of Black embodied resistance (2018: 22). She argues that as archives of historical and ongoing forms of oppression, the movement of Black bodies, such as those of Toni and her peers, gestures toward an insurgent embodiment and enacts a grammar of defiance that refuses to be contained by structural violence.

These readings are compelling. However, I would like to suggest that something else may be at work here: the film's departure from the class-based signifiers that shaped earlier cinematic portrayals of girl hysteria (e.g., boarding schools), coupled with the absence of clear external constraints (e.g., colonial femininity, institutional discipline, medicalization of intense girlish emotions), opens space for reading their fits not as pathology or protest alone, but as gestures toward alternative ontologies of embodiment and affect. In other words, the Blackness of *The Fits*' hysterical girls embodies "the skin in the genre," a concept Samantha N. Sheppard (2020) uses to describe how Black characters in films disrupt traditional generic conventions and aesthetics. White hints at this possibility when she likens the drill team's dance battles and a girl's sudden seizure to "a Pentecostal service or possession ceremony," which I argue accounts for the fits' contagious effects (28). Jayna Brown's (2021) exploration of *melting time*—the ecstatic moments wherein boundaries between selves dissolve—and her linking of Black female mystics' rigorous self-discipline to acts of spiritual surrender also offer a compelling framework for interpreting the drill team's fits as radical expressions of selfhood. In this sense, the dancers' rigorous training and precise choreography become the means through which a communal self is both accessed and performed, where the discipline of mastering timing and gesture serves as a portal to *melting time* in its choreographic and ecstatic forms. In the film's concluding sequence, Toni's fits enable her to experience *melting time*: we temporarily gain access to her interiority, which shows her performing perfectly with the dance team despite having previously struggled to master the choreography.

Methodologically, my video essay draws inspiration from Bradley's engagement with Foster to structure its videographic argument about Toni's Black hysteric girlhood in two ways. I reframe six of Foster's questions about choreography and protest because

they compel us to consider what these Black girl bodies signify in this genre film. Black girls in the real world are routinely subjected to adultification processes, characterized by perceptions that their bodies and voices are inherently inappropriate and disruptive and that they are older and less deserving of care than white girls of the same age (Epstein, Black, and González 2017). By contrast, *The Fits*' diegesis is marked by cultural and racial insularity, centering Black girlhood within a closed ecosystem that strategically positions Toni and her peers outside such racialized media and political narratives. As a result, many of the gendered signifiers Toni observes, evaluates, and adopts are shaped by and embedded within black cultural traditions. I also loop the sound of Toni's boxing gloves, not just striking a pad but "giving dap," a symbol of Black male unity, to her brother/sparring partner. This percussive element reminds us that the masculine space Toni frequents is Black, and it places my video essay in conversation with both the "contemplative tradition of Black essay films" (Raengo and Cramer 2020) and Black musical techniques, such as the temporal manipulations of "chopping and screwing," looping, and sampling. Together, I use these interventions to explore the "spontaneous and pre-determined" movements of young Black bodies on one hand and the video essay and film bodies on the other (Foster 2003: 397).

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## Biography

Desirée de Jesús is an assistant professor of communication and media studies at York University, an arts curator, a video essayist, and a film programmer. Her research-creation projects use experimental animation and critical fabulation to unmake and remake surveillance records of police violence against Black girls. Her co-led community-based work employs participatory visual methodologies to map the geographies of Black Canadian girlhood and the experiences of Toronto-based girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her curatorial and programming work has been featured at The Black Arts Centre, Toronto Metropolitan University, Concordia University, and the Toronto International Film Festival.

## Review by Raquel Gates, Columbia University

I find this to be a compelling videographic essay on *The Fits*, one that offers a strong and elegant argument and an evocative style. As a film that already evades some of the more clichéd narrative and stylistic conventions of the coming-of-age story and the sports film, this essay has found a form of presentation that feels more capable of engaging with *The Fits* than the traditional written article. In particular, I find the author's decision to present the visuals against the repeated sonic landscape of punches hitting boxing mitts (and then the absence of this sound) to be brilliant and effective. Moreover, the shift from analysis of the film's form to a broader question of the relationship between film form and *film studies form* was incredibly compelling. Overall, I am excited to see this piece published and look forward to teaching it in my

classes. I am waiving anonymity and am happy to be contacted by the author should they have any questions or comments about my report. The essay's self-reflective nature on the possibilities of the video essay is convincing and well-executed, and suggest the possibilities of the form for the field of film and media studies.

### **Review by Catherine Grant, Aarhus University**

In her highly accomplished video essay "*The Fits: A Structure of Feelings*," first publicly screened to deserved acclaim on a panel at the 2024 Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference in Boston, Desirée de Jesús successfully builds on phenomenological models of cinematic experience regarding the "film body." She does this, as she argues in her admirable maker's statement, in order to think sensorially about the place and affective attributes of Blackness in the "black" film *and* video essay. In my view, this dual media focus is original and compelling—indeed, I feel goosebumps every time I watch this focus pivot, and the meta level open up, at the midpoint of the video. For me, then, "*The Fits: A Structure of Feelings*" is eminently worthy of publication on several sets of scholarly grounds, not least of which is its virtuosic self-reflexivity as a video essay.

I'd like to highlight just two of the connected sensorial techniques De Jesús employs in her videographic meta-endeavour: "reframing" (a term she uses in her statement) and what I think of as "re-sounding." Visual techniques of reframing (and re-siting) operate in different ways in this video essay, including through the changing sizes of screens, the generative montages of split- or multi-screen arrays, and the strategic superimposition of shots from different parts of the film. But I was particularly struck by how De Jesús reframes, re-sites, and re-colors—visually and semantically—the textual material of quotations about bodies, choreography, and protest from Susan Leigh Forster's 2003 article on those topics as cited by Rizvana Bradley in her 2018 essay on *The Fits* ("Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion"). De Jesús repeats and performs variations on her (re-)citations a number of times throughout the video, where, on each occasion, they accompany different sequences from the film *The Fits*. In their last repetition, or re-citation, in the second half of the video, De Jesús removes her earlier quotation marks, and presents versions in each of which some of Foster's original nouns or subject pronouns are replaced—and reframed—by the phrase "[film and video essay bodies]," thus re-orienting the viewer to their newly meta function.

This textual cut-and-paste technique seems to me to be fascinatingly similar to De Jesús's avowed approach to her marvellously composed videographic soundscape, largely formed by rhythmically re-purposing the score and soundtrack of *The Fits*

through brilliantly precise acts of sampling and looping. In her statement, De Jesús characterises her “percussive” authorial interventions in this regard as being in conversation with “both the ‘contemplative tradition of Black essay films’ (Raengo and Cramer, 2020) and black musical techniques, such as the temporal manipulations of ‘chopping and screwing’, looping, and sampling.”

These particular (reframing and re-sounding) techniques of repetition and variation, at least in the inimitably capable hands of Desirée de Jesús, are highly suggestive models of videographic creative-critical procedure. Like the remix practices of “chopping and screwing,” in “*The Fits: A Structure of Feelings*,” they prove to be especially inventive recursive editing gestures (Keating, 2020), potentially generating a rich chromaticism, captivating rhythmic holding patterns, and, through the latter, above all, the space to feel and (re-)think.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

