

SOUTH SUMMIT

20 | SOUTHERN
24 | FUTURISM

**April 23-24
2024**

South Summit is a virtual conference that seeds conversation and action around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film and media in and about the American South.



What is South Summit?

South Summit is a convening of Southern filmmakers, storytellers, funders, and institutional stakeholders held in an effort to seed conversation and action around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film & media content in and about the American South.

The American South is an expansive region, replete with storytellers and rich creative practices, and yet its stories are often misrepresented on-screen and in the media, contributing to reductive stereotypes that disempower our communities.

When we look at contemporary art created by Southern artists across disciplines, we can see ideas, dreams, and future visionings that break through reductive boundaries and narratives that depict a region marred by racial oppression and economic injustice.

Southern artists often reveal what the media doesn't—resilient communities that embrace progressive ideals and value cultural strengths, community building across differences, fighting for social justice, and espousing an increasingly expanding view of what it means to be Southern.

In our country, power and resources, both philanthropic and commercial, tend to centralize themselves on the coasts, and this is certainly true of the ecosystem of film, as an artform heavily influenced by commercial interests.

But where does that leave filmmakers who live and work in geographic regions beyond/removed/outside of those centers of power? What about those who create independent film, virtual reality experiences, and other moving image artwork that challenge the status quo? And diverse artists whose voices are less often uplifted by the mainstream film industry?

What do Southern artists need to continue to tell bold and powerful stories that have the potential to imagine new possibilities for a Southern identity—stories that have the power to shift how we, Southerners, see ourselves in the present and therefore, reshape a bold and imaginative future for our region.

In its sixth iteration, South Summit 2024 took as a theme the idea of “Southern Futurism” where we invited South-based filmmakers to deeply reflect on their future South they are working to construct in their present day work.

Taking place virtually, April 23-24, 2024, South Summit gathered local, regional, and national mediamakers, arts funders, and institutional stakeholders, to engage in robust critical conversations and actions around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film and media that shapes both extrinsic and intrinsic views of the American South. The two-day, all-virtual, all-free event featured sessions that explored the possible futures of the South and how to build present-day systems and philosophies to support an expansive Southern future.

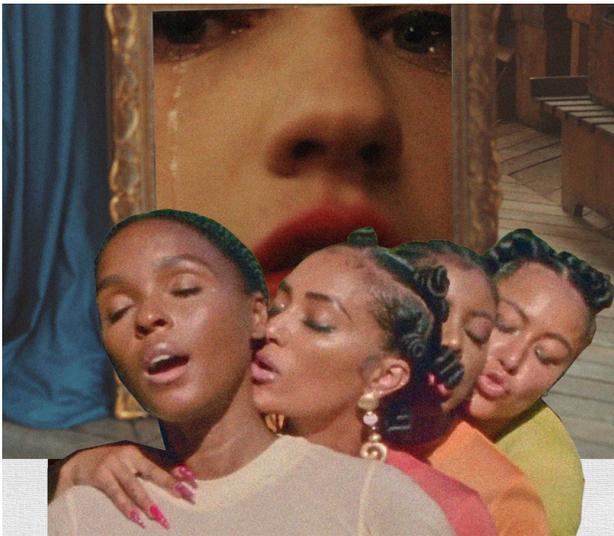
In addition to a keynote speech from producer, Lauren Domino, Academy Award- and BAFTA-nominated producer of TIME (Amazon Studios) and American Symphony (Netflix), who spoke of alternate creative paths and healing modalities that build bridges to radical future visionings, the conference featured four panel discussions and four commissioned essay readings and talks from South-based artists, all included in their entirety in this report.

What is Southern Futurism?

Southern Futurism is...radical forward-thinking and intentional world-building.

Rodneyna Hart, Museum Division Director at the Louisiana State Museum, first introduced the idea of “Southern Futurism” to our South Summit audience back in 2021, during which she was a guest on a panel of the same name, inspired by a museum exhibit she had curated. Since, the idea has taken root throughout the South as a roadmap for forward-thinking future visioning for our region.

- Southern Futurism is a South-based art and philosophy movement that seeks to envision an inclusive South, rooted in ancestral cultural practices that co-exist harmoniously and sustainably with natural ecosystems.
- Southern Futurism is built upon Dadaism and Futurism (specifically, Afro-Futurism and Indigenous-Futurism) ideals of boldly placing oneself in future-tense narrative art as means of cultural survival.



Promotional material from Hyphen Film Center Microcinema Screening Series

“Our nows are permanently etched into tomorrows, where the art of perception meets the science of time.”

**--Rodneyna Hart (LA),
originator of the phrase
“Southern Futurism”**



American Symphony (2023), produced by keynote speaker, Lauren Domino



Wild Hogs & Saffron (2024), by dir. Andy Sarjahani



Wild Hogs & Saffron (2024), by dir. Andy Sarjahani

“Our work is an act of resistance, refuting the dominant narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and fan the flames of polarization. Nuance dies in these flames.”

**-- Andy Sarjahani (AK/LA),
director/cinematographer**

Southern Futurism is... nuanced

The South has long been a fascination in the cinematic imagination. Its complicated history, set against a serene Southern landscape, is a tempting visual and emotional pulp for narratives based in or about the region. But according to Andy Sarjahani, Arkansas-born, Louisiana-based cinematographer and director, similar to trappings of a global “White Gaze”, the “Northern gaze” is equally as extractive, reductive, and ultimately harmful to folks that call the South home. In his essay, *Southern Storytelling*, Andy makes a case for narrative nuance and uses his film *Wild Hogs and Saffron* as a scaffold on which to center conversations about the multitude and richness of cultures, ideas, and perspectives of our beloved region.

Key takeaway quotes:

- “Like the translucent waters of the Buffalo River that methodically carved the limestone bluffs of the Ozarks over millions of years, stories and their ideas hold power.”
- “Whether it be poverty porn or a fixation with the caricatured toothless backwoods bigots whose self-hate and insecurity manifests in mindless ferocity towards anything that feels unknown, these projects will be rewarded by critics and gatekeepers as ‘revelatory.’ Indeed, for them it is revelatory because the critics have as little connection to our place as those who made the work.”
- “At the future South, we don’t check part of ourselves at the door. I look forward to a day when our stories don’t fixate or fetishize Otherness.”
- “We will look to our ancestors who tell us what the South has been and how we arrived here. We will consult our lived experience for answers on what the South is and what it’s becoming. We will make stories to make sense of it.”



How to Carry Water (2023), ft photography by panelist Shoog McDaniels

Southern Futurism is...rooted in community

A large part of what truly sustains the passion of filmmaking is the film-loving audience. But direct access to an engaged public can be arduous and tricky, a process that can be replete with winding and convoluted distribution channels that are increasingly becoming more restrictive. In an open discussion panel facilitated by Kentucky-based microcinema collective, Hyphen Film Center, we explored lessons learned from a leading community-based microcinema spaces that strives circumvents major distribution channels and bring filmmakers' work directly to audience members, in unique and inventive way. In true Southern Hospitality style, their model of serving refreshments made with food harvested from their collective gardens and encouraging robust post-screening conversation that elevates the themes of the screening, local Louisville filmmakers are bringing new life into the screening experience. Across the South, community-rooted collectives, such as Hyphen Film Center, are aiming to strike a balance "between the movie theater and your couch," offering a more direct and meaningful engagement for both filmmaker and audience.

The discussion included Hyphen Film Center members and filmmakers Naveen Chaubal, Demi Gardner, Fitzgerald Junior, and Bryn Silverman.

Key takeaways:

- The microcinema experience is a alternate path to streaming and "big box" distribution channels, that can help filmmakers connect directly to audience engagement and community building, placing meaningful and transformative screening experiences at the center of community-rooted distribution.
- Although sustainability within a capitalist economic structure is a challenge, redefining "success" can help expand access to community and invite likeminded collaborators who are equally passionate.

"Southern Futurism for us is about revisiting what success in the film ecosystem looks like. Together, how can we create a new way to exhibit, appreciate, and have discourse around our work? Could this lead to a new economic model for local filmmakers?"

-- Hyphen Film Center (KY)

Southern Futurism is...collective liberation

Although The South is fertile ground for bold and imaginative ideas, means and support for film production, outside of major industry hubs, can be prohibitively expensive. But New Orleans based queer, BIPOC production co-op Studio Lalala is built around principles cooperative economics and skill-based currency models that help sustain local film production. In their panel conversation, "Cooperative Filmmaking for Collective Liberation," co-op members and filmmakers Juicebox Burton, Elvira Castillo, jazz franklin, and Maya Pen led a robust discussion around exploring and implementing community-specific solutions to barriers for local film production.

Key takeaways:

- Community-rooted solutions to film production barriers are not always one-size-fits-all. Each solution is as organic as the community it sustains, expanding and contracting around the specific needs of the project and its impact goals.
- Shifting the future of set culture requires grappling with oppressive systems within present day production practices.
- Redefining currency beyond money expands collaborative possibilities.

When I think of Southern Futurism, my mind immediately turns to the tenants of Afro-futurism and the projection into a future world in which liberation is a fact, and black folx are safe, loved, and cared for and art is a vehicle to get us there. My concept of Southern futures is tied to this and a connection between all timelines, ancestors, and the elements. It's rooted in a sense of personal Sci-Fi in which we imagine the future and orient our lives to create it.

-- Lauren Domino (LA) | from keynote speech "Exercises in Time Travel"

Southern Futurism is... ancestral

Time is not linear but, rather, cyclical—and so the future is but the long arc of a collective past. In our Reel South-supported panel "Ancestral Futures," moderated by Latria Graham (SC), guests Jackie Iyari Barragan (TX), director of "Echoes of Rio" (2023), Shoog McDaniel (FL), photographer and participant in "How to Carry Water" (2023), and Karran Harper Royal (LA), genealogist and producer/participant in "Finding Us" (2023), all spoke about how ancestral legacies bind their present day work to future-tense placemaking.

Key takeaways:

- Future-tense placemaking is an act of resistance and ancestral survival.
- Our present day work will be part of a foundation the future of Southern narratives will stand upon.



Finding Us (2022), ft panelist Karran Harper Royal



Stay Here Awhile (2021), ft panelist Latria Graham



From Studio Lalala production reel



Echoes of the Rio (2023), dir. Jackie Barragan

Key Takeaways

For Artists

- The future of the South is a bold re-examination of our regional history, in service of radically imaginative solutions to past cultural shortcomings.
- Narrative art must not only reflect the times, but also interrogate contemporary issues and offer creative possibilities.
- The South is as nuanced as its landscapes and the characters it sustains.
- The South is living in the climate change future of a nation. Now, more than ever, Southern stories are a time machine for narrative futures.
- Narrative Justice is to center participant care and insist on nuance, over troupes and caricatures.
- If Southern filmmakers center their distribution goals on audience connection and impact, the full power and possibilities of distribution channels, from major streaming giants to local microcinema screenings, can be wielded to build community around your work and the action it calls for.
- As artist, thinking deeply and intentionally about the longevity and impact of our present day work is positive and necessary action towards future world-building.

For Arts institutions + Organizations

- Community-centered and community-led filmmaking entities and other community-supported institutions are the cornerstone of a thriving independent Southern storytelling community. They are instrumental in building a sustainable local film culture outside of mainstream industry spaces.
- Beyond financial support, independent southern filmmaking communities need access to safe spaces, mentorship, lab intensives, and other professional development support to help build and sustain careers outside of major media hubs.
- When it comes to workforce development initiatives, funders should resource and support programs that go beyond hiring campaigns. To address inequities within the film industry, there must be investment in training, retaining, and promoting underrepresented Southern storytellers.
- Festivals, film institutions, and funders that center niche communities are powerful and foundational in sanctuary building. Where there is a safe space that unapologetically centers a culture, a community will gather and invariably thrive.
- To combat extractive filmmaking and espouse more subtle and nuanced storytelling, support the storytellers, as well the communities, who are closest to the story.



Rodneya Hart (LA)



Andy Sarjahani (AK)



Lev Omelchenko (GA)



Amos Cochran (AK)



Maaliyah Papillion (LA)



Lauren Domino (LA)



Hyphen Film Club (KY)



Sultana Ishram (LA)



Collette "Funke" Means (LA)

Faces of South Summit



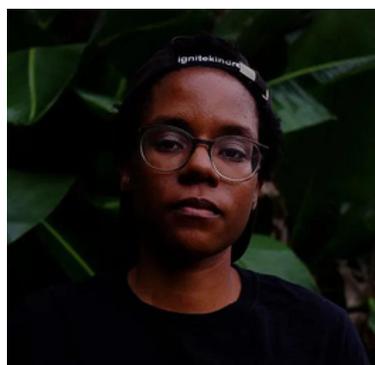
Juicebox Burnton (LA)



Maya Pen (LA)



Elvira Castillo (LA)



jazz franklin (LA)



Latria Graham (SC)



Karran Harper Royal (LA)



Jackie Barragan (TX)



Zuri Obi (LA)



Shoog McDaniel (FL)

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Keynote + Essays

The following four pieces on southern futurism were commissioned by the New Orleans Film Society for the 2024 South Summit.



Keynote Address: Exercises in Time Travel

Lauren Domino

Thank you for sharing this space with me for the next forty minutes. Thank you Zuri and The New Orleans Film Society for having me as this year's South Summit Keynote speaker. This means a lot as the seed of a career in film was sprouted as a volunteer at the New Orleans Film Festival almost twenty years ago. Before I begin, I kindly request that you have something to gather your thoughts—a pen and paper, a phone screen, or open a document tab. This is not because I will say anything groundbreaking, but I want you to have a space to jot down answers to prompts that will come in a moment.

I must admit, though honored by the invitation, I was a bit surprised as I don't always feel hyper qualified or prepared in these spaces. My sense of knowing in work and life is rarely tied to formal rules and industry standards. It's connected to animism, ancestor veneration, study, and lots of self-understanding work. I shape my way of producing through all these modes. Instead of "fake it until you make it," I have a "come as you are and let's grow together" approach. I'm bringing that to this keynote, so bear with me, and let's begin this journey together.

When I think of Southern Futurism, my mind immediately turns to the tenants of Afro-futurism and the projection into a future world in which liberation was a fact, and black folx are safe, loved, and cared for and art is a vehicle to get us there. My concept of Southern futures is tied to this and a connection between all timelines, ancestors, and the elements. It's rooted in a sense of personal Sci-Fi in which we imagine the future and orient our lives to create it.

I understand my own personal sci-fi via exercises connecting with my healthy healed ancestors, guides, the earth, and my future self; utilizing tools created by brilliant minds who shape the future in the present. One of these tools is an Oracle deck. I want to thank the brilliant Educator and Folk Herbalist Nikki Minor for introducing me to this deck, Green Gold and Ancestral Plant Spirit Oracle Deck by Star Feliz of Botanica Cimarron. It's a deck that speaks to land, ancestral connection, and listening. I asked the deck what message needed to be conveyed in this keynote and Palm was the card that popped out.

"Palm

Arecaceae

Africa, Asia, Central and South America, North America, Oceania

Seed / Venus/ The Folk Legend

I am the ethereal wing of peace. I climb high to find and ride the waves of ease and flow. When I remember I was always born free, I'm not living within a marathon cycle in order to feel free. Relax into it baby. Let birds be your teachers. And invite the solace of air as your comfort"

- Star Feliz of Botanica Cimarron

That feels pretty spot on for what we do.

I thought it would be nice to guide you through another exercise I used to connect the present and the future. A joyous exploration.

If it feels good to you, let's start by practicing a little movement to let go of anything that pulls at us. We will ground ourselves in the present moment together. I'll move my arms and hips to release my nerves. Maybe you need to release the worry of emails flooding your inbox, the stress of a project or the excited anticipation of an upcoming event. Maybe your release needs to be audible and you can hum or shout. Move in whatever way you feel called to.

Now if it feels right, take a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale.

Welcome back. Now let's pull out your pen and paper, your phone or your writing device of choice. I want you to write down an introduction. Envision yourself in the future. That could be you ten minutes from now, tomorrow, ten or fifty years from now. Let the future version of you arrive in your mind's eye. Now, introduce yourself to you. What's the future you're saying back? Where are they in the world and in their spirits?

I find it helpful to check in via self introduction. It charts my progress, marks my present, and guides me. Write down what comes to you. Here's my intro from this exercise.

I am Lauren Domino, a channeler of story, a creative doula, and an explorer of the unseen. I am joining you today from the place of my birth and current residence - Bulbancha, the place of many tongues. This city has shaped my sense of the world and my creativity. It constantly speaks to me, teaching me how to be in ritual each day and bring that reverence in all I do. Listening to the heartbeat of this city and learning its lessons in duality has shaped me and brought me to this present moment which joins us together.

Some foregrounding. I am Felton's granddaughter. She, the party starter who introduced me to all the facets of art, from trips to the opera to sneaking me into my Aunt's bar to watch drag shows and the practice sessions of the Black Masking Indians. The child of hidden artist Patricia and sci-fi book-a-day reader Louis. I was born and raised in the East. If you know you know. My father's family came from Crowley, Louisiana, and settled here in the 1950s. My mother's side of the family has always called Uptown and The Lower 9 home. There was, of course, a home before our enslavement. However, my people's resilience shaped new roots in Louisiana and built lives on its soil. I come from a people who have experienced unimaginable loss and yet find joy and connection in creation and community. All of this is in me and my work.

To speak of Southern Futurism, I have to start with my lineage to explain my relationship to time. I believe it's a spiral, and as my favorite shirt reads "We don't move through time. Time moves through us." Throughout the course of working and knowing my sister-friend Garrett Bradley particularly on the documentary feature "TIME" our conversations focused on memory as a present feeling in the body and translating that sensation into film. "TIME," and the use of personal archival and present-day verite following the Rich family and their quest for freedom replicates the time travel we do behind the scenes. Our work as documentarians is to capture memories of the past and stories unfolding in the present. We also look towards the future of what the film will become. Which upon completion and release is now a visual representation of the past. Creating in this medium makes us time travelers. Filmmaking is the way we translate the nonlinear movement of time. We must be present in our understanding of the past, and grounded in the now to co-create our relationship with the future.

The future is the present. Southern Futurism is shaped through listening, transformation, and trust. We are shaping the future now—in this moment. When I think of Southern Futurism in a film landscape, it is the lens that connects us. Have you ever worked on a project and then suddenly you could see it. Each time we weave together thoughts and visions that become art, we project into the future and bring back to the present what is needed.

I believe that as filmmakers, storytellers, and community builders we hold a sacred role. Our work helps people see themselves and the world differently. Their hope for the future or lack thereof is molded by our current lived experiences and imaginations. I believe filmmaking is a spiritual practice and a powerful healing tool. For me, healing begins with the people making the work. Success is defined by growth behind the camera, and our sense of connection to the spaces we inhabit, just as much as the stories unfolding on screen. We are the embodiment of the land and our ancestors, they pour into us and the stories we tell. To think we are alone in creation is an isolating thought.

This can be a complicated thought to hold, especially in the South where the land holds so much hurt done by the hands of some of our ancestors. The South as a region and identity is complex. It exists in the fractured polarities of life - decay and rebirth simultaneously. The South holds grief and pain that transmutes into art and celebration. It can be dizzying as Southerners constantly jumping between these polarities not knowing where to land. Questioning what to draw from when the waters seem so murky. The South is an embodiment of the knowledge that we all hold ancestral trauma and gifts. I hold these truths in both hands. They guide me on my journey of creating and understanding my place in the world. As artists and time travelers we are called to shape new pathways in the space between polarities. We are called to hold pain while speaking truth to justice and in the words of Toni Cade Bambara "make it irresistible." In the space between these contradictions is creativity and hope.

In my creative practice I try to work with filmmakers to go deeper than the surface. To sit within the hard or uncomfortable areas of the story and let it move them. To listen to what is activated within. What's calling to be recognized? How is the work transformed through our personal experiences that allows for future healing? For me this is a process of navigating through the layers with deep listening and trust. I'm so grateful for the filmmakers who've let me do this work and for whom I learn so much from and inspire me daily. I want to thank a small portion who are also some of my dearest friends: Angela Tucker, Garrett Bradley, and Ja'Tovia Gary.

I invite you all to pause for a few moments and pull out your notation instruments and get still. Let's take a deep breath and connect within to find out what messages your future self/internal knowing is trying to convey. Maybe you need to close your eyes, or put a hand over your heart. Maybe you want to move. Whatever works for you, I want you to reconnect with your future self. You've gotten their intro now let's learn more.

Going deeper than the intro, what do they want you to know, about themselves or the future world? If you have questions, ask them and get to know who you are.
Is there anything you need to know now?

I want you to jot down all that comes up. Take it all in.

In these exercises of future visioning and creating it can be really challenging to trust what's coming through. Maybe what came through clearly is "You need to create a seven part science fiction series set in Opelousas", and you're like "I don't have the time or energy and I have a fraught relationship with that place." This is where trust comes in. What doesn't make sense in the present may guide us into a future beyond our wildest dreams.

I recently produced the documentary 'American Symphony,' an intimate portrait of artists Jon Batiste and Suleika Jaouad as they use creativity as a survival mechanism in the face of personal crisis and professional success. The film is a meditation on art, love, and the creative process. It's a project I initially rejected. I took a break from the South, from my life, from emotional ruts. I packed up my things and headed to the desert in need of the dry airy climate to assist in moving through some deep seed grief. At the time I was unsure whether I would return to the South or work in film. I felt bogged down by failing at work/life balance and making a sustainable living that didn't put me in a constant anxiety loop. I got the offer for this project and though I desperately needed the money I wasn't ready to end my search for self and said no. They called again with an updated timeline and I did the exercise we just did. I got still, which for me means sitting at my altar and asking what I needed to know. What came out was clear, yes, I had to take this job.

Yes, it didn't make sense to me but I listened. What came next was the process of listening, re-examining my connection to home, and looking at the intertwining legacies of shared familial and creative connections with Jon. Calling upon those familial connections particularly my Uncle, Edward "Kidd" Jordan who would become an ancestor over the course of making the film. One of his many legacies was his constant call to live a life of purpose. In listening I discovered my work as a producer wasn't just work but my purpose. A purpose that allowed me to travel with the film and say my Uncle's name and teachings from stages around the world - breathing continued life into his legacy. A purpose that has led me here to impart the wisdom I've gained along the way. My impossible future that I ran away to find has now become my present.

As a producer I have the privilege of creating the future with each film I work on. The work of a producer/creative doula as I like to call it, helps create community. We build future worlds by putting our beliefs into practice. With each project we get to ask ourselves: What does this community look like? Who's all here? Whose voice needs to be included and heard? Are we listening? How does my community feel cared for? Are they rested and healthy? How is the work nurturing beyond a paycheck? How is the work generative? How is the work pushing forward the form and reimagining practices of the industry? Is the work liberatory?

Through knowing and action, we create new futures for ourselves, our industry, and our region. Futurism is a multi-dimensional time loop and we access it now. My favorite writers, my ancestors of vocation, Lucille Clifton and Toni Morrison both used the act of listening and channeling letting their stories come to them. Their lives and work testify to the creative futures we build from a place of connection. It isn't a struggle, but rather a wisdom that comes with ease.

Okay, take a deep breath, clear your mind, and pull out your writing paper. Take a moment to listen and channel that sense of knowing and connectivity you've accessed today. When you look forward, what does the future of your creative work and community feel like? Is there a feeling you listed that stands out to you? Is it rest, joy, abundance? Whatever it is, highlight the one that speaks loudest.

Now, how can you begin today to work towards those feelings? For example, if it's rest - how do you incorporate more rest in your creative process by taking breaks away from the work and spending time in nature.

I want the Southern Future we are creating to be expansive, inspiring, supportive, free, abundant, lush, vibrant, and ever evolving to greatness. The feeling of support is calling me. I can work towards support by sharing with my friends and community that this is what I know to be true. I can also ask them to hold me and remind me when I am filled with doubt.

Hold your answers close and find ways to incorporate those futures into your present.

The practices we shared today of listening and connecting inform our past, shift our present, and create the future. Southern Futurism is now.

Thank you.



Lauren Domino is a writer and an Academy Award and BAFTA nominated producer with a focus on the healing power of film. Her work as a producer includes *Alone*, *The Earth is Humming*, *Black Folk Don't, Like, America*, *TIME* (Amazon Studios), and *American Symphony* (Netflix). She has produced branded content and live events for *The New Yorker*, *Elle Magazine*, *The Oscars*, *Microsoft*, and *Essence Festival*. Lauren previously co-hosted the podcast *The Secret Lives of Black Women*, which was highlighted by *The New York Times* and *Forbes*.

Southern Futurism

Rodneya Hart

Futurist History

Our nows are permanently etched into tomorrows, where the art of perception meets the science of time.

Because life is cyclical, we live in a world immersed in new technological advancements, global urbanization, speed, excessive sensory input, second-skin connectivity, and rampant change. The Italian Futurists of the early 20th century created manifestos espousing their revolutionary perspectives through literature, dance, architecture, film, and other art forms. They emphasized universal dynamism, speed, technology, youth, and violence with lofty ideals anchored in the struggle to maintain a dynamic Italian intellectual class. This worldview gave way to performative bravery, idealism, and fascism and romanticized the need for war as a cultural purification that gave vitality to the human spirit. True to form, the dawn of a new century brings a revolutionary cosmology of thought, information, speed, and an urgency to create the future. As time passed, these Futurist's philosophies evolved with cutting-edge scientific discoveries to shift their mindset away from distraction to universal dynamism and quantum entanglement. They started to create art with the new knowledge that we are in no way separate but particles that all are part of an inseparable whole. We are all vibrating molecules that imperceptibly intertwine. Visual representation of dynamic movement is easily observed in the Italian and Russian Cubo-Futurism paintings and sculptures from 1912 into the 1940s.

American Futurists

Futurism hurriedly spread through Europe but was slow-moving in America. Broadly speaking, aesthetic movements die on the vine in American capitalist societies unless we can comfortably commodify them. Business owners leaped at automation from the Industrial Revolution to the cybernetic one, reinforcing that those with the money have the power. Capitalism is an economic and political system in which private owners control a country's trade and industry for profit. All motivation and future success are assessed by an annual increase in shareholders' wealth—all processes emphasizing that narratives are cosplaying power as set by the wealthy white male American who created the power dynamics. The ideal American Futurist vision uses automation, mechanization, and cyberization of the world to perpetuate extractive processes that build for the top.

It may sound extreme, yet American development always asks for a 'blood oath,' often with a thin veneer of racism, classism, and destruction. American historian Gina Plumey argues that Futurism in America was a tool to promote consumerism, promote American industrialization, and maintain nationalism. By the dawn of the Atomic Age of the mid-1940s, Futurism stimulated interest in science, grew enterprise, and sustained financial support to beat other countries in the cold war of mutual destruction that was "fought" through developing national space and defense programs.

A wealth and power line is drawn, tracing the evolution of Wall Street's shareholders from the antebellum South's wealthy white male land-owning and Northern business-owning classes. All economic values derived from America are based on capitalism; maintaining a suppressed class of the working poor is essential to its sustainability. Northern industries were often just as culpable in their extractive profit from enslaved people, poor white workers, and other minorities. "Slavery-once removed" or profiting from the ill-gotten gains of refining the raw materials from the enslaved southern poor, manufacturing products from these materials, accumulating wealth as a byproduct, and exporting nationwide the mastered skills of urban enslaved people and the working class. This new country had a 246-year head start on the accumulation of wealth by extracting slave labor and has never been comfortable with losing that moneymaker.

There is still a caveat etched into the 13th Amendment to allow imprisonment to remain as the last holdout for slavery and maintaining a large class of the working poor; viewing Futurism through a Southern lens, tinted by tradition, can result in the trafficking of modern dissonance of how the "lazy slaves" carried America's wealth on their backs. America's industrial age left many southern farms barren. For many the narrative of the American South will always be informed and confined by its history. To lift the veil, if one looks up American Futurist online today, it is a site dedicated to neo-nazi propaganda and racialized hatred.

Afrofuturism

As a museum professional and student of anthropology, I can attest that there have ALWAYS been revolts by enslaved individuals. Most were not recorded in the history books; individuals were tortured and killed, dissenting voices were silenced, and education was denied, all to maintain some semblance of dominance. There may be a mention of a significant organized revolution, but there were many more. Humankind has never given their life, liberty, or dignity without a fight. Although the term Afrofuturism was not coined until 1993, visionaries and world-builders of the African Diaspora have always existed. American Futurism takes where Afrofuturism shares. There are different ways of exercising power, and there is a clear difference from American waste, extraction, and destruction.

In contrast, Afrofuturists are creating new pathways and connections. The great migration showed that innovators and industrialists of different backgrounds had a chance at better financial mobility. Many of these brave travelers were forward-thinking, keeping history in mind while taking a distressing past and passable present yet making way for a thriving future.

Mark Dery, in 1993, coined the term Afrofuturism as a cross-section of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation—authentic acts of free people. His essay in "Black to the Future," a collection of essays written by Black scholars, encompassed past inspirations and present revolutionaries and gave latitude for contemporary future builders through literature, film, music, and all of the arts. African Americans pieced together the Pan-Afrofuturist world to connect discordant threads and make whole a people severed from their history. Afrofuturism is sharing and supporting the creatives, doers, and builders for the empowering benefit of all.

Many Black people pushed the needle forward in perception, innovation, understanding, and expectation of Black excellence. Perhaps the most impactful Afrofuturist representative in popular culture is Lt. Uhura, a polyglot, translator, and communications officer who specializes in linguistics, cryptography, and philology on the USS Enterprise starship, played by the multitalented performer Nichelle Nichols. She was representative of Earth from the United States of Africa, often speaking Swahili on the 1960s original Star Trek series. This very intentional character's name comes from the Swahili word Uhuru, meaning "freedom." Uhura represented belonging in a future world where, as far as contemporary popular literature presented, Black people were extinct.

Central to the concept of Afrofuturism are the science-fiction writers Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Nancy Farmer, who combined the technoculture and science fiction indicative of the genre today. Jazz musician Sun Ra combined Egyptian mysticism and science fiction to form a new world and mythology. Musicians and artists George Clinton, Ellen Gallagher, and Wanuri Kahiu created a physical culture and evolution in film in the 1970s. Due to these cultural forebears contemporary artists such as Solange Noles, Beyonce, Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, FKA Twigs, Janelle Monae, and Kenyan visual artist Wangechi Mutu have expanded themes incorporating cyborg, metallic, and manufactured visuals in their styles.

[Science fiction films such as 1973's *Touki Bouki*, *Space Is the Place* with music by Sun Ra, 1983 *Born in Flames*, *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *The Meteor Man* (1993), *Sankofa* (1993), *Blade* (1998), *Black Panther* (2018), *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *Cosmic Slop* (1994), *Afronauts* (2014), *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), *Blacula* (1972), *I, Robot* (2004), *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, *Candyman* (1992), *Hancock* (2008), *Rain the Color of Blue with a Little Red in It* (2015), *Star Wars*, *De Javu* (2006), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), and so much more.

Even when it is a short-lived television show, the world notices: *Love Craft Country* (2020), *Bright* (2017), *Cleverman* (2016), *Raising Dion* (2019), *Afro Samurai* (2007), *Star Trek*, and various episodes of *What If...?*. Other media like comic books and graphic novels such as *Bitter Root*, *Wild Seed*, *Nubia*, *Dawn*, *Harriette Tubman Demon Hunter*, *Blood and Bone!*, *Love Bites*, *Patient Zero*, *The Talented Ribkins*, *Republica: Temple of Color and Sound*, *Midnight Arcade*, *Not So Super* by Jacques Nyemb, *Lashawn Colvin's Beautiful Soldiers*, and one I am excited about, *Children of Blood*.]

Southern Futurism

The American South propaganda machine perpetuates, "First, the South is portrayed as a region inhabited by an ignorant, economically depressed populace. Second, the South is portrayed as an almost magical realm of mint juleps and hoop skirts." The sleepy South has never celebrated future innovation, especially that which could come from free people of color thinking, creating, and thriving.

Not only did many formerly enslaved people liberate themselves, as soon as the Civil War was won Black leaders emerged as government officials, teachers, and thought leaders to give a voice during Reconstruction.

Southern Futurism is a worldview, a thought experiment, and a manifestation of radical forward-thinking and intentional world-building.

Rarely in the history of human slavery has there been such an insidious campaign so intentional as to break down the human psyche and rebuild a class of dehumanized automation and unflinching servitude. Because of these stolen names, traditions, culture, and history, a future had to be made on a bedrock of unshakable faith in a manifested future. Being a descendant member of the African American enslaved diaspora means understanding separation and 'skinship.' The detachment from our origin story has been purposely stolen, blotted, and blurred.

Southern Futurism is creating community, language, folklore, and, for many, the tools of education, liberation, and abundance, as the only grand savior of Southern Life.

Southern Futurism unveils profound truths, such as the understanding that Europeans did not import slaves, they abducted a portion of the geniuses and strength of Africa. For generations, African Americans could not hold patents. Their slaveholders also claimed their innovation for themselves, as ownership of a person also meant ownership of that person's intellectual property. It is not until our modern world that we discover lesser-known connections to innovation and African American contribution.

Southern Futurism is indigenous technology and innovation that have been developing out of necessity, leading to a better quality of life, herbal remedies, and life-sustaining solutions. The African American power model is abundance-based. It is built on a cultural perspective of "making something from nothing."

Southern Futurism is an updated view of the responsibility of our cultural institutions. We are no longer the keepers of all knowledge; in this information age where all things are accessible, we have to be the trusted source that has sought and verified the stories and retells them not from the view of the victor but that of the truth; chips fall as they may. To modernize and find new relevance for our growing audience, museums must be flexible and responsive to the changing world, continue developing non-traditional partnerships and collaborations, be willing to try innovative technology, and rapidly respond to developing interests. Preservation of our material culture is critical.

A portion of Southern Futurist thought has to look at the past and factor contingencies. "The Middle Passage" is the path that human traffickers took when abducting humans from Africa and then submitting them to an inhumane life of every abuse imaginable. The exact path hurricanes born in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Africa follow to wreak havoc on America's land south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Climate volatility due to human-aided climate change disproportionately affects the coastal South. If a ground can be cursed, a path can be haunted, and cosmic prices are paid in a magical-realistic way, could hurricanes wreak energetic tragedy as a cosmic comeuppance? Likely not; those with the most to lose continue to lose the most. Our present is the outcome of past privileged decision-making, neglecting the benefits of future labor. When we take away the consequences of other people's choices, we live the unconsidered and dismissed future.

This is the end of the world, but the panic is manufactured. The people who create the propaganda are losing their grip on the world. Nature will reclaim it, or we will do right by our home. Either way, the planet will be here, and this rock will spin. We conjure gravity in our creative process if we are alive, plugged in, and gain meaningful insight. As creators our call to action is to create compelling narratives, powerful stories, whole characters, and meaningful art. These are the future characters your fans will cosplay, fall in love with, disdain, and feel seen by. If we are not architects of our future, the world will happen to us rather than develop for and with us!

Reference:

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Rodneya Hart, MBA. In January 2019, Hart accepted the position of Museum Division Director for Louisiana State Museum, overseeing four museums spanning the state. She has been strategic in the growth of the local cultural community as a director, an exhibitions manager, and a curator for various galleries and museums. She volunteers her time with various cultural boards of directors and was a Governor appointed a Louisiana State Arts Council member. Upon completing an MBA in March 2023, Hart has set her sights on broadening life experiences.

A City in the Forest

Lev Omelchenko

"This struggle to defend the trees and forests is above all a struggle against imperialism. Because imperialism is the arsonist setting fire to our forests and our savanas." -Thomas Sankara

PART ONE

On September 8, 2021, the Atlanta City Council is slated to vote on whether to lease roughly 350 acres of the city's South River Forest to the Atlanta Police Foundation, a non-profit funded by some of the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the country. The city proposes that APF will clear cut the land and build the Public Safety Training Facility AKA "Cop City," which if built, would be the largest police training facility in the country.

City Council meets on Zoom—still in pandemic protocol—and must listen to 17 hours of public comment from their constituents. 99% are against Cop City. Activists organize protests at the homes of city councilors who might be swayed to vote "No." I attended one with my camera on what would become the first shoot day of my feature film.

About a dozen people gather and chant. Eventually the cops show up. After some intimidation, a cop tackles an activist, and all of a sudden cops are handcuffing everyone.

A cop points at me and says, "Get him."

I say, "I'm media," but it doesn't matter. I'm arrested with everyone else.

I spend the night in jail talking with the men in my cell, all Black men except for those arrested with me. The men are all held for petty misdemeanors—riding a bike on the sidewalk, not paying a court fine, not cooperating with a police officer who accused the man of "looking like a drug dealer."

I get out of jail around 4am in the pouring rain. The next day the city council votes 10-4 to build Cop City.

Perhaps the city thought that the vote would spell the end of the resistance. They were wrong.

On November 20th, 2 bulldozers are torched in the forest and the news spreads like wildfire.

A week later, November 27th I show up in the parking lot of Intrenchment Creek Park, the public park side of the forest that is slated to be demolished.

Chief Chebon Kernell and about four dozen Mvskoke people have come from Oklahoma to perform a ceremonial stomp dance in the forest, and to stand in solidarity with the movement. I'm asked to document the historic event.

The Mvskoke people chant and stomp their people's songs around a small fire, in a forest renamed by the movement to Weelaunee, a Mvskoke word for "Brown Water."

On April 20, 2022—Earth Day—the Mvskoke return to Atlanta, where a forest occupation is now underway. In the shadow of the pandemic, with so many venues and DIY spaces closed, the forest becomes the biggest community space in the city. An incredible infrastructure springs up - kitchens, tree houses, barricades, medical care. The forest is home to raves on the banks of the creek, self defense classes and moonlit adventures between the trees. This is now a full on land defense.

I help record a summit between the Mvskoke folks and local Atlanta environmentalists, faith leaders, and organizers. That morning, before the summit, I accompany Meeko Chebon and a group of school children to the "Mother Tree" - an ancient oak tree that activists have made into a sacred site. Chebon calls the tree "Bosi," or Grandmother, because she was likely around during the time of his people's ethnic cleansing. He says, "She probably hasn't heard my people's language since that time."

He asks the children to hold hands around the tree and says a prayer in his language.

I feel that I am witnessing something transcendent in this forest.

That Summer I spend time in the encampment with a 16mm camera. Security protocols are quite intense in the community, so I decide to lean into my limitations and mostly avoid filming people, documenting instead the artifacts of occupation - treehouses, kitchens, medic tents, campfires, sweat lodges, bridges, signs, banners, barricades.

One morning I'm awoken by shouts warning of police presence in the parking lot. I run out and discover an excavator trying to destroy a gazebo. It's repelled with rocks and donated cans of seltzer water.

A white tow truck is abandoned, and shortly set on fire.

I return to the forest in the Fall and help shoot a story about the occupation for Al Jazeera. This would be the first time a major new outlet publishes video journalism about the struggle.

The burned out truck is still there, now decorated with flowers and plants.

"This is the best art installation in the city" I'm told by one of the Forest Defenders.

PART TWO

In December, over a year since my arrest, I make a short film called "Beneath the Concrete, The Forest," which takes its name from a zine published anonymously that summer, which collected some of the writings generated by the Forest Defenders.

I open the film with an iPhone video of a police raid in the woods, recorded by a tree sitter approximately 80 feet up in the air. A distorted voice reads one of the letters included in the zine:

"I've become attached to my treehouse, thinking of it almost as an extension of myself. I found myself questioning this, questioning the connection I feel to a temporary structure. But I realized that what I was feeling was beyond that. From my feet high above the canopy to the roots buried deep in the ground, I could feel it. I wondered if this energy was spiteful, a land so scarred and blood-stained, never given a moment to heal.

Was I here because of spite?

Yes.

But the spite I feel toward the police is also born of love:

love for the land and all of my friends here and beyond.

This forest is not something I am going to give up without a fight.

Every delay opens up more possibilities.

Every contractor that backs away brings us closer to victory.

Each of our moves keeps them guessing.
Whether or not they choose to destroy our homes, I'll be here keeping up the struggle.
I'll be here for as long as I can, for as long as it takes.
They can try to evict us, but they will never be able to make us stop fighting.

There's joy in our fight.
This spirit, this forest, will never be able to be contained.
Everywhere you look, the police are trying to shrink our worlds, shrink our lives.
But we have chosen to say no.
Our fight extends beyond the borders of this forest—
it extends through our expressions of collective and individual joy,
incomprehensible to the narrow imaginations of the police and the ruling class that they protect.

We laugh harder than them, we feel more pleasure even in the midst of their assaults.
Falling in love with these woods has meant falling in love with one another
and with the possibilities of this world—
a love that the police will never understand,
and therefore cannot crush."

I finish my short film in December 2022, and less than a month later, a Forest Defender named Tortuguita—Little Turtle—is killed in the forest by the Georgia State Patrol during another raid.

I add a title card to the end of the film with the words:

!Viva Viva Tortuguita!

PART THREE

There is much writing about the movement to "Defend the Forest" and "Stop Cop City."
A good deal, like the zine I used for my short film, comes from within the movement – a coalition of people who see the destruction of a forest, and the construction of the country's largest police training facility, as a dystopian nightmare.

To read their words is to peer into an alternative vision of life and resistance in the 21st century.

The Forest Defenders are young, old, white, Black, brown, documented, undocumented, indigenous. Newly radicalized by the pandemic and the 2020 uprisings, and veterans of occupations like Standing Rock and Line 3. Mothers, children, queer folks, priests, artists, cooks, organizers, clowns, filmmakers. They believe another world is possible—is necessary—if humanity is to survive the next century.

The writers argue that Cop City is, for many reasons, the newest phase of police militarization and privatization. One that is in line with the history of the "Atlanta Way" of private-public partnerships.

The Atlanta Police Foundation, the non-profit building Cop City, is funded by the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the country. Its CEO, former secret service agent for multiple presidential administration, makes half a million dollars a year. Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the FBI work hand in hand with APF and APD to investigate and criminalize the protestors, while the GBI investigates its own killing of Tortuguita. Georgia already has an established program called GILEE that trains police in Israel. These elements, coupled with a seeming capitulation of the local government to the demands of the APF and APD, lead many in the movement to conclude that this facility will play an extremely sinister role in the future.

Policing budgets in this country collectively make American police forces the world's third-most expensive military organization, right behind US and Chinese militaries. As economic, social, and political issues compound, it seems that the only social service that gets increased funding year to year, is the police. When the pandemic started in 2020, doctors and nurses wore trash bags as PPE. Everyday people sewed masks, redistributed food, built mutual aid networks to fill gaps in a welfare state hollowed out by neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the police were geared up like an occupying army in response to the protests that erupted that summer. And even with all their equipment, they were not totally prepared for the mass uprising.

The Atlanta Police Foundation stepped in and offered to build the country's largest police training facility. This is the same foundation that was recently revealed by the Atlanta Community Press Collective to have pushed for a pilot program that integrated "GPS-enabled digital shackles" with "AI-powered real-time video surveillance ... to put up to 900 people under constant video, audio, biometric, and GPS surveillance as a condition of pre-trial release." The pilot, which would surveil people convicted of three or more felonies, would target mostly black men: "Over 93 percent of APF-designated 'repeat offenders' are Black, according to a 2022 annual report."

The selection of the proposed site for Cop City was no coincidence. The land is technically part of unincorporated Dekalb County, but is under the jurisdiction of Atlanta City Council, meaning that the predominantly low-income, Black residents who live around the forest have no voting power over what happens to the land next to their homes. They are already neighbored by multiple operational prisons, water sewage treatment and asphalt plants, and an eyesore aptly dubbed "Trash Mountain."

In the eyes of the police and the APF, the site wasn't a forest; its trees, plants, and animals did not constitute an ecosystem. It was cheap land that could be developed without much opposition. The city leased the 350 acres to APF for just \$10 a year for 50 years .

They miscalculated.

Had they chosen a large slab of concrete, some abandoned parking lot or failing mall, I doubt there would have been a movement quite as powerful as what we see in Atlanta today. But they decided to target a forest, an expanse of 350 acres home to both old and new-growth trees. Originally the land was stewarded by the Mvskoke people, who were ethnically cleansed and relocated to Oklahoma. The colonized land was turned into a slave plantation. It's worth noting here that in the South, the police initially played the role of slave catchers, surveilling and hunting down human beings who dared escape bondage.

After the Civil War, the plantation became a prison farm, where mostly Black prisoners worked the land to feed Georgia's prison population. The prison was abandoned in 1990; since then, nature reclaimed the blood-soaked land, which is likely dotted with countless unmarked graves.

In 2017, the forest was described by the Atlanta city government as one of the "four Lungs of Atlanta", and there was hope that it would be cleaned up for locals to enjoy. But instead, it became, once again, the target for the prison-industrial complex.

And when the forest was attacked, it gave out a call that people could hear.

Fight for me, fight for yourself.
My fate is your fate.

The Forest Defenders who answered the call see the backers of the Cop City project as villains, capitalists, with billions of dollars, mainstream media, and state violence at their disposal.

Cop City's backers see the Defenders as domestic terrorists and organized criminals. And they work hard to project that image across the city and the country.

My work as a documentary filmmaker who has followed this movement since its inception, is to offer a different perspective of the struggle. One that is true to the spirit of the forest and the land.

PART FOUR

After I finished my short film, I return to the forest and spend December holidays with a small group of determined Forest Defenders. It's 18 degrees Fahrenheit.

There have been multiple raids, including the one I featured in my short film. People have been arrested and charged with domestic terrorism. The parking lot and several trees, including an oak tree that was at least a century old, have been torn up by bulldozers.

A Defender named Panda gives me an interview, telling me that while the cops call them domestic terrorists, the only violence has come from the police. Less than a month later he's arrested in the same raid that kills Tortuguita.

2023 is a blur.

Winter

I'm at a vigil for Tortuguita. One of the concrete slabs in the parking lot has been turned into an altar for Tort, and for all martyrs of the Weelaunee Forest. It's gut-wrenching. People are devastated by Tort's murder.

My co-director Nolan and I break down in tears.

The city rages and more are arrested for domestic terrorism.

There is no body camera footage from the Georgia state troopers who killed Tort, but there is footage from APD officers nearby in which an ungodly barrage of bullets is heard, followed by an officer wondering aloud if the police shot themselves by accident.

Spring

The forest is reoccupied for the first time since winter.

A music festival is organized and the first night culminates in hundreds of people dancing to Zach Fox amongst the trees. The next day a group of about 200 people target the Cop City construction site and do several million dollars' worth of damage. The cops respond by raiding the music festival, and I film the police tackling concertgoers indiscriminately.

Tortuguita's mother, Belkis, arrives in the forest. She comes to a poetry reading and tell the people "I've lost one child, but gained a thousand more in this struggle." I'm filming with her as she tearfully reveals that the autopsy implies that Tort was sitting cross-legged and with their hands up. 57 bullet wounds in their body.

A few days later she spreads Tort's ashes under pouring rain – a blessing, she says, because the helicopters can't hover above our heads. My lavalier mic doesn't work very well; it turns out Belkis keeps magnets in her pockets which block the microphone's wireless signal. She says "it's protection."

A few days later the police raid the forest and lock it down for good.

Within a matter of days, 85 acres are clearcut. We fly a drone to assess the damage. It looks like a mass execution of trees. After the trees are removed, the land looks like the surface of Mars.

ACPC reports that the city lied about the public cost of Cop City – it will cost the taxpayers twice the estimate. A week later a SWAT team raids the home of the Atlanta Solidarity Fund, charging three with domestic terrorism.

Warrants against the organizers cite reimbursements as evidence of money laundering. The reimbursements listed are for “expenses such as gasoline, forest clean-up, totes, covid rapid tests and yard signs.”

Summer

City Hall is flooded with a historic turnout. Hundreds are turned away, and many of those who make it inside are unable to sign up in time to speak. People give 3-minute speeches until 5am, practically all of them against Cop City.

Eventually city council votes 10-4 in support of Cop City, and police flood the chambers. A few days later a referendum campaign is launched to get Cop City on the ballot.

I accompany a number of people as they canvas the city. We watch the number of signatures climb through the summer, reaching 116,000 - double the necessary amount. It seems that victory is imminent.

And then a federal judge claims the process is unconstitutional according to Georgia law.

Fall

The petition is delivered and the city puts it in a closet. Instead of counting the signatures, the city publishes the names of everyone who signed.

The state charges 61 people with an additional RICO charge. The indictment reads:

“Defend the Atlanta Forest is a self-identified coalition and enterprise of militant anarchists, eco-activists, and community organizers...Indeed, an anarchist belief relies on the notion that once government is abolished, individuals will rely on mutual aid to exist. In doing so, anarchists believe that individuals will work together and voluntarily contribute their own resources to insure that each individual has its own needs met.”

Undeterred by the sweeping criminalization of political ideology, priests and faith leaders chain themselves to construction equipment on the construction site as a form of protest.

Winter

As we cross the 1 year anniversary of Tort’s death, Atlanta locals continue to disrupt Brassfield & Gorrie construction sites through Non-Violent Direct Actions.

Every few weeks more bulldozers get torched.

The police offer \$200,000 for any information on the arsonists. In February the cops raid a few homes in the Lakewood neighborhood, arresting Jack on suspicion of arson.

The fires continue.

The lockdowns continue.

The chants continue, here and around the country, where now 69 cop cities are being planned and developed:

“Cop City Will Never Be Built”

“If You Build It We Will Burn It”

“Viva Viva Tortuguita”

PART FIVE

Cop City was supposed to be completed over a year ago, and there are still no buildings.

In my time with the Forest Defenders, I’ve learned that participating in resistance, while not always glamorous, is joyful. Whether they are making banners with school children, cooking massive meals, carrying gallons of water, singing songs, resolving interpersonal conflict, life is dynamic, its roots extending deep and wide. It’s a life that resists alienation and fear; a life that seeks the wisdom of nature and the ancestors who once made their home among it. It is a life of ingenuity, care and passion.

Forest Defenders argue that attempts to destroy the movement only reveal the real threat it poses to those in power: a threat to their profits, to their ability to exploit the land and the people, and to their sense of self. Perhaps the money and the power that the ruling class has accumulated is worthless in comparison to the love the people have for the land and each other.

The Forest Defenders are the latest in a long line of warriors standing up to American imperialism. Every battle keeps a flame alive and continues the legacy of resistance.

With their struggle they pay respect to the ancestors who fought for the land, and atone for the ancestors who fought for the Empire.



Lev Omelchenko is an Emmy Award Winning ATL and NYC based director. Born in Kramatorsk, Ukraine he immigrated with his family to Brooklyn, NY at age 9. As a filmmaker, he is driven by collaborations with cultural and community laborers whose practice is outside the traditional film industry. Lev is currently in production on a documentary feature film "A City in the Forest" about the protest movement to Stop Cop City in Atlanta, GA.

Southern Storytelling

Andy Sarjahani

INTRO

For all its wild and wonderful messiness, the American South is home and always will be. Regardless of where I receive my mail. The forest baths in the old growth hardwoods of my beloved Ozarks bring me a restoration that I've yet to find elsewhere. And yet there's the increasingly pervasive dogmatic ideology that fuels legislation that slash rights across the Southern states.

Growing up Iranian-American in a small town in Arkansas, I began to learn around age 5 that if I did a good enough job hiding my Middle Eastern half, I too could be one of the guys. There was a part of me that I always felt I had to check at the door. To be clear, it's the Iranian part of me that needed to shrink.

Now, as an independent filmmaker, it seems as if I was supposed to have checked the Arkansas at the door. Many of my colleagues are confined to the bubbles of New York and LA, and the well meaning cliched quip "I'm sorry you had to grow up there" confuses me. What exactly are they sorry for? These same people would never apologize to me for being Iranian so why is this acceptable amongst presumably liberal peers?

SOUTHERN STORYTELLERS

I had the privilege of working as a cinematographer on the 2023 PBS docu-series Southern Storytellers directed by my friend and mentor, Craig Renaud. The New York Times picked a Southerner to review the series and this is what she had to say:

"Despite our bloody history, and contemporary politicians intent on suppressing that truth, many people here defy what non-Southerners think they know about this place. The new PBS documentary series "Southern Storytellers," directed and produced by the Arkansas filmmaker Craig Renaud, makes this point as directly and as forcefully as I have ever seen it made on television, a medium that is in large part responsible for the stereotype itself."

STORIES HOLD POWER

Stories hold power and we live in a time where book bans are as ubiquitous as the Dollar General's scattered about the South like horsetail in pasture.

Arkansas native Maya Angelou said, "The more you know of your history, the more liberated you are." Her 1969 classic novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is one of the most banned books in US history and is currently banned in varying capacities throughout Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, Washington, and Texas. My mom was a children's reading teacher at a public school in Arkansas for over 30 years. She fostered a curious spirit and love for story and I have to believe that's the early scaffolding of my evolution into a filmmaker. Books, moreover stories, were integral to our upbringing. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one of the multiple classics that she gifted my brother and I growing up, is now banned inside and outside of the South.

Like the translucent waters of the Buffalo River that methodically carved the limestone bluffs of the Ozarks over millions of years, stories and their ideas hold power.

NORTHERN/COASTAL GAZE

Most stories told through film about the South have historically been told by people without connection to the place or a real, genuine, investment that typically doesn't extend beyond the trauma porn they're here to save us from.

The Northern or Coastal Gaze is antiquated and views the American South with an extractive lens. Whether it be poverty porn or a fixation with the caricatured toothless backwoods bigots whose self-hate and insecurity manifests in mindless ferocity towards anything that feels unknown. These projects will be rewarded by critics and gatekeepers as "revelatory." Indeed, for them it is revelatory because the critics have as little connection to our place as those who made the work.

Who are these projects for and why are these the people defining us? And why do we need to be rescued by them?

We've always been here though. Our stories available to the masses might be few and far between, but we've always been here.

I saw a film recently at a film festival whose maker was a young, upper-middle class Israeli man hailing from the private schools and suburbs of New York City whose only connection or time spent in the American South was the handful of days it took him to make the film. He profiled one of the most radical leaders in the Southern Baptist community and it will be distributed on a major platform. Mockery and caricature of the South sells like Chick-Fil A at a church softball tournament. How is this any different than Tucker Carlson fixating on the most rabid, American flag burning mullah in Iran and waving it in front of the entire Fox News audience as a monolithic Iran?

WORK AS RESISTANCE

Our work is an act of resistance, refuting the dominant narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and fan the flames of polarization. Nuance dies in these flames. Rather, our work brings Light to perspectives we've always known existed.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SOUTHERNER

We are making from a perspective that has been absent, erased, and in other cases violently silenced. We are speaking against the silence of the past and in doing so defining our future. Not a single one of us has a lock on what it means to be a Southerner.

For me, it's gutting a catfish on the banks of the Arkansas River with my pops. Our fingers smelling like our Tyson chicken liver bait. Dry counties run by the Baptists who get drunk behind closed doors. Summer creek swims with my soul dog June. Legislation, signed by a childhood classmate, that attempted to ban Iranians in Arkansas from owning a home. Bull elk bugling in rut in the Boxley Valley as the first fall chill rolls in. Digging for ginseng, forest baths, and deep tissue massages for the mind. Obliteration of women's reproductive rights. Old growth hardwood deciduous forest. Burning nostrils and watery eyes from Dow Chemical plants, Tyson Chicken rendering plants, and paper mills. Political will devoted to monuments for the unborn rather than the failing public schools. Church potlucks and poison ivy. Cottonmouths and deer ticks. Sandstone cliffs and digging for diamonds.

My perspective is a tiny drop in our big bucket. The ensemble of our collective perspectives will illuminate the wildly diverse tapestry we all know exists.

We will look to our ancestors who tell us what the South has been and how we arrived here.
We will consult our lived experience for answers on what the South is and what it's becoming.
We will make stories to make sense of it.

And the stories will come because we will continue to try to understand our home as we
redefine it. We will interrogate and illuminate every corner of this place, watching the
problematic ideology wither in the Light just as the good ideology thrives.
In the process, we have grace for each other and move fiercely towards the Light.

MAKING THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT

At the future South, we don't check part of ourselves at the door. I look forward to a day when
our stories don't fixate or fetishize Otherness.

Jon-Sesrie Goff's *After Sherman*, Elaine Sheldon's *King Coal*, Raven Jackson's *All Dirt Roads*
Taste of Salt, Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari*. These are the models I look to as I develop my own
work.

From Wendell Berry on community:

"A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that
the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the
knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each
other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves."

Thank you for your time today.



Andy Sarjahani is an Iranian-American documentary filmmaker and cinematographer raised in a working class community outside the Arkansas Ozarks. He is interested in people, our relationship to place and how that shapes our worldview. His current work focuses on human ecology, climate change adaptation, threats to democracy, masculinity, and nuance within the American South. He holds an MS in Sustainable Agriculture/Food Systems and left academia in 2012 to tell stories with a camera. He has worked as a documentary cinematographer for VICE, Al Jazeera, Story Syndicate, PBS, and on numerous documentaries.

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