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Marsha Gordon, Allyson Nadia Field

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The Other Side of the Tracks: Nontheatrical Film History, Pre-Rebellion Watts, and *Felicia*

by MARSHA GORDON and ALLYSON NADIA FIELD

Abstract: *Felicia* (Alan Gorg, Bob Dickson, and Trevor Greenwood, 1965), a short educational film about a teenage girl living in Watts, California, chronicles a day in the life of a high school junior as she reflects on her geographical situation and life aspirations. This article considers how *Felicia* is particularly suited to a discussion of the ways that urban spaces, and Watts in particular, were imagined in the 1960s. It demonstrates how nontheatrical film can inform our understanding of film history and enrich discussions of documentary filmmaking, the role of student filmmakers, and other cinematic movements such as that of the LA Rebellion.

F*elicia*, an approximately thirteen-minute documentary marketed as an educational film starting in the mid-1960s, is one of many thousands of nontheatrical films shot and distributed on 16mm during the greater part of the twentieth century for use in classrooms and other community-screening contexts.¹ The short film tells the story of an African American high school student living in the Watts neighborhood of South Los Angeles, California, with her mother and two siblings.² The film is narrated through Felicia's first-person voice-over paired with images of her at home, in school, and on the streets in her neighborhood. Made by three white film students as a non-school-related project while they were attending the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), *Felicia* is an exceptional

1 The 1965 version of the film is viewable online, courtesy of Skip Elsheimer's AV Geeks Archive, at *The Internet Archive*: <http://archive.org/details/Felicia1965>.

2 Felicia Bragg's father was African American and her mother was born in Metcalf, Arizona, to parents who had moved from Mexico in the late nineteenth century; however, the film does not make mention of her mixed heritage. In marketing the film, distributors referred to it as a day in the life of a "Negro girl" and a film concerning "Negro life and attitudes in one American community today." *Educational Screen and Audiovisual Guide*, March 1966, 56, and August 1966, 62.

Marsha Gordon is associate professor of film studies at North Carolina State University. She is author of Hollywood Ambitions, coeditor of Learning with the Lights Off, and former editor of The Moving Image. She is completing a book about Sam Fuller's war films. She and Allyson Nadia Field are coediting a collection of essays about race and nontheatrical film.

Allyson Nadia Field is associate professor of cinema and media studies at the University of Chicago. She is author of Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity and coeditor of L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema. Field is cocurator of the L.A. Rebellion Project.

document of life in Watts prior to the rebellions that took place in the summer of 1965. The film's timeliness was a key point made in its initial marketing; the catalog for University of California Extension Media Center (UCEMC), the distributor of the film from 1965 to around 1971, advertised: "*Felicia* was filmed in her home, school, and neighborhood in Watts, California, in the spring of 1965, shortly before the area was devastated by rioting. Because of the clues it contains to the conditions which led to the riots, the film has gained importance as an introduction to discussions of the origins of racial tensions."³ While the film was not intended to be an exploration of the roots of urban unrest (which it could not, of course, have predicted), in terms of marketing it benefited from increased attention to "Watts" and the escalating crises taking place in cities around the country. Such concerns became a popular subject in the educational film marketplace as the volatile events taking place in cities like Washington, DC, and Detroit in the latter part of the 1960s unfolded.⁴

As film scholars continue to push the canonical boundaries of the discipline, more and more such nontheatrical, ephemeral, and/or orphan films will be discovered and, like *Felicia*, considered important for reasons that have been elaborated at length elsewhere but that bear reiterating in short form here.⁵ While theatrical films of both the fiction and nonfiction variety have long dominated the landscape of cinema studies, the historical exclusion of nontheatrical films—whether out of convenience or prejudice—has impoverished our understanding of the richness, diversity, and reality of the cinematic experience for most media consumers, who typically saw many films outside the commercial realm of the movie theater. As scholars have systematically challenged this assumption and as nontheatrical films play more central roles in scholarship and teaching, a new arsenal of films is emerging that will be valued for a variety of aesthetic, historical, and cultural reasons. This tendency seems, at this juncture, not only an inevitability but also a necessity, given the imbalanced nature of the discipline of film studies up to this point in time. For just one quantitative example supporting the current corrective trend in the discipline, John Mercer observed that "in 1977 fewer than three hundred feature films were started by the major studios in Hollywood, but

3 *University of California Extension Media Center 16mm Films* (catalog) (Berkeley: University of California, 1967–1969 and 1970–1972). This description also appears in a synopsis version in an undated flyer in the personal collection of Robert Dickson. The film was priced at \$70 for purchase, with a rental price of \$4, and was noted to be "of interest to high school, college, and adult discussion groups, and to classes in sociology, civics, and current events." A marketing flyer from 1968 by UCEMC, held in the collection of the New York Public Library, prices the film at \$75 with a \$5 rental fee, noting that *Felicia* had won honors at the American Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, Columbus Film Festival, National Student Film Awards, Vancouver International Film Festival, and Independent Film-Makers Festival at Foothill College.

4 By the early 1970s, *Felicia* was one of several titles in the Extension Media Center's catalog that concerned Watts, racial disparity, and/or urban unrest. Others include *Angry Negro*, *Angry Voices of Watts*, *Civil Disorder: The Kerner Report*, *Color Us Black!*, *Diary of a Harlem Family*, *Future and the Negro*, *Negro and the American Promise*, *Question of Violence*, and *You Dig It*.

5 For more on the orphan film movement and the related symposium, founded by Dan Streible, see Dan Streible, "Saving, Studying, and Screening: A History of the Orphan Film Symposium," in *Film Festival Yearbook 5: Archival Film Festivals*, ed. Alex Marlow-Mann (St. Andrews, UK: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013). See also the introductions and essays in Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

over 15,000 nontheatrical films were completed.”⁶ Nontheatrical films not only vastly outnumbered their Hollywood counterparts for much of film history, their very different and less centralized means of production, distribution, and exhibition allowed for a fascinating diversity that was never possible in the more controlled, corporate environment of Hollywood.

But how to determine which of these overwhelming number of films deserves to take up space on our syllabi and in our scholarship? Acknowledging the long-standing tradition of nontheatrical films as no more or less valuable to film studies than theatrical films necessarily challenges the stability and primacy of other canons. It also more closely reflects the ways spectators have consumed film as well as the multimodal media environment in which moving pictures have been produced. *Felicia* was made at a pivotal moment during which sweeping changes to Watts and cities across the nation were transpiring; it was also distributed in the context of a nation grappling with social issues involving race, class, and gender—three of the film’s central concepts. *Felicia*’s emergence at the precipice of the violent expressions of disenfranchisement that took place in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965 is significant in ways that should not be underestimated and that certainly could not have been anticipated. The film played a role, however small and difficult to assess, in efforts to promote understanding and dialogue in the education system that mirrored national debates concerning race, class, and urban disenfranchisement. It was also produced by student filmmakers at UCLA only a few years before the university saw the emergence of a sustained, vibrant, Black independent filmmaking culture. In this sense, *Felicia* should be understood as operating at the intersections of several key concerns including, but not limited to, documentary, educational film, independent film, student film, issues of race and community, and the political valence of perspective and voice. Not least, it is a moving portrait of an exceptional young woman of color on the cusp of maturity and possibility, made at a time in which such representations were rarely encountered in mainstream media, cinematic or otherwise.

This article, then, performs a historical recuperation as well as a justification, not dissimilar to the kinds of canonical retrievals enacted on behalf of many other theatrical films that now occupy an acknowledged place in the film studies discipline—say, for example, those made by African Americans, women, filmmakers from developing countries, and even experimental filmmakers. Educational filmmakers are just the newest group of makers to be rescued from the periphery of film history. It is incumbent on scholars working with nontheatrical media to conceive of ways to frame our scholarship that make these films *necessary* to our understanding of film history, thus compelling the discipline to open up space for formerly marginalized genres and screen practices. The challenges of cultivating this kind of scholarly work include locating these materials (since so many nontheatrical films languish in the neglected corners of archives, if they have been fortunate enough to survive de-acquisition, a plight not dissimilar to that of silent film before the Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives convened in Brighton in 1978); researching them (since relatively little is documented and preserved in terms of primary resources about the

6 John Mercer, *The Informational Film* (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1981), iii.

nontheatrical universe); making them accessible (since so few of the films are readily available in their native format of 16mm or on DVD, although increasingly more are materializing in digitized forms online); and last but not least, winnowing down their truly overwhelming numbers to form a manageable body of formerly neglected films that illuminate certain film historical as well as cultural issues and have the potential to enrich our understanding of related theatrical works.

Felicia serves as a case in point for how a nontheatrical film speaks to such concerns, although this article is not intended merely to elevate the film into this as-yet-unformed pantheon of significant nontheatrical works. Certainly the fact that its genre, documentary, has the longest association with nontheatrical films—in terms of distribution as well as scholarship—suggests a fit within an already-established vein of study. Almost any history of the documentary form pays some attention to 16mm films, be they reduction prints of the pioneering documentary *Nanook of the North* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1922), which had a tremendous life on the educational film circuit, or more didactic documentaries meant to inform audiences about any number of subjects.⁷ What follows situates *Felicia* in the context of documentary and educational film history, as well as in relation to the work of Black filmmakers who have been termed the LA School or the LA Rebellion—a loosely associated collective of filmmakers who met at and worked in and around UCLA. *Felicia* precedes the LA Rebellion and arguably anticipates it in its subject and aesthetic strategies, despite having different investments than the largely art and festival film output of the Black filmmakers who emerged from UCLA in the subsequent decades. The film is thus particularly suited to a discussion of the ways that urban spaces, and Watts in particular, were imagined in the 1960s, both through official media channels, such as television news reporting of the urban revolt of 1965, and through other potentially influential avenues, such as nontheatrical films. Because this article is, in part, an excavation of a forgotten film, we begin by documenting its production and distribution.

An Unusual LA Story. Most educational films about race made in the 1960s and 1970s focus on African American males in an urban environment, so from the outset, *Felicia*'s concentration on a female protagonist and point of view sets the film apart.⁸ *Felicia* was made in the documentary tradition, largely using nonsynchronous, first-person voice-over accompanied by images that read as “fly on the wall” in terms of

7 For a few historical examples, see Frank Freeman, “Requirements to Education with Reference to Motion Pictures,” *School Review* 31 (1923): 340–350; Wesley Pratzner, “What Has Happened to the Documentary Film?,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1947): 394–401.

8 A quick survey of a few pages from one annotated 16mm film catalog published in the 1970s, Helen Cyr's *A Filmography of the Third World* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), reveals this gender bias. Of twenty consecutively listed films focused on African American issues, there are only two films focused on female figures: a 1952 documentary about Marian Anderson and *Felicia*. There are many biographical documentaries about men like Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Charles Mingus, and Fred Hampton; a few more broadly pitched documentaries about civil rights issues or regional concerns; and a few fiction films. For more on both the maleness and the fictional, narrative qualities of many of these films and their role in addressing anxieties about urban violence, see Marsha Orgeron, “‘A Decent and Orderly Society’: Race Relations in Riot-Era Educational Films, 1966–1970,” in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Dan Streible, Devin Orgeron, and Marsha Orgeron (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 424–441.

their aesthetics but that are enacted or staged for the camera's benefit.⁹ *Felicia* exudes, to borrow words from Erik Barnouw, "an intimacy of observation," an effective technique for drawing audiences into this personal take on race and class in what would have been perceived as, and what the film explicitly markets as, "the ghetto."¹⁰ Most of the nontheatrical, nonfiction films about race being made at the time used more conventional modes of presentation dominated by archival or interview footage of a usually historically important subject (such as Martin Luther King Jr.) whose contributions to society are explained by a voice-of-God, didactic narrator. One of the things that differentiates *Felicia*, then, from such contemporary nonfiction films on the subject of race is its personalized and intimate mode, as well as its predominantly realist, observational aesthetic. It is also notable that it is a film about an "ordinary" person rather than a widely recognized historical figure.¹¹ Still, although it is certainly an intimate portrait of a high school student, the film is nonetheless invested in broader social and environmental issues pertinent at the time. Through the "ordinary" figure of Felicia, the filmmakers explore racial and economic disparity, focusing on the inequalities in the educational system.

The filmmakers—Alan Gorg, Robert Dickson, and Trevor Greenwood—started filming on occasional weekends in 1963, while all three were students of filmmaking at UCLA.¹² Felicia Bragg remembers that there was a significant period of time during which the filmmakers got to know her and her family before the project officially began.¹³ The filmmakers collected more than an hour of audio recordings of Felicia, the daughter of a Mexican American mother (who appears in the film, along with Felicia's siblings, Peter and Rosie) and an African American father (who does not appear in the film and was no longer living with the family at the time of filming).¹⁴ The filmmakers asked Felicia to speak about her life, her expectations, and her perspective on living in Watts when she was a junior in high school, and all but the prologue of the film consists of this edited voice-over monologue.¹⁵ The filmmakers subsequently shot scenes

9 For more on different typologies and characteristics of documentaries, see Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), especially 3–75.

10 Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 231. Barnouw uses the phrase in relation to the British free cinema documentary movement of the 1950s. UCEMC promotional materials directly state that the film "will stimulate constructive discussion of the problems of the Negro in America's ghettos." UCEMC promotional flyer, New York Public Library.

11 One of the three *Felicia* filmmakers, Robert Dickson, remembers taking a course with British documentarian Basil Wright, in which Dickson wrote "a paper about how documentaries had not done—to that point—much in the way of profiling the societal situations of *individuals*"—and *Felicia* seemed like an opportunity to correct this. All information about the making of *Felicia* is derived from a series of e-mail correspondences with Marsha Gordon conducted in the spring of 2013; an in-person interview conducted by Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field with Trevor Greenwood and Robert Dickson on April 16, 2013, in Los Angeles; and an in-person interview conducted by Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field with Felicia Bragg on April 17, 2013, in Los Angeles.

12 The filmmakers remember that they had begun working on the project before John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963. Robert Dickson, e-mail to Marsha Gordon, March 13, 2013; Robert Dickson and Trevor Greenwood, unpublished interview with Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field, April 29, 2013.

13 Felicia Bragg, unpublished interview with Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field, April 17, 2013.

14 Dickson and Greenwood, unpublished interview.

15 The filmmakers recall that the opening "prologue" sequence of the film, which lasts less than a minute, was the only

in the family home, in her school, and on the street to correspond with her unscripted words.¹⁶ Trevor Greenwood explains that “the comments were crucial in developing the structure for the film. Nothing was scripted. The comments were her own.”¹⁷

From start to finish, Felicia’s narration (around ten minutes in total, crafted from more than an hour of source material) is edited to focus on education: her siblings and their relationship to school; her mother’s desire for more education than she could attain (based partly on Felicia’s grandmother’s insistence that her own daughter needed to learn how to cook and sew more than she needed to go to college); white students’ sense of entitlement to higher education; Black students’ situational lack of educational aspiration; and Felicia’s desire to go immediately to college and study something that would allow her eventually to help “her own community” (which she, in fact, did, attending the University of California, Santa Barbara, as one of only a handful of students of color in the late 1960s). As Greenwood describes the filmmakers’ goal: “Our intention was simple: to create as best we could an honest portrait of Felicia. We wanted to show an audience (it was unstated, but we assumed that for the most part it would be a white audience) what it was like for this young student living in Watts.”¹⁸ The filmmakers’ choice of narrational and visual style derived from their desire to avoid making a polemical, didactic film. Rather, they wanted to be part of the effort to, as Greenwood put it, “create a better understanding.”¹⁹ In this sense, the goals of the filmmakers could be viewed as aligned with the goals of educational films of this period and sympathetic to the themes Felicia raises in her narration; they are also methodologically opposed to Hollywood’s attempts to deal with race in social problem films like *The Quiet One* (Sidney Meyers, 1949), *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958), and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967).

The film was completely self-funded by the three filmmakers until it became attached to a producer after its completion—there was no sponsoring organization or

narration in the film that was scripted, that is, adapted from Felicia’s more casual commentary. Alan Gorg, the principal photographer on the film, recalls that while film stock was relatively expensive, audiotape was cheap. Recording Felicia talking informally about her life was an affordable way to begin the project. This also allowed Gorg to use his very portable Bolex camera during the shoot. Gorg spearheaded the project and found the Bragg family through Felicia’s former teacher, Sue Welsh. Gorg then invited his classmates Trevor Greenwood and Robert Dickson to come on as partners in the project. The filmmakers recall recording around an hour to an hour and a half of Felicia speaking, from which they edited the voice-over track. They had specific topics that they cued her to discuss, and Felicia was reportedly adept at responding and required little coaching from the filmmakers. Alan Gorg, e-mail to Marsha Gordon, June 11, 2013; Dickson and Greenwood, unpublished interview.

16 Bragg remembers that her mother dressed up the three kids for the domestic scene, as those were not their regular school clothes, but the only part of the film that Felicia commented on as a kind of staging was the scene in which she walks down the railroad tracks. While her family home was just a block from the tracks, she said that she would not have normally walked that way (though her brother frequently did), so this was done for the poetry of the images. Incidentally, Bragg volunteered admiration for the effect of this scene as she watched the film for the first time during our meeting in the spring of 2013. Bragg, interview.

17 Trevor Greenwood, e-mail to Marsha Gordon, March 6, 2013.

18 Ibid.

19 Dickson and Greenwood, interview.

university support.²⁰ Because of the shoestring budget, along with the other school and work commitments each of the filmmakers had, the film was not completed until the spring of 1965. Stuart Roe, another UCLA graduate who was working as a documentary and educational film producer and distributor, was a friend of the filmmakers who ended up facilitating initial distribution of *Felicia* through UCCEMC starting in 1965. Roe suggested that he become the producer of the film (although he had no hand in its production) in exchange for paying finishing costs.²¹ When the film screened at the 1967 Second National Student Film Festival at Royce Hall Auditorium at UCLA, Roe was credited in the program alongside Dickson, Gorg, and Greenwood; his name also appears on all of the release prints.²² In the early 1970s, Roe withdrew the film from UCCEMC distribution and sold it to Bailey Film Associates (BFA) Educational, which trimmed a brief but significant prologue from the film and superimposed a copyright mark and series title on the film's original card, renaming it *Minority Youth: Felicia*.²³ The film was then marketed alongside three others in the series, all from 1971—one about an “American Indian” (*Adam*), one about a Japanese-American (*Akira*), and one about a Mexican-American (*Angie*).²⁴ The index categories under which the film appears in the UCCEMC catalogs from 1967 to 1973 give a sense of how the film was marketed and how its distributors imagined its possible use in broad contexts:

California; Child Development—Teenagers; Crisis, Social/Urban; Discussion; Ethnocentrism; Family Life; Freedom/Equality; Human Rights/Human Relations; Integration/Segregation; Law/Crime/Law Enforcement—Civil Rights/Civil Liberties; Minority Americans—Negro/Black; Opinion; Poverty/Disadvantaged; Prejudice/Antipathy/Hostility; Problems of Modern Man; Social Complex of Man—Environment; Social Complex of Man—Interaction/Polarization; Teenagers/Youth.²⁵

Felicia was not categorized explicitly as a documentary, but it deserves a place in that genre's long 16mm history. Although the shots of *Felicia* at home, school, and on the streets are performed, if not for the camera's benefit then certainly with an awareness of the camera's presence (in fact, almost all of her voice-over was recorded first and then the shots of her were filmed to accompany her commentary), their mostly

20 The print we began working with for this project carries a “B'nai B'rith” title card, so we initially thought the organization might have sponsored the film. However, it was common practice for an organization like B'nai B'rith to purchase a 16mm film, splice on its own title card, and circulate the print among its constituency, which accounts for this or any other apparent organizational affiliation.

21 Dickson and Greenwood, interview.

22 Program for “The 2nd National Student Film Festival,” March 3, 1967, Royce Hall Auditorium, UCLA. Program in the personal collection of Robert Dickson.

23 According to Alan Gorg, Stuart Roe “hooked it up with a distributor, I think Bailey, and we got \$500 one time and gave it all to Felicia's mother.” Alan Gorg, e-mail to Marsha Gordon, March 12, 2013. For more on Bailey Film Associates, see Geoff Alexander's *Academic Films for the Classroom: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

24 Short descriptions appear in the 1993 Phoenix Films Catalog, 84. Collection of the University of California Berkeley library.

25 *University of California Extension Media Center 16mm Films* (catalog) (Berkeley: University of California, 1967–1969, 1970–1972, 1972–1973).

observational quality (only one shot shows Felicia directly addressing the camera) lends an intimacy and “life as it is lived” quality to the production. It also makes the filmmakers’ presence seem unobtrusive and the film’s subject appear unmediated.²⁶ *Felicia* was, in fact, described as an engaging film precisely because of its use of this very natural, authentic-seeming first-person voice-over narration that gives the impression of the story being told directly from and by the young woman on screen.²⁷ As the UCEMC flyer for the film puts it, “*Felicia* is a 15-year-old Negro girl’s quiet, perceptive inquiry into her life in a segregated community” (Figure 1).²⁸ Perhaps taking a linguistic cue from this same flyer or the similar UCEMC catalog description of the film,



Figure 1. The cover of the University of California Extension Media Center’s brochure for *Felicia*. From the collection of the New York Public Library.

an anonymous reviewer in the 1967 *Booklist* review considers *Felicia*’s narration the “most important part of the film,” its “perceptiveness, honesty, courage, and genuineness” the “qualities which make this film appealing to a wide audience.”²⁹ In advertising the film, UCEMC pointed to the broader applicability of the film’s central themes, noting that “the problems it presents could apply to any community.”³⁰

With the goal of fostering dialogue in mind, *Felicia* was advertised as a vehicle to “stimulate constructive discussion of the problems of the Negro in America’s ghettos.”³¹ On the basis of reactions in reviews and discussions of the film that appeared in the years following its release, the filmmakers appear to have achieved this objective. A pertinent example is the film’s inclusion in *Curriculum Guidelines for Inner-City Teacher Education* published by the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory in

26 Bill Nichols discusses these qualities of observational documentary in *Representing Reality*. It should be noted that voice-over narration is not a typical component of this style; synchronous sound is the prevailing mode employed by such practitioners as D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Frederick Wiseman.

27 In an interview, Greenwood and Dickson cited the influence of the National Film Board of Canada documentary *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-Railway Switchman* (Roman Kroitor, 1953, 12 min.), which can be viewed at http://www.nfb.ca/film/paul_tomkowicz_street_railway_switchman/. Like *Felicia*, *Paul Tomkowicz* consists of a first-person voice-over narration combined with poetic images of Tomkowicz going about his daily life. Also like *Felicia*, the film is formalistic, with attention to black-and-white composition, lighting, and framing that are highly aestheticized. Dickson and Greenwood, interview.

28 Flyer in the personal collection of Robert Dickson.

29 “Review of *Felicia*,” *Booklist and Subscription Books Bulletin* 63 (1967): 840. *EFLA Evaluation* also called the narration “very natural,” as quoted in the “Film Review Digest” of *Felicia* in *Sightlines* 1, no. 1 (1967): 12.

30 *University of California Extension Media Center 16mm Films* (catalog) (Berkeley: University of California, 1967–1969, 1970–1972).

31 *Ibid.*

1969.³² In a thoughtful section of the curriculum on “The Culture of the Inner-City,” *Felicia* is listed as one of five films recommended for training future inner-city teachers, selected for its ability to illustrate “what it is like to live in a segregated subculture.” The existence of this publication—along with many others with kindred aims for both students and teachers—suggests the degree to which there was an urgent need to create “a knowledge of the sociocultural environment of the inner city.”³³

The film is also tonally quite distinctive. Where many of the fiction films of the period deal with issues of inequity or frustration with a sense of anger or tension, *Felicia*—in part because of the subject’s subdued vocal qualities and mature assessment of her situation—never comes off as what the UCEMC brochure assures potential buyers that the film is *not*: “[a] ‘protest’ film.”³⁴ This reassurance is also revealing inasmuch as it indicates the degree to which there was something refreshing—or, arguably, unthreatening—about the film’s take on race relations. This is neither praise nor criticism of the film’s politics but rather an acknowledgment that the prevailing tone of the day was more aggressive, reactive, and activist in nature—at least from the perspective of those who were assessing and using audiovisual (A/V) materials for classroom use. The quietness of the film was viewed as especially appropriate for an educational film audience, as was its openness—that is, its refusal of direct confrontation or prescriptive conclusions—which was at the time considered the best practice for facilitating classroom discussion.³⁵

Felicia: Life in Watts. *Felicia* is largely a film about the perception of the subject’s relation to her own environment and areas beyond the borders of her community. The film is framed from the perspective of an outsider on its main subjects—the figure of Felicia and the spaces she does and does not inhabit. Felicia discusses her family, schooling, dreams, and impressions of the city, ruminating on the limited opportunities for her de facto segregated community and declaring her commitment to getting an education in order to help improve Watts. Against her narration, the filmmakers provide visual accompaniment that illustrates the points she makes. Yet it is not a simple correlation. On the one hand, Felicia provides commentary for the images shown, framing them from her perspective. On the other hand, the voice-over motivates the images, which are the filmmakers’ interpretation of Felicia’s mental subjectivity and environmental reality. This interplay between perspectives and points of view is telling, as it offers both a subjective (albeit mediated) and an interpretive component.

The film begins with shots of idyllic spaces in Los Angeles as Felicia provides off-screen narration of her impressions of other (white) neighborhoods in the city against corresponding long shots of a bucolic neighborhood, public swimming pool, park, and

32 Grant Clothier, ed., *Curriculum Guidelines for Inner-City Teacher Education* (Kansas City, MO: Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory, 1969), 87. The other films listed alongside *Felicia* are *The Cities and the Poor*, *The Hard Way*, *Phyllis and Terry*, and *The Future and the Negro*.

33 *Ibid.*, 84.

34 UCEMC promotional flyer, New York Public Library.

35 The vogue for open-endedness even extended to filmstrips, as Irene Cypher’s May 1968 title for her regular column on the subject indicates: “Materials Should Stimulate—Not ‘Dictate,’” *Educational Screen and Audiovisual Guide* 47 (1968): 30.

school.³⁶ The camera shoots these locations at a distance, aligning its lens with Felicia's outsider perspective on what she calls "the rest of the city." From the first shot, these spaces appear to be open, uncrowded, suburban, verdant, and idealized (for example, the school—Pacific Palisades High School—sits at the foot of the Santa Monica mountains). While not identified as such in the film, Pacific Palisades is one of the most affluent areas in Los Angeles and nearly thirty miles from Felicia's school in Watts (but close to UCLA's campus in Westwood, another affluent, predominantly white neighborhood). People are shown from a distance and not individuated. Felicia explains that, although she has not spent much time outside her own neighborhood, what she finds most impressive about other places in the city is "the sense of space." She reflects, "There's nothing jammed up against anything else and there's lots of room to breathe." The camera captures this breathing room and gives an image to her impressions of these "other" neighborhoods. Felicia's sensitivity to how disparity is marked by the ways in which space is articulated in Watts versus "the rest of the city" motivates the formal structure of the film. Urban spaces and the way they structure their inhabitants' sense of possibility comprise the film's strategy for eliciting empathy, increasing awareness about adjacent communities, and presenting Felicia herself as concurrently exceptional (in her ability to perceive and articulate her situation at such a young age, as well as with regard to her aspirations) and typical (inasmuch as her daily reality is presumably not different from that of her peers living in the neighborhood around her).

Yet the outsider perspective is doubled because Felicia's narration is presented in support of the narrative created by the camera of the white student filmmakers, who shoot from what they envision to be her point of view. The doubling comes from the filmmakers' imagination of Felicia's perspective, absent Felicia, whose voice, but not image, is present in this opening sequence. In this sense, the film's beginning can be understood as offering a white point of entry with images from the world the filmmakers have access to but Felicia does not—except as a fleeting observer looking in from the outside. It is thus a reflection and perhaps also an acknowledgment of the filmmakers' vantage point, even if ostensibly from the perspective of the film's African American subject, who provides the words that differentiate between what the audience sees on-screen and her environmental reality. The opening thereby posits white spaces as outside the experience of the narrator, who discusses these spaces but does not visually appear to be a part of them. By framing white spaces as other or alien, the film establishes a perspective aligned with Felicia while also giving its presumed white audience a means to comprehend the simultaneously racial and spatial differences between communities. Felicia does not use the word "segregation" in her narration (although the film was later marketed with these terms), but racial division is implicit in both her description of her community versus "the rest of the city" and in the filmmakers' framing of "white" and "Black" spaces.³⁷

36 Here we are referring to the UCEMC print. The BFA version excises this scene but is otherwise identical.

37 For example, *Educational Screen and Audiovisual Guide* (August 1966, 62) listed *Felicia* under the category of "social problems," summarizing the film as follows: "A 15-year-old Negro girl's quiet inquiry into her own life in a segregated community."

Before the film proceeds to Felicia's neighborhood, the spectator is shown images of what lies outside its borders—what it is not. And what it is not is likely more akin to what viewer's (presuming a predominantly white audience, which is what the filmmakers imagined) understanding of a neighborhood, school, and park would be. Felicia offers her impressions of the "rest of the city": "I guess the city's a pretty good place to live in—for *most* people. Me, I live in another part of the city." On these last words, the scene cuts to train tracks and the loud sound of a train horn announces the shift in environment. As the train approaches the camera, the titles are superimposed on the tracks, with Felicia's name (the title of the film) positioned on the tracks (Figure 2). The train tracks occupy the lower part of the frame previously occupied by green space, the swimming pool, school lawn, and parks. With that cut, the verdant idyll is replaced with images of Watts, beginning with the train tracks and extending to overgrown and unkempt yards, junkyards, dilapidated homes, and loitering people. While these types of images rapidly became emblematic of Watts following the national attention to the area in the aftermath of the civil uprising of August 1965, at the time of the film's shooting such sights were not as widely circulated as they would become in the ensuing months and years and would likely have been revelatory, possibly even shocking, to the film's early audiences.

The prologue has multiple functions. It offers glimpses of the white filmmakers' world to illustrate Felicia's commentary. It also provides the presumed white audience with



Figure 2. The title shot from *Felicia*, a film that literalizes the idea of taking its audience to the other side of the tracks.

a point of entry into a day in the life of an African American high school student whose community is markedly different from the white suburban universe that opens the film, to which the spectators presumably could relate. Interestingly enough, the film's prologue functions as a reverse ethnography, in which the object of study makes observations about the world of her observers.³⁸ Following this prologue, the film is divided into three sections: Felicia's house and family, her school and its contrast with schools in white neighborhoods, and her broader community. The film is thus structured to move from personal to public and individual to social, suggesting a means

38 There is a long tradition of photographic and moving-image documentation of impoverished communities, dating back most seminally to Jacob Riis, whose *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914) included an array of drawings and photographs of his subjects.

for understanding Felicia as both an individual and a constituent (both representative and distinctive) of one community and outsider to another.

The train punctuates the shift from the prologue envisioning “the rest of the city” to Felicia’s neighborhood. The train is both a marker of Watts, where the train tracks signify the urbanscape and signal that the (presumably white) viewer is going to be taken on a trip from the familiar spaces of the prologue to a universe which he or she would otherwise be unlikely to travel to or even, thanks to the freeway systems of Los Angeles, pass through except from an isolated distance. A sound bridge of the moving train links the tracks to an exterior shot of Felicia’s house, a modest but clean Southern California bungalow with an overgrown yard around it. Those unfamiliar with the architecture typical of the region might read the bungalow as shack-like. The overgrown yard certainly contributes to the impression that Felicia lives in poverty (Bragg herself remembers that the interior of her house was always tidy, although the outside was left untended). At the very least, the image is a striking contrast to the opening shots of suburban order in the prologue.

From the exterior shot of the house, the sound bridge carries over to a shot of Felicia washing her face in the bathroom, shown in close-up reflected in the mirror. This first view of the film’s protagonist begins with her face obscured by a towel as she proceeds to dry off. It is an intimate moment in which the audience is given access to Felicia’s private preparations, made somewhat distant by filming Felicia in the mirror. The shot represents a typical morning ritual, indicating the start of her school day, yet it also captures a central tension in the film between intimacy and the outsider’s gaze. The camera reveals a private moment that some viewers might understand as invasive or objectifying in the manner of ethnographic observation. However, Felicia’s voice-over mitigates this view, as it presumes an invitation to the filmmakers and, by extension, the spectator, to share in these otherwise private scenes. The train is still heard running as she introduces herself and the train noise continues as she moves into her bedroom and introduces the space: “[This is] where I was born and I’ve lived here all my life.” The film next introduces her family by cutting to the kitchen, where her brother Peter and sister Rosie are having breakfast and Felicia’s mother is at the sink doing dishes. Felicia enters the kitchen and joins her siblings for breakfast. As Felicia talks about her mother, the camera follows the matriarch into another room as she sits down at the sewing machine (Figure 3). As the “sole supporter of the family,” she makes a living sewing and babysitting, while also taking care of her children, “like a father and a mother.”

Upon the film’s release in 1965, Felicia’s family situation would have resonated with the national conversation about race and poverty catalyzed by the publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Known as the Moynihan Report, which like *Felicia* was also issued in 1965, the study featured Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s ideas about Black family life in the ghetto that would inform some of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s key policies for the “Great Society.”³⁹ However, *Felicia* subtly

39 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, US Department of Labor, 1965).

suggests a contributing factor to class disparity without pathologizing or stigmatizing Felicia's family. The Moynihan Report emphasized the perceived disintegration of the nuclear family, and many experts saw education as the key to addressing social disparities. As an educational film, *Felicia* logically is concerned with the role of education, but it also serves as an argument against



Figure 3. Felicia discusses her mother's regrets about not being able to go to college as the camera observes her mother going about her seamstress work in the family's home.

a certain perception of unambitious lower-class African Americans that was in circulation in the culture and a key issue of concern in the educational literature of the time.⁴⁰ The focus in the first third of the film on Felicia's home and home life speaks directly to these concerns with honesty and directness. In this scene, Felicia talks wistfully about her mother's unachieved education and her aspirations for her children to have opportunities that were impossible for her. Felicia's perspective on her mother's thwarted ambitions recounted over images of her mother at work is intimate, clearly intended to be touching in its poignancy and moving in its empathy—feelings that the filmmakers surely wanted to extend from Felicia to the spectator. While the camera largely follows Felicia through the film, in this brief scene it leaves her in the kitchen to focus on her mother in the living room as Felicia's voice-over muses on her mother's hopes for her children's futures.

The family's ambitions are reliant on the possibilities afforded by education. When Felicia introduces her siblings, she emphasizes their study habits and intelligence and laments the fact that her brother recently dropped out of school. The film next shows Felicia walking to her high school, which initiates the next segment of the film featuring her school day at Jordan High, starting with the Pledge of Allegiance. This scene serves as a relational point for the likely audience of *Felicia*: other students across the country who begin their school day in the same way. Yet the Pledge of Allegiance is not simply a neutral component of the American school day. The compulsory recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance for children at public schools has been criticized by many African American filmmakers—along with countless students, writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals, and even a state legislator—who have pointed out the irony

40 See, for example, Helaine Dawson, *On the Outskirts of Hope: Educating Youth from Poverty Areas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Roger R. Woot, ed., *Education and the Urban Crisis* (Scranton, PA: International Textbook Company, 1970).

of proclaiming “liberty and justice for all” in a grossly inequitable society.⁴¹ Although this moment in *Felicia* is not by any means an overt criticism, it is surely a subtext when considered in relation to Felicia’s voice-over; it is also a critique that subsequent filmmakers have made more directly. For example, several filmmakers associated with the LA Rebellion focus on the classroom as a site of social conformity and a platform for resistance.⁴² Also students concerned with discourses on education, the LA Rebellion filmmakers later brought to the fore some of the key issues that simmer just below *Felicia*’s surface; what is implied in the early 1960s had become direct critique by the end of the decade.⁴³

However subtle, the Pledge of Allegiance and subsequent classroom scene nonetheless function in tandem with the film’s strategy of making Felicia at once similar to and different from the presumed viewer. While also a point of relation, *Felicia*’s classroom sequence demonstrates the disparity between her educational environment and that of the imagined educational film audience. Over observational shots of her class, and under the guidance of the white teacher, Felicia narrates her ambitions to go straight to college after graduation and take courses that will help her become “something that is really helpful to the people, something that isn’t just what everyone can do, but something where I can help my own people.” This is said as the camera pans across the room populated by Felicia’s classmates, all of whom are African American. Felicia talks about her classmates’ lowered expectations for professional advancement, with an implicit criticism of their complacency. Yet her words target the broader social constraints that lead her classmates to imagine becoming secretaries or beauticians: “I guess they’ve decided there’s no use in them aspiring to become anything else because they won’t be allowed to do anything else.” Here, Felicia situates her aims in a long tradition of uplift ideas, essentially disparaging—albeit gently—the lack of ambition of her classmates but also assigning cause to their perception of insurmountable impediments. The film cuts to shots of the school, crowded hallways, the lunch yard, and students hanging out. Over these shots, Felicia talks about how there have been very few white kids at any school she has attended, and she begins to describe her one experience of a summer program she attended at a white school

41 For example, Maulana Ron Karenga promoted a “Black Pledge of Allegiance” in the late 1960s. Charles Mingus famously ad-libbed a critical parody of the pledge in Thomas Reichman’s 1968 film *Mingus*. More recently, Henri Brooks, a state representative in Tennessee, was widely criticized for refusing to pledge allegiance in 2001.

42 For example, Gay Abel-Bey’s 1991 film *Fragrance*—which is about the conflict between an enlisted man and his politically antiwar brother—opens with their younger brother being forced to sing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” as a punishment for talking in class. Forced to sing all week in class, the young boy refuses to sing on the last day when his soldier brother redeploys. Jacqueline Frazier’s *Shipley Street* (1981) centers on a young girl attending a Catholic school where she faces racism and suffers behavioral problems until her concerned parents remove her from the school. Don Amis’s 1974 *Ujamii Uhuru Schule* (Community Freedom School) is an observational documentary depicting an alternative education to the American public school system, one that focuses on an educational model that resists the perceived indoctrination of white hegemony perpetuated in mainstream classrooms. Likewise, the child in Alile Sharon Larkin’s 1979 short fiction film *Your Children Come Back to You* attends a school like the Community Freedom School. And Haile Gerima’s first short film, *Hour Glass* (1971), portrays a UCLA athlete who rejects being cast as an entertainer for white spectators and leaves the campus for a Black community.

43 Another example worth mentioning of an unusual nontheatrical, educational film that deals directly, and in a much more revolutionary and confrontational spirit, with issues of classroom politics and the exploitation of Black school-age athletes is *220 Blues* (1970). For more on this film, see Marsha Orgeron, “A Decent and Orderly Society,” 424–442.

(identified by Bragg as Huntington Park High School). The camera cuts to Felicia talking directly to the camera for the first time in the film. Addressing the off-screen interviewer, she then gives her impressions of white students.

Occurring more than halfway through the film, this cut to Felicia is jarring (Figure 4). The subject of the film, who has been shown to us as the subject of the camera and separated from her narration by nonsynchronous editing, is in this one instance made whole and aware of the camera's presence: Felicia's voice joins her body. To smooth the jarring cut, the sound

bridge seamlessly continues the sentence, with the same recording masking the visual break. Felicia speaks to an off-camera (and unheard) interviewer in classical "talking head" style, with an occasional glance at the camera. This is a noteworthy departure from the style of the rest of the film and an intriguing directorial decision. The separation



Figure 4. Felicia Bragg's direct address to the camera occurs in only one scene in *Felicia*.

between narration and image that has been the pattern through the majority of the film suddenly becomes apparent as Felicia directly addresses the camera. Curious, too, is the location of this one instance in the film as a whole. Like the opening, the on-screen interview centers on Felicia's impressions of the white world around her—in this case, her interactions with white students in a summer program. She talks about their confidence and their assumptions of secured futures over shots of white students in a more lavish school setting, playing basketball and tennis. She notes in particular that the white students all seemed certain they were heading for college ("even the ones I thought were real dumb"), whereas she is not sure she will be able to go to college. Over images of the white students at Pacific Palisades High School, the sound of the train horn that marks Felicia's sonic environment punctuates her observations about the differences between her community and that of the white students. While certainly a function of the soundscape background of the initial recording of Felicia's narrative, the train horn is all the more jarring when set against the affluence of Pacific Palisades and further marks these shots as if from Felicia's perspective. The scene then returns to exterior shots of Jordan High at the end of the school day with students leaving, and continues by following Felicia in its prevailing observational style as she walks home, marking the start of the last segment of the film. As with the opening, this concluding section frames a Black space with shots of white spaces.

This sequence of the film thus begins with Felicia directly addressing the camera and ends with Felicia's off-camera narration about white students' assumptions

regarding going to college while images are shown of Black students at her high school exiting the building at the end of the day. This moment is followed by a significant duration of silence—twenty seconds total—an unusually quiet and sustained segment of the film that allows for a visual transition between Felicia at school and Felicia walking the streets alone on her way home. Allowing spectators the opportunity to think about what she has just said about race, class, educational opportunities, and personal aspirations, the placement of this caesura in the verbal narration alerts us to the film’s most obvious focus, carved out by the directors in the editing of the voice-over: the value of, and disparities regarding, education.

Pedagogical trends of the time favored classroom films that allowed students to contemplate, discuss, and debate what they saw on-screen versus earlier tendencies to use explanatory, didactic styles that told students what they needed to know.⁴⁴ This twenty seconds of silence in *Felicia*, then, fits with the zeitgeist in educational film production practices through which students were encouraged to form their own responses to what they saw on the screen. It also allows for a transition to observing Felicia walking the streets of Watts on her way home from school in the final third of the film (Figure 5). This sequence can be understood as a kind of truncated and downbeat city symphony, focused on the decay and problems of the city. It is not that Felicia seems to be



Figure 5. Felicia walking the streets of Watts in a sequence that anticipates Dorothy’s perambulations in Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1975).

in danger but rather that her surroundings offer a clear challenge to her—and implicitly her neighbors’—psyche. Much of the cinematography is poetic in style, with shots of Felicia walking the streets in a fashion that seems to anticipate similar shots in another UCLA alumnus’s film, Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1975), a feature-length fiction

film about a pregnant welfare recipient in Watts who is being harassed by government agencies to abort her unborn child. We can imagine Gerima’s Dorothy (Barbara O. Jones) as a kind of “failed” Felicia—an intelligent woman whose environment has circumscribed her within a cycle of poverty and systemic abuse inescapable for a mother on welfare. *Felicia* depicts its protagonist at the crossroads of divergent life trajectories, with education as a means of escape and eventual return in a position to assist others

44 There is an extensive literature that emerged in the 1960s about open-ended films and the pedagogical efficacy of films made to stimulate discussion both inside the classroom and in other public settings. See, for just one example, Madeline Friedlander, *Leading Film Discussions* (New York: League of Women Voters of New York City, 1972).

versus the lack of opportunity that would likely accompany her remaining in Watts and forgoing college. Felicia's tenuous position at the threshold of her future is mirrored in the film's treatment of her environment; its precariousness preoccupies the camera in this closing segment.

A tracking shot of Felicia walking, with decaying, graffiti-covered, and flyer-littered fences and walls behind her, is accompanied by narration focused, for the first time in the film, on the Watts neighborhood: "All these people that talk about Watts, who say how dirty it is, how filthy it is, how much they want to leave. All my friends don't want to live here[,] . . . hate to say that they live in Watts. I think that's silly. They *do* live in Watts. Sure, everybody wants to get out. I don't; I think I want to stay here."⁴⁵ As Felicia speaks the final line here, the camera pulls back from a medium close-up to a long shot of Felicia walking the streets alone. The filmmakers play up a dissonance here, with Felicia talking about her desire to stay in a neighborhood paired with images of that neighborhood that read as bleak and uninspiring. The rhetoric here is implicitly about having a desire to improve your community, the assumption being that to go away and get an education and then return to improve the community is different from merely running away from it because the neighborhood is understood to condemn individuals to failure. Bragg recalls that these shots were filmed around 103rd Street and Graham, about the halfway point on her walk from home (around 95th and Beach) to Jordan High School (around 103rd and Kalmia).⁴⁶ This is significant in part because the film uses these street shots to tackle the timely topic of being aspirational in a depressed community.

Felicia points out that the only way to improve Watts is if people stay to "build it up." As she speaks these words, the film proceeds with a series of shots illustrating the conditions in which people in Watts live. These shots focus on a lot filled with old tires and car parts, including discarded car bodies piled many feet high into the air, providing visual examples of Felicia's prerecorded narration. Over the ambient sounds of the junkyard Felicia comments, "I know they have to have those things, but they don't have to have them right behind houses." A striking pair of shots connects the car wreckage to the community living in the midst of it, illustrating Felicia's point. The first shot tilts up from the ground to reveal a towering pile of precariously stacked cars in a junkyard, followed by a reverse shot of the top of the pile taken from a backyard on the other side of the fence. A matching downward tilt reveals a young child on a tricycle in the veritable shadow of this looming automotive graveyard, followed by a shot of a group of children playing in the shadow of a junkyard (Figure 6). After a pause in narration, allowing the viewer some space to consider how he or she feels about this environment and to absorb the jarring ambient sounds, Felicia gently speaks in a way that directly implicates the spectator:

How would you like to have a bunch of cars right in your back yard? So what if some kids get out there and play, and they pile one car too high and it comes crashing down and there's no place for it to crash but right into the

45 This scene, too, is reminiscent of shots of Dorothy in Gerima's *Bush Mama* traversing the streets of Los Angeles some ten years later.

46 Bragg, interview.

yard. And I think that's dangerous and I don't see why the city allows it to be like that. Those people, even if they are living in a rundown neighborhood, that still isn't any reason to have them live with stuff like that right at their back door.

In contrast to the opening scenes of the film that show the relatively pastoral and paradisiacal white, upper-class universe of parks and pools, this portion of the film explicitly asks viewers to imagine what it would be like if they lived where Felicia lives. Shots of a crane dropping more cars on top of the pile convey a sense of hopelessness for a community that nobody outside it seems to care about. Felicia's indictment of the role the city plays in perpetuating these conditions is significant, for it implies the ways in which impoverished communities are (mis)treated in comparison to their more affluent counterparts. The film thus makes the point that it would be absurd to imagine any of the affluent neighborhoods shown in the opening sequence tolerating a towering junkyard in proximity to houses or places where children play, thereby juxtaposing one community's unthinkable with another's quotidian.



Figure 6. Kids in Watts playing in the towering shadow of a junkyard as Felicia discusses the city's responsibility to address such hazardous environmental inequities.

The point of this sequence is both to celebrate Felicia's ambitions *despite* her circumstances and to convey an understanding of why so many in this community have a defeatist attitude about life—precisely one of the things touted about the film in post-Rebellion commentary about it. The film does not suggest that Felicia is a typical young woman in her community but rather that she has managed to flourish and dream in ways that many—perhaps even most—of those around her have

been understandably unable to do. A shot from inside a house through a window of shattered glass that looks out onto a ramshackle home with an older woman sweeping in front of it makes this point obliquely, reminding the viewer of what it would take to transcend these circumstances, which are of course quite different from the tidy environment in which Felicia lives with her family. Discussing the negative impact of this environment, Felicia diagnoses the problem: “[Many] just give up before [they] even start. I think maybe that’s what happened to a lot of the adults. You see all these men hanging around on the corners all day long, doing nothing, playing checkers. They just don’t care anymore.” Felicia assesses her environment in the same way she does her school and the white schools, and therefore her statements are the articulations of her perspective without claiming to be an objective account, with the images marshaled by the filmmakers. Whether or not the figures captured by the camera are indeed loitering unemployed men or men relaxing after work, what is offered is Felicia’s verbal impression of certain men in her community. She concludes with a prognostication: “Perhaps it’s too late for the adults, but it’s not too late for the young generation like myself.”

These are the final words of the film. The images transition from these men by the train tracks to a new low-angle shot of the train tracks into which Felicia walks. For the first time in the film, nondiegetic music plays as two cuts follow Felicia walking off toward the vanishing point down the tracks, replacing the incoming train that opened the main body of the film. Felicia’s final verbal sentiment is hopeful, but the wistful music and the image of Felicia getting smaller in a desolate landscape complicate what could otherwise have been depicted as a more celebratory finale. In some ways, the final image reminds us of Felicia’s alienation—another recurrent theme of the film. She feels different from white students in “their” school; different from her less ambitious fellow students in her own school; different from earlier, less-striving generations whom she perceives as having resigned themselves to live as they do; and even different from members of her own family. *Felicia* is in some ways a study of these varying and opposed subject positions, connecting the story of one teenager to broader contemporary discussions of alienation—both racial and generational.

This final sequence is the most striking in the film in terms of both its iconography (what would presumably have been shocking environmental conditions of urban poverty) and its formal aspects (highly aestheticized compositions). The contrast between the subject and its formal representation—urban blight shown through carefully composed and visually appealing shots—anticipates the cinematography of Charles Burnett, who arrived at UCLA in 1967. The affinities between *Felicia* and the films of the LA Rebellion are based in the film school experience. At the time, UCLA encouraged and enabled its students to explore issues of race, politics, and urban experiences in America through the filmmaking process. In this way, the relation between a film like *Felicia* and the work of the LA Rebellion goes beyond subject matter or representational strategies, extending to the context of production and the ways in which both sets of filmmakers were engaging with related questions of aesthetics and politics, film and social change as they were framed by the experience of film study at UCLA. Both *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984) (which Burnett shot for Billy Woodberry) find beauty in Watts through a lens that is as loving as it is invested

in cinematic naturalism inspired by the documentary impulses of Italian neorealism. Burnett's lens shares with *Felicia* an interest in capturing children in their urban ersatz playground and in the precariousness of their environment, which Felicia directly remarks on and Burnett visualizes, particularly in his shots of children playing throughout *Killer of Sheep*. Both groups of filmmakers also link the industrial desolation of an environment to the emotional depletion of its inhabitants. Through masterful framing of public and private spaces, and the porous fluidity between them, these films share a concern for the ravages of systemic disenfranchisement. When Felicia comments on the hopelessness of the unemployed men on street corners, we can understand her as anticipating figures like Stan, the slaughterhouse worker of *Killer of Sheep*, or the under-employed Charlie Banks of *Bless Their Little Hearts*.

However, there is a key difference in the tone and function of the shots of urban desolation in *Felicia* and the later films of the LA Rebellion. *Felicia's* purpose is to accompany her observations and provide a point of reference for an audience likely unfamiliar with the living conditions of a community like Watts. The voyeurism of the camera in *Felicia* is underscored by the distance at which the filmmakers shoot, especially in some of the more compositionally elaborate shots. For example, the shot of an older woman sweeping, seen from a distance through a broken window of a presumably abandoned home, is staged for maximum impact. Similarly, one shot of Felicia walking home is taken from behind a pile of stacked tires, framing her in the background while the camera remains behind this artificial barrier, panning left to follow her as she walks on the sidewalk, mostly obscured by the piled tires (Figure 7). That shot is followed directly by a striking, compositionally balanced shot of a small bungalow seen through a hollowed-out car hood (Figure 8). The metal carcass frames the house, which



Figure 7. Felicia walking home from school, shot from a distance through a yard of piled tires.

lies in the background behind a mesh fence and is flanked by two large palm trees. The palm trees, typifying paradise, are a stark contrast with the car wreckage. It is a carefully composed, deliberate image that voices an argument.

Felicia's shots are framed and edited to represent larger social phenomena, presenting emblems of what it means to live in

Watts more broadly. The subsequent filmmakers of the LA Rebellion who shot their films in Watts did not feel the need to have such emphases. The spectator still learns something about Watts, since it serves as the setting for a number of LA Rebellion films, yet the function of each image is not to present evidence of economic and environmental

neglect but to show characters (often portrayed by nonprofessional actors) in their own community and to tell the stories of people in that community—stories rarely seen in mainstream cinema. *Felicia* shares these characteristics, but as an educational film, it represents the environment and the broader social structure through discrete emblematic images that convey an argument to an audience that significantly includes school-age viewers.



Figure 8. The filmmakers artfully frame emblematic shots of Watts.

This contrast is not meant to criticize *Felicia* but to position it in its historical, rhetorical, and aesthetic context. Indeed, the films of the LA Rebellion work against this aesthetic strategy to develop a different mode of representation. *Felicia* is certainly not poverty tourism; nor does it operate in the same way as the titillating lens of post-Watts rebellion television coverage of the area.⁴⁷ However, the film does take pains to give an account of how objects not ordinarily thought of as beautiful could be, thereby rendering the negative aspects of Felicia's environment more poetic. In this sense, the influence of Canadian filmmaker Roman Kroitor, whose 1953 documentary *Paul Tomkowicz: Street-Railway Switchman* is cited as a model by Greenwood and Dickson, is clear. *Felicia's* directors humanize their subject and find the aesthetic wonder in her environment even as her voice-over disparages the very things presented as compositionally striking. The cinematic rendering of the beauty of the community of Watts in all its complexities would become a preoccupation of a number of LA Rebellion filmmakers in the following decades.

Conclusion. *Felicia* offers its spectators a fascinating pre-rebellion glimpse of life in Watts, populated by a thoughtful and hopeful narrator who has ambitions despite her environment and the discriminatory nature of a culture in which race, class, and gender as well as geography function to limit her and other members of her community. The film takes its viewer from Felicia's home to school and to the larger neighborhood, providing a cartographic imagination for outsiders to ponder how lives are shaped by circumstance as well as by individual determination. *Felicia* supplied teachers and

47 For a discussion of television coverage of the Watts rebellion, see Elizabeth A. Wheeler, "More Than the Western Sky: Watts on Television, August 1965," *Journal of Film and Video* 54, nos. 2–3 (2002): 11–26; Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

other exhibitors with an optimistic but realistic vision of a path that seemed unlikely—perhaps impossible—to imagine just months after its filming, a counternarrative of sorts to mainstream media representations of the “riots,” as they were most often referred to, and of the larger “ghetto” crisis confronting American cities. By using the thoughts, feelings, and words of a young woman living inside this community, accompanied by images that reflect as well as project her reality, the filmmakers provide a cinematic experience of a neighborhood that would, in the months to come, become one of the nation’s great symbols of the troubled state of American race relations.

In the present day, *Felicia* speaks to intersecting areas of study, including nontheatrical film production and the role of educational film in the national discourse on race and poverty. It is also a keen reminder of the fact that, while the discipline has tended to compartmentalize genres and modes of film practice, films were rarely consumed or produced in this way. As a classroom film, *Felicia* operated in the same discursive environment as theatrical film, network television coverage of “riots,” documentaries about race relations, and governmental assessments of the causes of civil discontent. Not unrelatedly, *Felicia* reminds us of the role of student filmmakers and filmmaking, another neglected avenue of the field except when pinned to auteurist discoveries—Martin Scorsese’s, Spike Lee’s, Tim Burton’s, or Todd Haynes’s student films, for example.

But *Felicia* is more than an example of student filmmaking or 16mm educational film: it changes our understanding of how films about African American urban communities functioned at this time, as well as films concerned with Los Angeles. For example, *Felicia* demonstrates that a creative outpouring like that of the LA Rebellion emerged in relation not solely to Italian neorealism and Third Cinema but also to a demonstrated context of local films concerned with similar issues. It also evidences the deliberate use of film to document a community in order to help it—in this case by filmmakers outside the community who nonetheless believed that making a film could, perhaps, make a difference. This was very much a sentiment in keeping with the spirit of the time and the progressive politics of many artists and media makers of varying racial, class, and national backgrounds. The quest for documentary authenticity as a powerful tool of political change motivated the makers of *Felicia* (as well as subsequent generations of UCLA students) for similar activist purposes.

Encountering such an instructive film amidst the vast universe of forgotten educational films affirms that 16mm nontheatrical film offers a perspective absent from, yet complementary to, the theatrical universe of the time—one that contributes to a richer understanding of film history. As the proliferation of educational films dealing with the “race problem” post-1965 suggests, 16mm film was a key way that many students encountered questions of race and class and were exposed to issues of social inequity. The film raised precisely the kinds of questions that were notably absent from commercial cinema but markedly present in many students’ daily lives. Far from the impersonal (and often dehumanizing) portrayal of the urban “jungle,” *Felicia* offered audiences a portrait of an individual with relatable aspirations.⁴⁸ While

48 Senator Thomas Kuchel referred to “the rule of the jungle” in Watts, a phrase repeated in media coverage of the rebellion. See, for example, Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 281.

we have been unable to locate any firsthand accounts of the film's classroom reception (a very rare find in educational film studies), its moving depiction of ambition in the face of environmental adversity offered a progressive and hopeful perspective on a subject that triggered irrational fear and mistrust in media representations of all sorts. Reconsidering *Felicia* as an educational film as well as a documentary portrait of a community on the cusp of transformation broadens the scope of film history to account for an example of filmic practices, exhibition contexts, and representational strategies that intersect with scholarly investments in more established areas. It also represents the rediscovery of a documentary gem and the teenager—now woman—who inspired three student filmmakers to provide a platform for her to tell her story and that of her community.

Postscript. Felicia Bragg has spent her life as an organizer and activist.⁴⁹ She made headlines in 1974, when, at the age of twenty-six, she replaced the head of the Los Angeles Labor Federation, Sigmund Arywitz, for a seat on the Democratic delegation attending a national convention in Kansas City. Felicia had been an organizer for the Hotel, Restaurant, and Bartenders Union but was unemployed at the time.⁵⁰ She told the press, “My victory over Arywitz was symbolic because I’m young (26), black, and a female.”⁵¹

We showed Bragg a digitized version of the film when we met with her in the spring of 2013, and the experience was quite moving. She viewed the film much as she would a home movie and was especially touched by seeing her mother, who lived to be ninety years old. She discussed the community she grew up in and its being documented by three UCLA student filmmakers who wanted to share an untold story about what it meant to live, literally, on the other side of the tracks. Toward the end of our time with her she reflected on watching the film and thinking about the trajectory of her life: “I don’t know why I was so attached to Watts but I was; kind of romantically attached to my community, and really still am. I always felt that people really did see the beauty of that community. It’s one of the things that segregation did do for us that we really don’t value now, maybe, and that was that it kept us together.” Bragg also recollected, with a palpable sense of sadness, that the togetherness and viability of the community was destroyed following the uprisings in Watts in August 1965.⁵²

A final postscript to the story of this film came in December 2014, when we were successful in our nomination of *Felicia* to the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry.⁵³ The librarian of Congress, in consultation with the National Film Preservation Board, selects twenty-five films each year and prioritizes these films for

49 Bragg, interview.

50 See “Democrats Oust Labor Leader from Delegation,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1974, 3.

51 “Arywitz, Foe Differ as to Why He Lost Seat at Convention,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1974, C1.

52 Bragg, interview.

53 The authors of this article first nominated *Felicia* for consideration for the registry in 2013 and resubmitted their nomination in 2014. The press release for the 2014 selections for the National Film Registry is available at the website of the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2014/14-210.html>), and the complete list of films named to the registry is at <http://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/>.

preservation. The inclusion of this short, educational, nonfiction film is an indication of the importance of the story it tells and of its place in American film history. The fact that it was named to the registry is a reminder of one way that archivists and film scholars can help to shape that history. *

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