



Title

Re: Devotion

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About the author(s)

is an American artist, educator and film-maker. She works across narrative, documentary and experimental modes of film-making to address themes such as race, class, familial relationships, social justice and sociopolitical histories within the United States. Her collaborative and research-based approach is often inspired by the real-life stories of her protagonists, exploring the space between fact and fiction and blurring the boundaries between notions of narrative and documentary cinema. In 2020 Bradley's debut feature documentary, *Time*, was nominated for fifty-seven awards and won twenty times, including an Oscar Nomination, a Peabody Award and Best Director, Documentary, at Sundance, making her the first Black woman to win this award.

is an interdisciplinary artist who investigates the complexities of narrative production, consumption and perception. Utilising various media, she deconstructs language and imagery to explore the tension between subaltern experiences and dominant histories. Through investigative research, she considers the ways media frameworks control how narratives involving marginalised communities are depicted and in turn disseminated under the aegis of journalistic 'objectivity'. She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award, CatchLight Fellowship, Soros Equality Fellowship, Sarah Arison Artadia Award and the Radcliffe Fellowship at Harvard University. Her work is in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA; and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, among others.

Cover image: **Fig. 2** Still from *Alone*, by Garrett Bradley. 2017. Film, duration 13 minutes. (© Garrett Bradley; courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

Re: Devotion

by Garrett Bradley and Alexandra Bell • 08.05.2024

This conversation, between the artists Garrett Bradley (b.1986) and Alexandra Bell (b.1983), is an edited excerpt from 'Garrett Bradley: Devotion', published by MIT Press in February 2024. It is the first volume in a new series of readers co-published with Lisson Gallery entitled 'Re:', which will respond to a number of its artists and themes past and present.

Alexandra Bell: I often think about the overlap between journalism and documentary. I know in a sense they are the same thing, but documentary has a type of freedom to it that I'm not sure journalism has. Documentary is a more robust subjective space than journalism. Anyway, there is something you said at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, when you were in conversation with Julie Dash.¹ You said in journalism and in documentary, I think, there are questions about the role of beauty... and whether beauty can incite action in the same way that trauma can. And I'm very much in the camp of yes, beauty can do that. So, I think I enter my work and my process from that point of view. Can you say more about this?



Fig. 1 *Olympic Threat*, by Alexandra Bell. 2020. Screen print and archival pigment print on paper, 2 parts, each 48 by 52 cm. (© Alexandra Bell; courtesy the artist).

Garrett Bradley: Sure, although quickly on documentary and journalism: John Grierson was a Scottish film-maker credited with

coining the term 'documentary', in reference to Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*. From what I understand Flaherty went to the Arctic in 1912 to observe and film the Inuk people from this 'ethnographic perspective', then somehow lost all of his film. So, he went back to some of the same places and had members of the Inuk community re-enact their own lives and practices. And that film was then coined 'a documentary', by Grierson in a review – which cemented the notion of a new genre. In Grierson's essay, 'First principles of documentary' (1932) he makes the case that 'acting' and scripted films are not only bourgeois but have less potential to reflect 'the spirit' of the real world.



Fig. 2 Still from *Alone*, by Garrett Bradley. 2017. Film, duration 13 minutes. (© Garrett Bradley; courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

Today, Wikipedia defines a documentary as 'a non-fictional motion picture intended to "document reality, primarily for the purpose of instruction, education or maintaining a historical record"'. The documentary works I've made have often started with a conversation that centres itself on if and how larger societal issues affect us on a personal level. And from there – really just facilitating a visual articulation of how those questions are answered. And that does go into aesthetics, into your question on the role of beauty versus trauma, or pain?

I should be clear that I'm not qualifying those two things. I don't mean to imply that it's a matter of choosing between violence and trauma, but rather of incorporating them both as modes of expression that can create the opposite effect, that create the peace, the beauty. Both likely need a platform because both are true. I think what I was getting at is the complication that occurs in parallel, when something becomes public, it can also become definitive. And there is a tendency, that I'm personally invested in counteracting, in which we are defined by the problem, by the pain, by the trauma. Black people – Black Americans in particular – have shaped and defined global culture through music, clothing, language, art, through forms of beauty. And that place, the

outcome of a grim reality, is where I've personally been most interested, most focused.



Fig. 3 Still from *Alone*, by Garrett Bradley. 2017. Film, duration 13 minutes. (© Garrett Bradley; courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

AB: In journalism, I think violence is central to the way the field operates. Journalism trains you for trauma being the point of arousal – it's supposed to galvanise people. In fact, a lot of people enter journalism school dreaming of uncovering some human rights abuse or some high-level corruption. It isn't as common for beauty to be the catalyst in news. I think solutions journalism tries to get at this by asking a very central question, what is actually working? And from there those stories often contain great examples of communal love, perseverance and problem-solving, but this isn't the norm. Most news is doom and gloom. You know, if it bleeds it leads.



Fig. 4 Still from *America*, by Garrett Bradley. 2019. Multi-channel video installation, looped. (© Garrett Bradley; courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

GB: I want to talk a bit about form because I think our processes work to similar ends in very different ways. When I'm cutting something, I find myself aspiring towards a seamless or invisible change. I don't want anyone to feel the construction. And it's interesting because I realised that makes the work opaque again in some way.

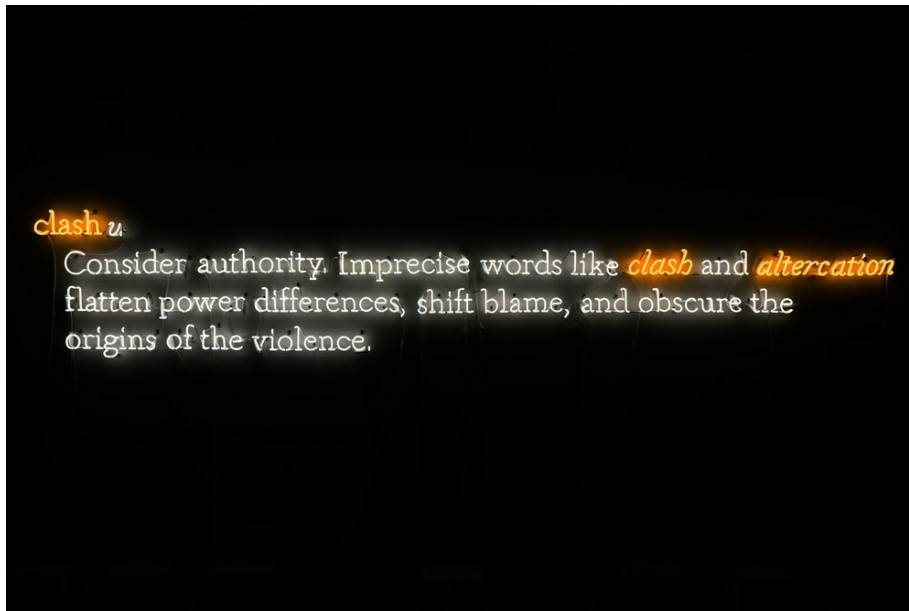


Fig. 5 *clash* from the series *Warning Signs: Disputations on the Power and Efficacy of the Fourth Estate*, by Alexandra Bell. 2023. Neon tubing, transformer and electrical wires, 4 by 0.76 m. (© Alexandra Bell; courtesy the artist).

I want to read a very brief description of your process by Doreen St. Félix for the *New Yorker*. It's brilliant in its brevity, because your work is doing so many things, so it's a good place to start. She writes, '[Bell] uses redaction, omission, annotation and text editing to alter articles. She then prints out large versions of her deconstructions and plasters them onto walls around the city'.²

Can you talk a little about your process – particularly the role of visibility? Being able to see what you've changed with your red marker, the error and correction in one space **FIG.1**, the construction is made visible. Are you interested in being able to see a multifaceted truth? Or is it a new truth?

AB: It's an old truth, right? I'm most often trying to narrow it down to something really singular and specific. When it comes to reporting on violence against Black people, there's a certain level of nuance allowed. So, a part of me is trying to remove all doubt. I'm trying to erase all the grey areas, many of which are hidden in the framework or structure of the article.

I once returned a used book because it had too many margin notes. I remember it felt impossible to read and form my own view with all the side-talking going on. I think about Counternarratives in this

way. The goal is to be disruptive and to distract, so that people can see your construction. The edit needs to be intrusive and domineering. It needs to be visible. Also, visible edits on top of an already published *New York Times* article is a power move. It's my way of saying, 'Not so fast, we are not done yet'.

I feel like I noticed some of your edit in *Alone* FIG.2 FIG.3 or is it technique? There's a parallel between your distance from the subjects and their distance from one another. It happens in the conversation with the lawyer and when she's waving to him as he's been transferred. Also, you use montage in *America* FIG.4 and isn't that sort of bossy?

GB: Both of those instances in *Alone* are in-camera. The distance – the placement of the lens in relation to what's happening – is a type of editing in that it's a choice but it takes on a different process once I start cutting. There are hard cuts or dissolves, essentially lots of different ways to 'cut' or transition from one thing to the next. All of which reflect, from a formal standpoint, what the message is. *America* was a series of twelve vignettes. It's funny because I never thought about it as a montage but I like that: twelve years in montage. And montage is bossy, but in my mind, the whole process is a layering of points of view, connected to a certain end, a certain goal.

AB: Ah yes. Well for me, construction and edits sometimes feel like the same thing, but I get that there's a clear difference. I'm perhaps overreading, because I'm in the early stages of film and video in my art practice. I've been thinking through broadcast news segments and montages so I'm hyper-attuned to every little thing these days.

This new thing I'm working through emerged out of my stay in Los Angeles, where I spent a great deal of time with Kahlil Joseph and folks at BLKNWS. I got to sit in on editing and make suggestions and also share my own thoughts about news and media. When it came time for me to prepare a segment, I felt a number of limits: first my own editing abilities and that I really wanted to put a lot of text on screen.

I remember feeling a bit frustrated, but it became an opening for me. I really wanted to embrace the idea of the news segment and consider what it might mean to pull video from two screens and put it into another form, one that felt more in line with the way I read. Does this make sense?

Montage seems so abstract to me and I feel so painfully literal at times. One place that always feels radical for me when it comes to my practice is that I use old news. I don't think drawing from the archive is this mind-blowing thing, but in journalism and news media when something occurs is very important, reaching back to something that is considered 'old' is disruptive.

In this sense, time becomes part of my technique. Can we talk about the use of time in your work? Obviously, you have the film *Time* (2020), but you also have *America*, which moves across time. There's something thematically happening for me. For you?

GB: All three of those films were made around the same time, very much overlapping with each other. *America* took almost six years to make and I was really invested in the idea of trying to formally challenge myself to create something within the technical limitations of the turn of the twentieth century. That's why it's on 35mm film, even though it's expensive as fuck, and I knew colour wasn't an option at that point. I'm mentioning that because that's also why *Alone* is in black and white, I was having a hard time seeing in colour and I didn't feel it would add another layer to Aloné's or her family's experience, or that it was even appropriate. It was actually one of her sons, Jay, who said, 'It's so cool that it's in black and white, because it's like nothing's changed in time'. I wish I had thought of that. *Time* and *Alone*, in my mind, are always sister films, because I met Fox in the process of making *Alone* and the methodology that I established remained exactly the same.³ But getting to your larger question around conceptual ideas of time, my feeling is that there's just one tense, so when we remember things from the past, they become present inside of us. In the same sort of corny New Age way that you talk to your future self and it becomes your present. And that's how you manifest, right?

AB: Yeah. Alright I was thinking about that. It's the thing that stands out to me. When I get asked about time my feeling is just that nothing is ever really old.

GB: Right, exactly, and those three films in particular were really operating under that belief system that the past and the present were one and the same. With *Time* it was interesting, because I didn't know Fox had this whole archive of films and it forced me to reconsider how to edit the piece. And the film became about how they stayed connected over the course of Robert's incarceration, and how love, ritual and routine operated for them in their life, and how they were able to hold on to themselves as individuals, to resist the ways in which the prison industrial complex aims to remove one's identity and sense of self. The juxtaposition from past to present allowed for them to always be in the same tense of time, even if it was twenty years prior. But I wouldn't have been able to do that had I not tried to do something similar with *America*, namely how to force flexibility out of material I myself did not shoot, how to evoke or pull out something I discern, through movement, timing and juxtaposition. Through its editorial construction. That challenge is what I think, really defined the next film, thereafter. And *Naomi Osaka* (2021) actually.

While we're talking about construction, I don't know whether you

see your Instagram as a part of your practice or not, but your approach to your Stories is very specific and I wonder if you can talk a little about that. How you approach that format? Do Counternarratives apply here?

AB: I like to think I make work that both appreciates and complements my neurosis and also breaks me out of it. I can be painfully literal and ordered and, as a result, linear in the way that I don't always love. I'm always looking for the moment a system or setup or gadget breaks me out of this sort of one, two, three, four feeling I constantly have. And you know, there's something about Instagram and how it's structured that really frees me from, or perhaps highlights, the way my mind bounces around before I even have a chance to intervene. That said, it has limits and things that appeal to me. Structure is good. Ten slides? I got you. I can make effective, funny, incisive commentary on this topic and I can apply my own rules that I know but others won't really recognise. And it plays on the internet and the speed of things. I can make a statement about the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention's rapidly changing incubation period and tie that to Amazon working conditions in ten slides using a meme featuring a Tyler Perry character. It's so fucking funny to me and I really love the way this site holds my humour and idiosyncrasies in this way. And I guess another thing that is important – it doesn't feel forced or contrived.

I try to respect my limits but it's never the end of things for me. I'm always trying to figure out how to say something and when I feel stuck or I don't fully have the skills to pull something off, I seek other ways while also reaching back to build up those other muscles. Instagram puts me in the video conversation. I'm inching my way there. It's me inching my way toward collage. It's me inching my way toward assemblage. I've been really devouring the work of Raymond Saunders (b.1934) and Hervé Télémaque (1937–2022), as well as returning to Lorna Simpson (b.1960), Mickalene Thomas (b.1971) and Arthur Jafa (b.1960). There's a certain readability for me now that I'm trying to tackle a different set of challenges.

This is an opening for me, you know? And I've been trying to figure out how to take this skill that exists in the very specific arena that is Instagram and figure out how to make a physical work or installation. How does one give form to, or say concretise, these seemingly ephemeral moments that are so rich and so informative? They all represent the power of the internet and I guess inherently the danger of it too, depending on where you stand in the world. Also, without getting too conspiracy theory on you, one day they are going to up and unplug the whole thing without notice. Watch. I think it's really necessary to find these moments of meaning and house them somewhere.

GB: The anxiety that you're talking about, around being unplugged

is really interesting – it makes me think, in much the same way of needing to house and archive, likely off the internet, that part of the revolution in this moment is that it is unplugging. And unplugging is deceptively simple because we know how difficult and complicated that actually is when our emotional, economic, even increasingly our human connections are through devices. But if that dependence is what colonisation looks like today, are we not in a profound moment wherein it's easier than ever to revolt? I don't know how I feel about what I'm saying. It's truly a question I'm agnostic about at the moment. I'm curious how you might think about that proposal. If it's a matter of just turning the phone off – not buying appliances with cameras and microphones – focusing on the physical world, are we potentially in the least violent and most powerful position historically to resist?

AB: Ehhh. I'm not sure if it's anxiety so much as it feels like an inevitability. I imagine it's not even possible for people to decide to unplug and I think people who are able to achieve a certain level of analogue-only life are financially secure and have the option to carve out a niche way of living.

GB: I'm saying the technological age that we're entering tells us that our own bodies and the physical world are more and more obsolete. And I'm wondering what past revolutionaries, whose bodies were so integral to the resistance, what they would say to us in this moment? The violence in other words, maybe, is staying plugged in.

AB: I'm reading David Walker's *Appeal* from 1829. It's this small pamphlet he wrote in Boston calling out slavery, calling out white folks, with a call for Black unity to fight back against oppression. He was smuggling it down to North Carolina on ships by sewing it into sailors' clothing. Its presence in the South resulted in one of the first quarantines. They were really trying to make sure the book didn't get around. Anyway, I mention this because one of the remarkable things about the pamphlet and about Black newspapers is that they represented mobility. Especially so at a time when Black people couldn't move because of slavery and Northern terrorism, the mobility of paper was revolutionary.

I think about the internet in this light. Obviously, it's supervised and there is probably zero likelihood of privacy, but it's a form of distribution. Cheap distribution. The internet is a place to get information out and to connect with other people. To mobilise if one desires, or at least get the ball rolling towards this kind of place. I think that's important and again, I think people have to do the work of traversing the digital and the in-person.

If I have any anxiety, it's that there is limited infrastructure in place for when – not if – the internet goes away. Goes offline. Maybe this is a question for Nam June Paik (1932–2006). You know he basically used his work to predict the internet and that we

would be uploading ourselves. I think both are likely, but I lean more towards there being some grand and extreme blackout and a great unplugging. If the powers that be don't make it happen, climate change will get us there soon enough.

GB: I would agree that we have innovated every situation we've found ourselves in – and yet in almost every instance, it's revealed, identified and co-opted. And so again, we're forced to find another mode of mobilisation, maybe hence the internet. But I wonder if we've reached that point now where it's been revealed. They know what Black Twitter is. And so I'm sort of forced to wonder if it's a matter at this point of getting back to another, physical in-this-world method.

AB: Well I hope while people are logged in, they are gathering up all the connections and all the tools we will need for whatever is coming. Speaking of, I know you're working on an Octavia Butler project. I read *Parable of the Sower* (1993) in Los Angeles at the height of the pandemic, when people were running out of oxygen, that was intense. It's a book that considers how we might get on the other side of something. I'm wondering, what's it like to make a film like *Parable* (forthcoming) now?

GB: It doesn't feel like a jump. I've, from the beginning, talked about it as a documentary because there's nothing about it that isn't real. Not even, Lauren's hyper-empathy. One of humanity's great downfalls is our own amnesia, our tendency to forget. And I think that's where both the problem and the solution lie in this present moment. Lauren as a central character – and as us – is very much sifting through all of that.

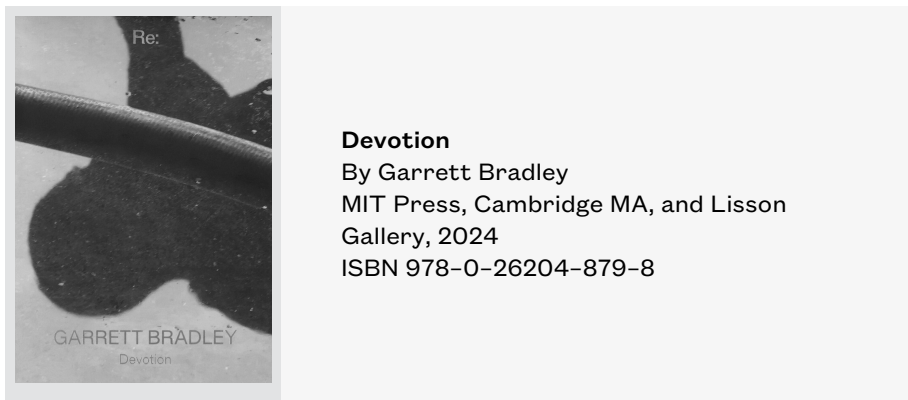
AB: I sometimes think the alternative or the seemingly fictional setup is the best way to smuggle in these new ideas. I have an in-progress work, *The Freedom Papers*. I'm going to do predictive reporting but with a touch of fantasy to consider solutions to things that, in the moment, feel insurmountable. It's also a way I'm trying to break out of my own gaze. You know, the work that I've done, in many ways, centres Black trauma and doesn't always upend it or turn us toward solution. I left 2020 and perhaps the early part of the pandemic thinking about how to challenge myself: how do I make something that is of my own mind? Something that doesn't use as its source a particular, perhaps painful news story as a jumping point.

And I leaned into that question in a very literal way. What would it look like if I made something in my own words? My neon series, *Disputations on the Power and Efficacy of the Fourth Estate* [FIG.5](#), emerged from that thinking. I have a lot of insecurities about the work, but it also feels like an important moment. I'm giving myself freedom to use each work, each series, as a springboard to something else. And it feels good that it came out of a challenge I gave myself.

GB: I love the idea of thinking about neon writing as a way to take a break from your own aesthetic. Especially when you think about neon as an announcement. How do I break my own tendencies? That's a good question. I think that's a challenging thing when you're working with film, because of its elusiveness to a certain extent. The closest relationship I have to touching my films is in the edit and then they become things I can't touch again. It's like making a memory seven times – in ideation, in production, in post, in sound, in colour, in typeface and in its release. I like thinking more and more about physical space as a final space to experience the work and maybe shifting away from linearity.

AB: Ah yes, the challenge of linearity. I guess that's where we end?

About this book



Footnotes

- 1** As part of Garrett Bradley's *America: A Journey Through Race and Time* (11th–17th October 2019).
- 2** D. St. Félix: 'How Alexandra Bell is disrupting racism in journalism', *The New Yorker* (29th May 2018), available at www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/how-alexandra-a-bell-is-disrupting-racism-in-journalism, accessed 22nd April 2024.
- 3** Bradley's film *Time* (2020) follows Fox Rich, an 'entrepreneur, abolitionist and mother of six boys [who] has spent the last two decades campaigning for the release of her husband, Rob G. Rich, who is serving a sixty-year sentence for a robbery they both committed in the early 1990s in a moment of desperation', see foxandrob.com/time, accessed 30th April 2024. The film combines the video diaries that Fox has recorded for Rob over the years with footage by Bradley.

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