Rachael Stoeltje: Our final presenter is Chris Horak [Jan-Christopher Horak]. He is the Director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive. And he has been running film archives for 30 years, about 30 years, somewhere in there. He is also responsible for preserving Oscar Micheaux’s *Veiled Aristocrats* and finding and preserving Rex Ingram’s *Let My People Live*. He and Jackie [Jacqueline Stewart] together have been co-curating this really great ...

Unknown: Ally [Allyson Nadia Field]...

Rachael Stoeltje: Oh, and Ally [Allyson Nadia Field]? I’m sorry, Ally [Allyson Nadia Field], I keep leaving you out. Sorry. And Ally [Allyson Nadia Field], who’s right there, have put together the LA Rebellion series, which screens in the cinema tomorrow at 7 and another film Sunday at 3. Sorry, Ally. And, I guess I’ll just ... yes, so, Chris Horak [Jan-Christopher Horak].

Jan-Christopher Horak: Thank you. And, thank you to, for Brian [Graney] for inviting me, and I’m glad to be here. I’m not going to talk about early black film, but rather about some of the experiences we had with the LA Rebellion. And the first provocative thing I’ll say is that while the issues of materiality are maybe the most exasperated in terms of early black film, the same problems exist throughout the history, whether we’re talking about Blaxploitation films in the 70’s, or independent films like the LA Rebellion films, literally up to the present. There may be a DVD copy of a particular film out on the market, but that doesn’t mean that it is a) preserved and in often times those are these, especially when we’re talking about things like the so-called Blaxploitation films, are made from one surviving print, because the companies that made these films for the most part were not the Hollywood majors but were smaller companies, many of which have gone out of business and the films, literally there’s no one there to keep the films.

With the LA Rebellion project, it was a little bit different, because working in an archive as long as I have; usually we’re dealing with films where the filmmakers are no longer around. And, so it’s, they’re not really concerned with their legacy or anything like that. In the case of the LA Rebellion filmmakers, it was in some ways even more difficult because, yes, the filmmakers were there, but the work had to a large extent disappeared from consciousness. And the filmmakers themselves, being independent filmmakers and often very marginalized filmmakers, as filmmakers of color, did not have an infrastructure to make sure that the materials survived. And, in some cases, the films were in a lab but nobody knew that. In other cases, they were under beds and other places like that, simply because as I said most of the films of the LA Rebellion were not distributed by any mainstream filmmaker, film production, film distribution company. So in fact, the only film I know that was actually picked up by a major is Charles Burnett’s *To Sleep With Anger*, which is Goldwyn. The other films that have been distributed were so-called specialty distributors like Kino [Lorber], like Women Make Movies, like the Black Film Cooperative, institutions that themselves are somewhat marginalized and also always economically at the fringes, and are always struggling to continue to survive. So what happened is that the prints would get, a lot of these films were made in the 70’s and early 80’s. The single print would be made. It would go to somebody like the Black Filmmakers Co-op or a Third World Newsreel, and they literally have been running that same print for 20 years, 25 years, or more. And so those
prints are almost in as bad of shape as some of the films we’re talking about when we’re talking about the race film era.

As we discovered of the, something like 75 to 80 films that we identified, and since then we’ve actually identified a few more, literally only about 35 percent have any kind of distribution and that was back then, and many of them then fell out of distribution. So for example, the films of Jamaa Fanaka who was maybe commercially the most successful as a commercial filmmaker. He was, his features were distributed through an exploitation distributor, Xenon [Pictures, Inc.], but they went to video at some point in the 80’s and so there were no prints, good 35-millimeter prints of those films available. And the situation with other filmmakers was even more difficult.

So, our first goal was beyond identifying the filmmakers and identifying the films was to try to find the material. And of course, since these were living filmmakers, we had to work with those filmmakers. And, that initially was also quite a challenge, because these filmmakers had gone to UCLA but UCLA had more or less, because these weren’t like rich white guys who went into the Hollywood industry, they were marginalized and in many cases UCLA had not contacted them for years, and years, and years, and decades, or longer. And even while they were at UCLA, of course they being the first generation of African Americans at university were subject to unbelievable racism, by the white professors who were supposed to be supporting them. And we’ve had, we’ve heard stories that make your teeth curl in terms of white professors making sure that things didn’t happen for these African American filmmakers.

And so when we first called and said, yes, we want to do this project, they went UCLA, you know, who the fuck are you? Really, because they hadn’t heard from us for such a long time. On the other hand, there were other filmmakers, again one young, one woman in New York, when I called her, she started crying because she said nobody’s asked about this film in 35 years. She had won the Dorothy Arzner Prize for that film, and yet it had not, nobody had asked about it. It had not been screened in over 35 years.

So, getting the cooperation of the filmmakers was one major issue. And that literally, that really happened over time. And in some cases, the filmmakers really didn’t get on board almost until the end of our tour. So after we had done the show, and after it went on tour, I mean like three weeks ago I got a call from Larry Clark. And Larry Clark who, I guess he was in Chicago, was he in Chicago or, yes, and he had such a good time, and he calls me up and he says, you know, I now feel like I’m a part of UCLA again. But it literally took almost three years for that to happen in terms of his project.

So then finding the films. Again, some of the filmmakers ended up going into other professions. Some of the filmmakers were still filmmakers but were struggling. And in fact, none of them, I mean even someone like Charles Burnett, even someone like Julie Dash who their films are on the National Registry, and in certain film study circles you know their work. You know Killer of Sheep. You know Daughters of the Dust. And yet these filmmakers are still economically at the margins. I mean, they do not, they’re not rich people. They are always struggling. And so they didn’t necessarily worry about where their work was. So, we’re looking for the project ones, which were the first films made by these filmmakers as students. I found Jamaa Fanaka’s first film, One Day in
the Life of Willie Faust. Actually, it was Jackie [Jacqueline Stewart] and I; we spent a whole day in over 100-degree heat, down in Compton in this shed. And finally, at the very back, late in the afternoon, in the dirt, I find this one 16 millimeter reel of the film, which is the only surviving print. I mean it’s literally in the dirt.

Jan-Christopher Horak: Yes, the original concept. In other cases, filmmakers had no idea. Larry Clark, we, As Above, So Below, which turned out to be a fantastic discovery, nobody had any idea about this film. And we asked Larry about it and he says, well, the last time he had actually seen the film was something like 1975, ’76. And thanks to some, one of my preservationists, Ross Lipman, who is like a super-bloodhound when it comes to finding, he actually, 40 years later, found the original A&B rolls in a lab. So that was a, and in fact we also found the A&B rolls of Monona Wali’s Grey Area, another film, 1991. There was a print at the New York Public Library. And we got that and we were thinking we were going to have to preserve that, and then all of a sudden we find the original negative.

So that was, we had some successes, but then there were other things that were much more tragic. Melvonna Ballenger, who had passed away in 2005, we found out all of her stuff had been literally thrown into the street. So there was nothing left. And her film Rain, which was her thesis film, when we finally, what we finally found, ironically, was in our own archive, where there are not that many student films because UCLA’s model, unlike that, for example, USC, is that the filmmakers are their own producers and they maintain their own copyright. USC pays for it. They maintain the copyright. They have an archive where they keep the stuff. Not so at UCLA. So we, of this film, Rain, we found an original three-quarter inch tape of a truly awful tele-cine transfer of a 16-millimeter work print. And that’s all that survived.

And, as some of you may know, three-quarter inch is now a huge, huge, problem because the tapes are no good. And we had to bake the tape in order to get any kind of signal off of it. And then it took several months of digital work to improve the quality of the image, which is another point that I want to make. In these films, you are happy with what you have and you have to try to work with that no matter how degraded the material. My preservationists are often working on Hollywood films, and so they always want it perfect. And, it was a real struggle with them to make them understand that if you have, like this Rain, like this Melvonna Ballenger film, or even Jamaa Fanaka’s Willie Faust, it was a pretty contrasty 16 millimeter blow up from an 8 millimeter print, that the quality is never going to be great. You can improve it to a certain level and that’s it, because this is a fundamental misunderstanding of digitality. Most people think you can fix anything. You can’t fix anything. You can only improve what is there. If it’s not there, you can’t create it. Digitality does not create stuff out of magic. So there’s only a certain point you can get to, but you have to then accept that that’s what it is and value what you have, and not constantly then bemoan the fact that it doesn’t look like a Hollywood feature. These films were never produced in that context. And to use those same esthetic criteria is really senseless. And of course, some of us have used that exact same argument when discussing Micheaux, because of course that’s the worst-case scenario in that situation.
So, anyway, we ended up, for the LA Rebellion project doing preservation on several Charles Burnett films, like *Several Friends* and *The Horse*. Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, all of you’ve seen, well all of you haven’t seen it because Julie Dash ran out of money when the film was in post-production and every single print, and there were probably, because the film did quite well for Kino [Lorber], every single print of that film was only made off of, timed off the first answer print. Now, what that means is that when you make a first answer print, you’re guessing what the timing is. You’re kind of getting there but you’re not really there. The only way to get a really good and correct version is to make a second answer print, which is where you then look at the first one and you retime that to fix all of the things. So, anyway, that never happened, for all of those years. We ended up paying off the debts in the lab and then actually commissioning a second answer print and Julie Dash and AJ, her cameraman, sat there at our premiere, which was the opening night of the program, and their jaws were like down here because they saw stuff, they had seen the film hundreds of times, they saw lots of stuff they had never ever seen before. So, from, it was like seeing a brand new film once you had that second answer print. And now, talking about issues of access, nobody wants to, no distributor wants to make a new version because they’re still making money off of the old version, which is I wish somebody would say, come on, let’s get the new version, but it’s not happening so far.

We also made a new print of Larry Clark’s *Passing Through*, again, after finding the original A&B’s to that, and Barbara McCullough’s *Water Ritual*. And now after the program’s kind of over, I had said to all of the filmmakers when I initially started this project that this project is not going to end with the end of our program, or the touring program, etcetera. And in fact, it has continued. We’ve done a lot of digital restoration work on Ben Caldwell’s *I&I, African Allegory* now. We did a digital restoration on *Diary of an African Nun*, Julie Dash’s film, which was also originally 8 millimeter, and we have now through a digital intermediary blown up to 35 and it actually looks very good. I found in Germany, Uma Dico’s film, the *Snake Under My Bed*, and we created an English-language version of that. And, the most recently, we’ve digitized Haile Gerima’s *Harvest 3000* so he can put that out on DVD now.

And, and this is a question which hopefully will be resolved happily, I’ve now applied for a grant to actually create a DVD teaching set for many of these titles which are just not available, so that they can be used as teaching tools. The challenge there is the rights issue, because of course when these filmmakers made these films; they were just taking stuff wherever they could find it and never clearing in the rights, especially the music rights. So, I calculated, it would cost over $100,000 to clear the music rights. And that’s not going to happen. So my model, and this is what I’ve suggested to the NEA is that we get grant funding to pay the filmmakers, because one other thing that I really wanted from the beginning is that the filmmakers get paid. They got paid for their appearances. They got paid for every time the film was screened, because in many cases they had not got, seen any income for a long time.

And, so the model I’m suggesting is that we fund the filmmakers, we fund the production, but then we distribute it for free to institutions, and this way we get around this whole music copyright issue. Whether it will work or not, we’ll see. You’ll know soon enough when the set’s out. So thank you.