

## **Kabir Carter**

### **Treemonisha Songs**

Nearly twenty years after my mother's unexpected and untimely passing, I began sorting through her photographic archives. The bulk of her photographs were taken in Los Angeles' Westside during a five year period in the nineteen seventies. During this time, Dori—I've always called her by a preferred diminutive of her first name—had regular access to an in-house darkroom that shared a wall with my bedroom. While she worked, I would sometimes join her and observe her fix a strip of negative film into a metal holder, slide the film under the lens of an imposing enlarger, trigger a burst of bright light onto a blank sheet of photographic paper, and dunk the freshly exposed print into trays filled with shallow pools of photographic processing chemicals. I must have been allowed to help develop her proof sheets and prints, as I have a strong recollection of gently submerging and grazing the edges of photographic papers with rubber tipped tongs, all the while watching images gradually emerge.

Later, these images were usually rinsed and dried in a small, homely washroom that was also next to my bedroom. Inside, a large porcelain bathtub with a long rubber hose instead of a showerhead rested in wait, always ready to rinse my small form or one of many faintly acrid smelling photographic prints. To this day, when I bathe, I prefer to lie inside of a bathtub and drench myself with water, soaking for interminably long periods until my skin begins to swell and become heavy with water. I cannot find any other reason for this indulgent habit other than that it allows me to connect with my body memory of helping my mother in the darkroom—with an experience of having my thoughts and feelings modulated through the world around me, cast into sharper focus and incorporated into my being.

When the darkroom was not in use, I would often sit within it and luxuriate upon a roomy Eames lounge chair and ottoman. I did not know that the Eames Office was sited four blocks away inside of a disused garage and auto body shop, where Electric Avenue's old rail line was once swallowed into the inland edge of Main Street. And I did not know that our neighborhood was called a ghetto or the "slum by the sea." Nor did I know or understand that Venice was at the epicenter of Los Angeles' contemporary arts scene, where the studios of Vija Celmins, Fred Eversley, James Turrell, Chris Burden, De Wain Valentine, and many others were but a few steps or skateboard pushes away. Most important, I possessed no foreknowledge of the tremendous value our home might eventually produce, even as one headline from the Los Angeles Times trumpeted in the year I began going to school: "Everything Is Changing, Especially the People." All of this would come into focus later.

Back to pictures. Primarily, Dori's images disclose fragments of my family members' social and professional lives. While most of her photographs were taken in Venice's Oakwood District, in the vicinity of Venice Beach, or along the street best known as West Washington Boulevard, a number of other Westside locales appear: my alma mater University Elementary School and UCLA's Westwood campus; Santa Monica's mountains and canyons; my grandparents' residence in Bel Air; a handful of temporary outdoor film sets scattered throughout the Westside, and beyond it, Barnsdall Park.

Dori did not have any formal photographic training. Instead, she learned through observing family friends' own attempts at honing their photographic craft. And it is altogether possible that she felt attracted to photography in part because of its technical particulars and demands. After all, her father was a second generation Los Angeleno with an engineering background. And his father ran various thermal power stations in and near greater Los Angeles around the turn of the century. Through measuring and filtering light intensities, opening and closing shutters and irises, and converting and dissolving silver halide particles, Dori drew a thread from her paternal ancestors to herself.

While I am not certain of this, I suspect that at least some of the photographic tools that Dori used ended up in our loft upon the dissolution of The People—Venice, a community arts center for local youth that was led by my father and initially funded as a state sponsored response to the Watts Rebellion. Around the mid nineteen seventies, as my father's arts administrative work at The People—Venice ended, he began working intermittently as a character actor in a handful of film and television productions. Although he was not particularly successful, our rent was modest, and he seemed to work frequently enough to justify his pursuit of an acting career. And while I cannot recall expressing a desire to act or perform as a child, I soon followed suit.

Over a short span of my elementary school studies, I appeared in a photo shoot promoting skin care products in Japan, did Foley work in the role of Mowgli for a film production, and appeared in at least one Churchill Films production. Concurrently, Dori's photographic work continued to advance. In 1974, she shot a series of outdoor portraits of older neighborhood children for composite sheets. Around this time, she also took production stills on the film set of Black Belt Jones in Malibu, headshots for various unknown neighborhood locals, and documented musicians Billie Harris and his wife (who first lived in Venice with their children in a repurposed Helms Bakery step van) performing outdoors. Harris founded The Azz Izz Jazz Culture Center and Tea House on West Washington Boulevard, and one of his ensembles was featured in the work of UCLA MFA graduate Jacqueline Frazier, who is associated with what was eventually named in a 1986 Whitney Museum film program as the "L.A. Rebellion"—American independent cinema mostly made in Los Angeles by African Americans and others from the African diaspora.

One film that featured many of the people already mentioned is Amelia Anderson's *Scott Joplin: King of the Ragtime Composers*. Released in nineteen seventy seven, *Scott Joplin* is Anderson's UCLA MFA Thesis film. Over fifteen minutes, Eartha Kitt narrates an abbreviated biography of Joplin's career, focusing on his music publishing partnership and failed production of his opera *Treemonisha*. The cast for the film includes my godmother who (alongside Dori) is credited for costume design; Patricia Sides, her sister; an older boy who lived around the corner from my family; a musician and actor who appeared in at least two other films with my father around the same time period; and myself. The social fabric of Anderson's film represents a narrow slice of the same progressive and liberal West Los Angeles community that I grew up in. Retrospectively, the film is both an iteration of its script and effectively captures the spirit of the time and place of its making.

Until recently, my memory of the film was limited to the following: first, my personal recollection of appearing in it, which centers on a staging of the end of the opera at Santa Monica's now defunct Mayfair Theatre. Second, my mother's photographs documenting rehearsals and production, both on UCLA's Westwood campus and at the Mayfair Theatre. Watching footage from the documentary, I see myself attempting to move along with the rest of the cast, unable to follow Joplin's written directions for *The Slow Drag* as interpreted on stage. Perhaps this is where my aversion to performance stems from and why I am at once drawn to dance and paralyzed when given the space to move freely.