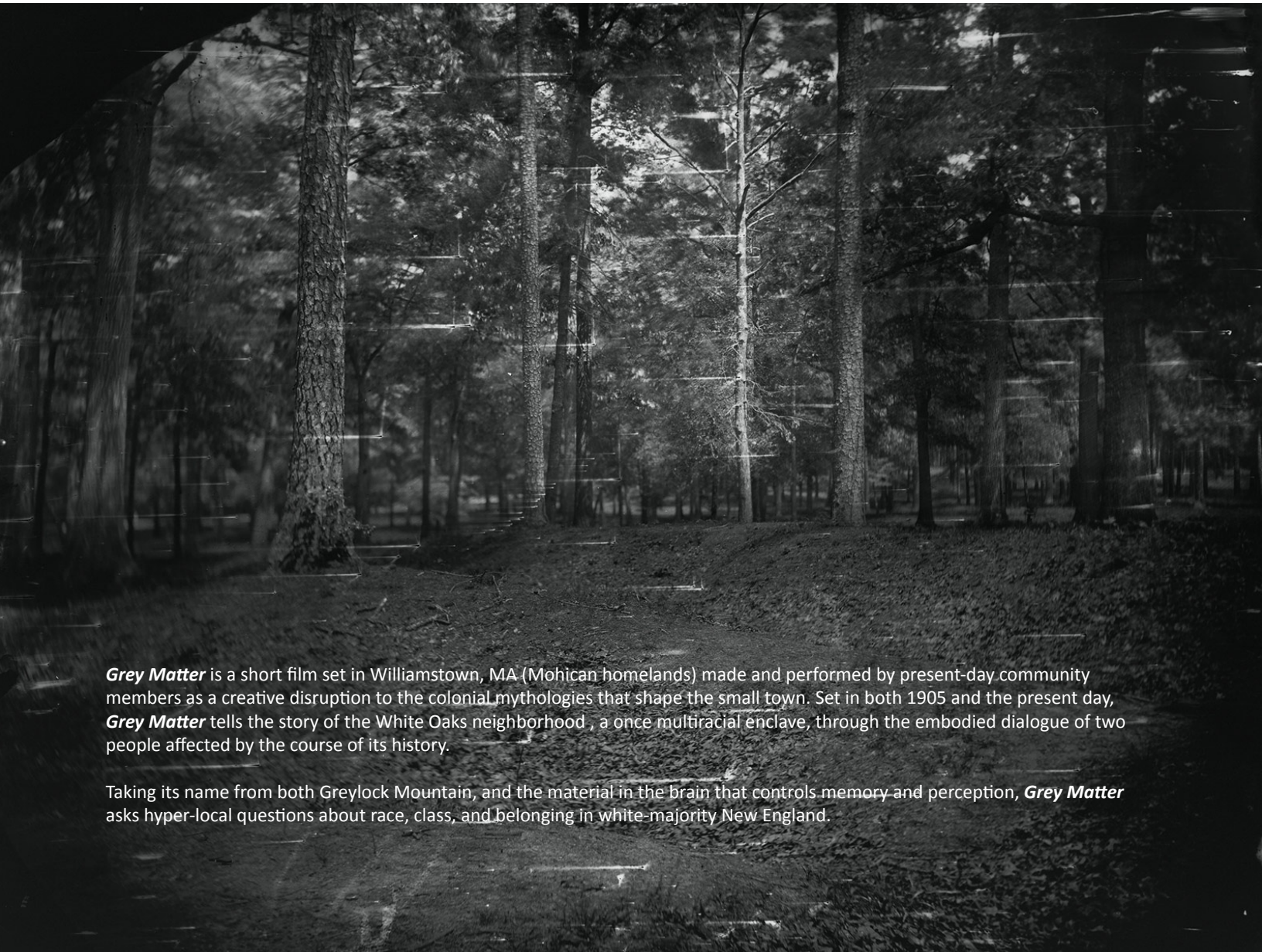


GREY MATTER



Grey Matter is a short film set in Williamstown, MA (Mohican homelands) made and performed by present-day community members as a creative disruption to the colonial mythologies that shape the small town. Set in both 1905 and the present day, ***Grey Matter*** tells the story of the White Oaks neighborhood, a once multiracial enclave, through the embodied dialogue of two people affected by the course of its history.

Taking its name from both Greylock Mountain, and the material in the brain that controls memory and perception, ***Grey Matter*** asks hyper-local questions about race, class, and belonging in white-majority New England.

CREATIVE TEAM / STORYTELLERS

Grey Matter creators Bilal Ansari and Sacha Yanow both have personal reasons for telling this story. Ansari—a diversity professional at Williams College and former Muslim Chaplain—comes from three generations of Black Williamstown residents, some of whom lived in White Oaks, and some of whom were violently forced out of town. Yanow—a queer Jewish performance artist—grew up in Williamstown feeling alienated, left to build a life in NYC as a performer, and returned during the pandemic to reckon with notions of home. Together, these storytellers from very different backgrounds are working together to bring to light their community's buried past.

Ansari and Yanow are joined by filmmaker Naiti Gámez and playwright Jerry Lieblich. This collaborative team is being advised by a multigenerational, multiracial group of town and area residents, including Williams College faculty, staff and students from the Art, Theatre, Dance, Africana Studies and History departments; curators from the Williams College Museum of Art; Mt Greylock High School students; local organizers; and members of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Community.





THE FILM

Part historical fiction, part art intervention, ***Grey Matter*** is a hybrid (narrative/documentary) short film set in both 1905 and present-day Williamstown (Mohican homelands). The film centers on the White Oaks neighborhood, a once thriving multiracial enclave of formerly enslaved people, Indigenous peoples, and poor white people. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, wealthy white land-owners and the local church founded by Williams College professor Albert Hopkins forced that community to disperse. Its residents — mostly Black subsistence farmers — were systematically criminalized, dispossessed, and pushed away. There is no local acknowledgement or awareness of White Oaks and its history.

Bilal Ansari and Sacha Yanow each have a different relationship to this land and both have been affected by the course of this history. ***Grey Matter*** follows their process of embodying the past as an act of belonging: as an intimate and restorative practice in the present day. Together they create and perform imagined scenes set in 1905 based on primary primary source materials and the lives of real life residents of White Oaks. Ansari embodies Ishmael Solomon, a Black basket weaver and grandson of a local Civi War hero. Yanow embodies Grace Greylock Niles, a white botanist and White Oaks church member.

The film weaves past and present to confront local mythologies and broader narratives of New England, which are characterized by the histories and people they leave out. ***Grey Matter*** seeks to creatively interrupt this erasure.

STORYTELLER BIOS

Bilal Ansari (co-creator, performer)

Bilal's family history in Williamstown goes back three generations. He has dedicated the past three decades of his work to challenging systems of racial, gender, and religious inequalities as a chaplain in federal and state prisons, community organizer, activist, advisor at various colleges, and educator. In 2013 Bilal was awarded the Connecticut Center for a New Economy's Outstanding Leadership Award for fifteen years of community activism and organizing that improved the economic and social well-being of working families in urban centers and rural communities by raising wages of the working poor, improving public education and training, securing public health care, and creating affordable housing. Bilal is a first-generation college student, with an AS in liberal arts from Ohlone College, a BS in human services from Springfield College, an MA in Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations and graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary, and a DM in from Pacific School of Religion. Bilal is Assistant Vice President for Campus Engagement at the Office of Institutional Diversity Equity and Inclusion at Williams College.

Sacha Yanow (co-creator, performer)

Sacha Yanow was born and raised in Williamstown, and has spent the last 20 years living in NYC working as a performance artist and actor. Their recent solo performances are experimental and embodied portraits of the inner lives of archetypal family figures—the father in *Dad Band*, (2015), the grandmother in *Cherie Dre* (2018) and currently the uncle —as a way to connect to estranged personal and cultural histories. Drawing from theater and performance art, these intimate works use humor and physicality to explore aging, gender, desire, and Ashkenazi Jewish assimilation. They have been presented by venues including MoMA PS1, Danspace Project, Joe's Pub, and the New Museum in NYC; PICA's TBA Festival/Cooley Gallery at Reed College in Portland, OR; and Festival Theaterformen in Hanover, Germany. They have received residency support from Baryshnikov Arts Center, Denniston Hill, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, SOMA Mexico City, and Yaddo. Yanow served as Director of Art Matters Foundation for 12 years, and previously worked at The Kitchen as Director of Operations. They received a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and are a graduate of the William Esper Studio Actor Training Program.

STORYTELLER BIOS

Naiti Gámez (director/cinematographer)

Naiti Gámez is a NYC & Miami-based filmmaker. Naiti has worked as a cinematographer and director on award-winning films and television series. Her film, *Love, Sadie* premiered at the Festival de Cannes Short Film Corner. Her film credits have screened at festivals worldwide including Festival de Cannes, Sundance Film Festival, Berlinale, Camerimage, Tribeca Film Festival, SXSW, among many others. Her TV credits include HBO, Showtime, PBS, ESPN, MTV, Discovery Channel, Nova, and more. Recent feature-length documentary credits include *Ailey*, about Alvin Ailey's life and legacy; *Through the Night*, a portrait of 3 women's lives as they intersect at a 24-hr day care center; and *Hail Satan?*, a provocative exploration of religious freedom in the United States. She holds a B.A. in Latin American Studies from Smith College, and an M.F.A. in Film Production (Cinematography concentration) from the University of Texas at Austin.

Jerry Lieblich (playwright)

Jerry Lieblich writes plays and poems in Williamstown MA, and Brooklyn NY. Plays include *D Deb Debbie Deborah* (Clubbed Thumb – Critic's Pick: NY Times, TimeOut NY), *Tongue Depressor* (The Public Theatre, Brooklyn College), *Nostalgia is a Mild Form of Grief* (Playwrights Horizons, Vineyard Theater), *Ghost Stories* (Cloud City - Critic's Pick: TimeOut NY), *Your Hair Looked Great* (Abrons Arts Center), and *The Barbarians* (New York Theatre Workshop, Dixon Place, PRELUDE), *A Discourse on the Method...* (Ensemble Studio Theatre), and *Everything for Dawn* (Experiments in Opera). Jerry has held residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Blue Mountain Center, SPACE on Ryder Farm, UCROSS, and the Edward F. Albee Foundation. They have received a EST/Sloan Commission and the Himan Brown Creative Writing Award (twice), and are an alum of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab, Page 73's I-73 Writer's Group, and Pipeline Theater's Playlab group. BA: Yale, Philosophy; MFA: Brooklyn College (Mac Wellman and Erin Courtney, chief instigators).

Malika Zouhali-Worrall (editor)

Malika Zouhali-Worrall is a British/Afro-Arab filmmaker based in New York. An Emmy Award-winning director, her directing credits include the feature-length documentaries, *Call Me Kuchu* (Berlin Film Festival, Netflix, BBC World, 2012) and *Thank You For Playing* (Tribeca, POV/ITVS, News & Television Emmy Award, 2015), both of which were theatrically released to critical acclaim in the U.S. In 2021, Malika's latest short film, *Video Visit*, premiered at BAM Cinemafest and Blackstar Film Festival, and will be released later this year by Field of Vision. As an editor, she most recently edited *Through the Night* (Tribeca, POV, 2020), a feature-length film by Loira Limbal that was selected for the 2019 Sundance Edit & Story Lab, chosen as a Critic's Pick by The New York Times and The Hollywood Reporter, and recently named as one of The Guardian's Best Documentaries of 2020. Malika is a 2019 Chicken & Egg Awardee, a 2020 Sundance Momentum Fellow, a 2020 William Greaves Award recipient, and a 2021 Adobe Women at Sundance fellow.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Grey Matter is designed to initiate conversations that help reframe dominant narratives about New England's history, and the founding mythologies of the U.S.

Initially, the film will be screened in galleries, museums and film festivals, along with community spaces, educational spaces and organizing circles.

Grey Matter will serve as a resource for school curricula and public programs to be built around and will be archived locally at the Williamstown Historical Society, the local TV Station WilliNet , as well as cultural organizations like Mass MoCA.



VISUAL INSPIRATION

The visual inspiration for the film takes its main cue from its name: ***Grey Matter***. The look of this world is grounded in a classical palette of black, white and many greys. The scenes set in the early 20th century feel historically rooted, yet contemporary and timeless. The present-day scenes are stylized and raw. The film pushes at the margins of “historical documents” and “period pieces” to remind us of how resonant these themes remain today. Soft naturalistic light is used to maintain a look that is evocative and atmospheric, as well as grounded and authentic. And the cinematography both anchors us, and changes stylistically, throughout the film as the story eaves in and out of unexpected times and places.





PRODUCTION STAGE & TIMELINE

Initial production began in Spring 2021. We workshopped and filmed the 1905 scenes on location in Williamstown over five shoot days, with a small 10-person cast & crew made up of mostly local artists and Williams College students.

In Fall 2021, we began post-production and edited a short work sample.

We are currently developing and writing the rest of the film and are scheduled to shoot in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023.

The film will be edited and completed in Summer 2022.

SUPPORTERS

Support for the initial development and filming was made possible by:

'62 Center for Theater and Dance, Williams College

Berkshire Taconic Community Trust

Mass MoCA

Town of Williamstown - Cares Act

Williams College - TIDE Grant

WilliNET (Williamstown Community TV Station)

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