

‘An impossible story.’

Three words open Miryam Charles’s debut feature-length work – three words that are repeated again and again in an attempt at (self-)persuasion. The Québécois filmmaker, who has garnered attention in recent years through her short-form works, takes as a backdrop for *This House (Cette Maison)* the sudden passing in Bridgeport, Connecticut of 14-year-old Terra Alexis Wallace – Charles’s cousin.

Just as her film is centred on an (f)act impossible to conceive – reports suggest that Wallace suffered extreme violence and physical pain – so Charles imagines an equally impossible apparatus to help shape it: the fabrication of a dialogue between Wallace and her inconsolable mother, ten years after her passing:

*What we propose / Invented stories, but not so far from reality /
An announcement of things to come / We’ll establish the possibility of a fluid
journey through time and space / In Haiti, the United States and Quebec.*

Charles conceptualises the encounter both as spoken words, as monologues and conversations, and as a visual assemblage, as installations and reconstitutions. Remarkably, Charles’s *mise-en-scène* is figurative and literal, with both imagined encounters and factual recollections presented on a physical stage with a rudimentary yet meticulous set design. In doing so, Charles creates a palpable space to accommodate memories and recollections, reconstitutions and, eventually, grief and collective therapy.

Despite its physicality, this constructed space remains on the spectrum of the prospective, nurturing the viewer’s emotional responses to a mother’s unjustifiable loss of her child. In doing so, Charles cultivates the mystery within this dispositive – pasts, presents and futures are constantly intertwined with imagination, fantasy and remembrance – while also imagining a purpose-built dispositive of the mystery. The filmmaker explores physicality in all its complexity: through 16mm and Super 16mm film rolls; through Schelby Jean-Baptiste’s admirable incarnation of Wallace; and through the narrator, embodied by artist Florence Blain Mbaye (who also gave voice to the St Lawrence river in Félix Dufour-Laperrière’s *Archipelago (FoR21)*, also produced by Embuscade Films). The narration reveals the evocative force of speech, both in its presence and absence, as it is deemed to disappear in the most unbearable moment of the death of one’s own child.

Charles’ tactful interplay between the private and the public, the confidential and the communal, in her exploration of a family event instigates both respectful distance and intimate compassion. As the viewer is invited to explore Wallace’s mother’s secret garden, sentiments of intrusion and care emerge and conflict, yet these sentiments eventually make the viewer reflect on the therapeutic virtue of collective remembrance as a way to address trauma. While Wallace inhabits each frame and sound of the film, Charles evokes an unflagging search for understanding, and for the meaning of an indescribably barbarous act – an act that requires investigation despite the knowledge that no satisfying answer can be found.