

INTERVIEW WITH COLLIN RIGGINS '24, CREATOR OF "SON OF MANY" - WINNER OF THE UCHV SHORT MOVIE PRIZE 2022



UCHV: Where are you from, and what is your major?

CR: Hello, my name is Collin Riggins, and I am from Kansas City, Missouri. As of a few weeks ago, I am really happy to say that I am officially majoring in African American Studies.

UCHV: When did you start making movies and how did you come to make "Son of Many"?

CR: I do not think I would hardly call myself a movie maker. In fact, this was my first time working with film. I normally do photography and some writing, which I think is really reflected in "Son of Many," which is a series of still photos and original poetry. I only decided to turn those photos into a film weeks after taking them; the feelings that I experienced while standing in the location in which those photos were taken demanded that I tend to sound in a way that photography simply did not allow. In terms of the film itself, Son of Many documents my journey to make sense of painful histories in which we are personally implicated. It takes place mere blocks from Princeton's campus, in front of what were living quarters for generations of enslaved African Americans (it is important to note that this building is now the giftshop for the Morven Museum). I stumbled upon this site by chance while on a walk. When I realized what this ominous structure was—the violence it stood for—I was overcome by an incendiary mix of emotion. Rage was the first to take hold, as I was dumbfounded how such a momentous space could be so readily reduced to nick nacks and second thoughts.

Sorrow quickly followed, as I envisioned children like myself born into captivity: the backs on which this institution was built and my existence became possible. And to my surprise, awe blossomed as I radically imagined the unlikely families and beautiful intimacy that flourished within these walls, a throaty refusal to a system that desperately tried to suppress both. These emotions ultimately prompted me to simply listen—to embody this space in all of its profound nuance. From the thicket, I heard my Great Grandmama Daisy chronicle her journey from Jim Crow South Carolina to our current home, Missouri. I heard the depth of a diaspora, a community we are actively trying to construct and understand at Princeton, throughout history, and beyond. I heard silence, sometimes the most radical sonic space an African American can exist within. Pulling from my own personal archive (e.g., conversations with Great Grandma, audio from a cafe next to Howard University, etc.), found materials, original poetry, and photography, I attempt to bring these ranging voices in conversation together.

UCHV: What was your budget?

CR: I did not have a budget for this project. I took photos using a 120 film camera provided to me by the visual arts program. And from there, I used Adobe Photoshop and Premiere to bring the project to life.

UCHV: Could you briefly describe any difficulties you had in making "Son of Many"?

CR: I think that above all, the amount of emotional labor required in any project like this can be a lot. I feel like this is often the case when I use personal materials as a way to make sense of broader structures. You always want to ensure that you handle these materials with great care, while also embracing vulnerability. It can be hard. Nevertheless, when you are able to strike a balance, I believe you can find some of the most fertile ground for creation. That is ultimately what I tried to do in Son of Many, and what I hope shines through for other African Americans who watch it; our own familial histories hold so much value deep within them, and no matter how much the black family has been reduced and devalued throughout American history, it deserves all the attention, care, and flowers that we can muster today.

UCHV: Any final thoughts?

CR: I just want to say a big thank you to Max Jakobsen who made me aware of this opportunity. I also want to express my appreciation for Brooklyn Northcross who accompanied me when I took these photos. She is my comfort not only in art, but life itself. As I mentioned, projects like these require a lot of emotional labor, but that toil always feels significantly lighter when you are surrounded by those who are the true embodiment of love and grace.