

Raising Aniya

Directed by John Fiege



<https://www.fiegefilms.com/raising-aniya>

U.S., 2025
87 Minutes / Color

World Premiere
DC Environmental Film Festival

A young dance artist in Houston, Texas, embarks on a journey to heal her spirit and find her voice after being displaced by a hurricane.

Publicity and Sales Contact

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Short Synopsis

Aniya Wingate is a young dance artist in Houston, Texas, who embarks on a journey to heal her spirit and find her voice after being displaced by a hurricane. With guidance from her mentor, Aniya investigates impacted communities on the Gulf Coast and develops a dance performance inspired by her experiences and the complex legacies of environmental injustice. Family, religion, sexuality, and mental health collide as she strives to transform dark histories into beautiful expression and movement. Through intimate observational cinematography, evocative dance sequences, and a haunting score, Aniya's story traces the agony and the ecstasy of growing up, while revealing the power of art and community.

Film Summary

Months after being displaced by Hurricane Harvey, 15-year-old Aniya Wingate sets out to discover her voice as a dance artist and environmental activist while coming of age in inner-city Houston. With guidance from her mentor, Walter J. Hull, Aniya discovers the history of chemical plants built on former plantations in Texas and Louisiana, uncovering issues of environmental racism she had never learned in school. The film is structured as a series of vignettes with place-based dance, observational scenes, and hours of rehearsal, mingling Aniya's research process with the creative work of translating and discovering ways of expressing her story through dance. The beauty and frustration of artistic labor are seen alongside other impressive, dedicated Black artists and activists who inspire Aniya's work. As Aniya's historical consciousness grows, centuries of political violence and environmental racism are revealed and transform her curiosity into righteous anger. With her newfound knowledge, Aniya choreographs her first show, *Caution: Roses Die Here*.

This film is a feature-length documentary, produced in Black communities along the Gulf Coast impacted by climate-driven disasters. Environmental racism in this region is well-documented in the research of Robert Bullard, the Houston-based professor known as the father of the environmental justice movement, and the activism and organizing work of figures like Hilton Kelley, who won the Goldman Environmental Prize for his work in Port Arthur, Texas, and Jacqui Patterson, who directs the Environmental and Climate Justice program at NAACP. Aniya meets each of these people, among other experts and activists. Walter and Aniya view intergenerational relationships as the backbone of the Black community, and in this film, environmental justice is revealed within a broader tapestry of intersectional oppression in the poisoned landscapes of the Gulf Coast and beyond.

Principal Crew

Director/Cinematographer	John Fiege
Executive Producer	Walter Long
Producers	John Fiege, Anita Grabowski, Walter J. Hull, Christopher Lucas
Editor	Sofia Chang
Composer	Ella Jarman-Pinto

Director's Statement on the Film

Raising Aniya is the third film in a trilogy of feature documentaries that I call the *Machines in the South*, which explores the impact of industry on communities and ecologies in the American South. The first film in the trilogy is *Mississippi Chicken*, an intimate portrait of Latin American immigrants working in the poultry industry and the cross-racial efforts to organize for workers' rights. The second film in the trilogy is *Above All Else*, a film about the resistance to the Keystone XL pipeline in rural East Texas and how one man's deep connection to the land intersects with the global fight to confront the climate crisis. As the final film in the trilogy, *Raising Aniya* confronts environmental racism through the coming-of-age story of a young African American dancer in Houston who creates a performance about her experience with Hurricane Harvey and her exploration of environmental justice on the Gulf Coast. Taken together, the trilogy reveals the immense power of industry in the South and the panoply of resistance strategies from a range of communities that are impacted and abused by those industries.

In this latest film, I accompany Aniya Wingate on her journey to recover from her experience with the hurricane and to produce and choreograph her first dance performance. The film plays out in five acts: "Landfall," "Swimming," "Drowning," "Surfacing," and back to "Landfall." The titles of the acts allude to the experience of being in the water and trying to survive in the middle of a hurricane. At the same time, the acts correspond metaphorically to Aniya's emotional experiences throughout the course of the story. The film's narrative tracks the research, development, and performance of Aniya's show, but I also use the structure of her show to track the emotional challenges and joys Aniya faces as a high school student who is transforming from a girl into a woman.

To tell this story, I use a range of filmmaking techniques, including observational cinematography and interviews of Aniya and those close to her, performance footage of dance and spoken word, and poetic landscapes that I film at a variety of frame rates, connecting the viewer to the place and the land. I spent the majority of production following Aniya's story in an

observational mode to capture the relationships, interactions, and small details of her life. Yet, throughout production, I checked in with Aniya and others through interviews to go deeper into their thoughts and feelings. I also filmed performances periodically, sometimes as part of a show or rehearsal and sometimes specifically for the camera. In the editing, we combine the external and experiential aspects of the observational footage with the intimacy and reflectiveness of Aniya's interior world. The dance footage acts as a non-literal, embodied, artistically-driven interpretation of the film's themes and sensibilities—and Aniya's emotions.

For me, Aniya's story is wrapped in the broader story of climate catastrophe and injustice, but her story is also about taking action. When her life is turned upside down by a hurricane, she turns to dance to recover from that experience, develop her future career path, and spark a conversation in her community about the complex legacies of environmental injustice and the love, hope, and beauty that can come out of tragedy. And she's only in high school.

Aniya inspires me, and I hope her story can inspire many others.

Biographies



John Fiege (Producer, Director, Cinematographer) is a film director, cinematographer, photographer, and podcaster whose work explores the cultural dimensions of ecological concerns. His award-winning films have played at Hot Docs, SXSW, Big Sky, MoMA, Cannes, and many others, receiving distribution on Netflix, iTunes, Amazon, Sundance Now, and other platforms. He is a 2024/2025 recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities Media Projects Development Grant for his new film about consumption and waste in New York City. He has received numerous other fellowships, grants, and residencies, including from The Redford Center, Doc Society, Austin Film Society, Film Society of Lincoln Center, Princess Grace Foundation, Kodak, and Smithsonian Institution. His film awards include the Silver Heart Award at the Dallas International Film Festival, Best North American Documentary at the Global Visions Festival, and Best Documentary Short at Dallas VideoFest's DocuFest. He was the director of photography on the Sundance documentary selection, *No No: A Dockumentary*. He hosts *Chrysalis*, a podcast about transformation in the face of global ecological crisis. He holds a B.A. from Carleton College, an M.S. in cultural geography and environmental history from The Pennsylvania State University, and an M.F.A. in film production from The University of Texas at Austin, where he also worked as a lecturer. He is currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Media Study and an affiliate of the Department of Environment and Sustainability at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.



Aniya Wingate (Cast) is a Houston-based dancer, choreographer, and youth advocate. A recent graduate with a BFA in Dance from Sam Houston State University, she currently performs with Urban Souls Dance Company and showcased her piece *Shadow Work* at the Limitless Dance Festival and The Black Agenda show presented by Urban Souls, a work previously performed at SHSU. Aniya's creative work integrates social and environmental justice themes, highlighted in her first production, *Caution: Roses Die Here*, which featured choreography, spoken word, live music, and interviews with activists. She has also collaborated on the short film *Shoulders Deep* and is the subject of the upcoming documentary *Raising Aniya*, exploring environmental justice in the Gulf Coast region. Aniya's work has been featured at events like the Climate Story Lab, the Original Thinkers Film Festival, and the National Mentoring Summit. She will be continuing her exploration this July in Lucca, Italy through a choreographic residency with Dance Italia, presenting a new work called The Echo of Shadows.



Anita Grabowski (Producer) is a community organizer who also produces films in collaboration with her husband, John Fiege. She previously produced *Mississippi Chicken* and *Above All Else*.



Walter J. Hull II (Producer) has been a thought leader, social artist, and youth development strategist in Houston, TX for 16 years. As an artist, his choreography has deep roots in healing and justice through the storytelling of the Black experience in America. As Executive Director of Urban Souls Dance Company (USDC), Walter has collaborated with the Founder, Harrison Guy to make USDC the premier Black dance company in Houston. As an Arts Educator, he has created the URBAN Kids and URBAN Girls Initiative which centers young artist voices to be active in their community. Through a partnership with the U.S. Embassy in Kigali, Rwanda, Walter has designed artists' development workshops that provided a platform for artists to develop as community leaders. Today, Walter educates his community on climate change and racial equity through filmmaking.



Christopher Lucas (Producer) is a producer, writer, and educator. As a producer on *Raising Aniya*, he participated in IFP's Project Forum: Spotlight On Documentaries at Film Week and Doc Society's Climate Story Lab. He produced *Above All Else* (SXSW, 2014) as well as numerous shorts and commercial projects with Fiege Films. He was an associate producer on *Shouting Down Midnight* (2022), *The Sensitives* (Tribeca, 2017), and *Living Spring*, an interactive environmental documentary about Barton Springs in Austin, Texas. In 2011, he was awarded a doctorate in media studies from the University of Texas, where he co-founded flowjournal.org, a popular site for scholarly media criticism. He is currently an Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator of Digital Cinema at Southern Oregon University, where he teaches courses in documentary and non-fiction cinema, screenwriting, cinematography, and film editing.



Sofia Chang (Editor) is a director and editor based in Los Angeles. Previously she edited The New Yorker short film *Herselves*, a personal hybrid doc examining intergenerational relationships in the Asian American diaspora. With her background in community organizing, she approaches storytelling with the hope of connecting people at different intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality. As a director she uses experimental nonfiction to explore belonging and intimacy as mediated by the digital landscape. Her latest film *OT7* premiered at the 2024 San Diego Asian Film Festival. Sofia holds a BA from Carleton College.



Ella Jarman-Pinto (Composer) is a critically acclaimed composer, described by Classic FM as 'one of the UK's most exciting music-makers' and recognised by the Women of the Year Lunch 2021. Ella focuses on positive-change storytelling, exploring: themes of claiming radical softness while Black, female/politically feminised and neurodivergent (opera *belly/back* with Jennifer Farmer, 2025); experiences of women and caregivers in the pandemic (*Plango: A Cure Lament*, poet Jo Brandon, BBC Radio 3 2021); rage and grief on men's violence against women (*Girls Are Coming Out Of The Woods*, poet Tishani Doshi, Donne, Women In Music 2022); explorations of Black awakening and introspection (*Lucky*, BBC Radio 3 2020 & *:Insert Expletive Here:* East London Music Group 2022). Ella released her debut album with Jo Brandon, *Lemon Verbena* in 2024. Ella's film work includes: *Raising Aniya* (Dir. John Fiege 2025); *AstraZeneca - The Attack*, (Havas Lynx 2018); and *The Fell We Climb* (Anti-Racist Cumbria 2023). Ella has had works performed at the Royal Albert Hall, Lilian Baylis and the Barbican Centre. *This Little Rose* is included in Trinity College London's Grade 8 Singing syllabus.

Gretchen Batiste (Cast) is an ordained Evangelist serving at Hosanna Family Church in Houston, Texas. She is passionate about prison ministry (men and women), youth outreach, street ministry, and counseling. She also mentors young people and advocates for grandmothers who take on the role of raising their grandchildren, offering them support, guidance, and encouragement. Evangelist Batiste is the Lead Intercessor for HFC's Upper Room Prayer Warriors, a certified Family Life Coach, and a Christian comedian who spreads joy through laughter. She is a proud mother of three daughters and a devoted grandmother of six. She is currently working on her book, sharing her experiences and wisdom to inspire others and strives to dive deeper in her mentorship.

Full Credits

Dedication

In loving memory of an angel we have knew
Mason Peets
2011-2022
Lost in an automobile accident

Featuring

Aniya Wingate, Walter J. Hull, Gretchen Batiste, Kammi Jones, Ebony Stewart, Robert D. Bullard, Hilton Kelley, Robert Taylor, Raven Taylor, Ibrahima Seck, Ty Lewis, Reginald "Juice" Wingate, Tai Welton, Dipen Bhakta, Tarami Readus, Jaylon Givan, Jayla Palmer

Student Artists (Aniya's Show)

Jazlyn Charles, Paris Coleman, Jaliscia Hannah, Jayla Palmer, Mya Parnell, Mason Peets, Kelsey Turner

Director & Cinematographer

John Fiege

Executive Producer

Walter Long

Producers

John Fiege, Anita Grabowski, Walter J. Hull, Christopher Lucas

Editor

Sofia Chang

Composer & Vocals

Ella Jarman-Pinto

Grief Ritual Guide & Drummer

Adé Anifowose

Double Bass

Casey Middaugh

Colorist

Joe Malina

Re-Recording Mixer

Morgan Honaker

Mix Facility

Soundcrafter

Title Design

Sarah Westrich

Dialogue Editors

Brett Bach

Miles Foster-Greenwood

Joseph Kennemer

Associate Producer

Shelby Hadden

Additional Editing

Katrina De Vera

Liz Perlman

Jo Huang-Zollner

Aerial Cinematography

Grant Pifer

Sound Recordists

Charles Bradbury, Anson Cheng, Maria Flores, Skylar Frost, Quinn Hoinoski, Christopher Lucas, Trey Palmer

Additional Camera

Sam Mohny

Camera Assistants

Keegan Cook, Skylar Frost , Michael Jimenez, Grant Pifer

Additional Footage

Aniya Wingate

Dolly Grip

Skylar Frost

Production Assistants

Charles Bradbury, Anson Cheng, Jacques Colimon, Maria Flores, Skylar Frost, Quinn Hoinoski, Trey Palmer

Lighting Designer (Aniya's Show)

Edgar Guajardo

Stage Manager (Aniya's Show)

Karmin Christal

Publicist (Aniya's Show)

India Lovejoy

Assistant Editors

Quinn Hoinoski, Shubh Jain, Isabella Nurt, Jackson Ruff, Caroline Weaver

Interns

Bryn Beausoleil, Cameron Belcher, Gaby Breiter, Leonor Castro, Anson Cheng, Lina Fisher, Jaclyn Elizabeth Fleming, Maria Flores, Skylar Frost, Ali Goodwin, Christopher Grubb, Noah Harper, Quinn Hoinoski, Jesse Hu Jenkinson, Jack Langlois, Emma Martin, Tino Joshua Martinez, Leah Meltzer, Damon Ornelas, Ana Rueles, Jackson Ruff, Liz Sanchez, Sarah Schneider, Rebecca Sims, Simon Tolman, Cayla Tyne, Caroline Weaver

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