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Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in *The Watermelon Woman*

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# **Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in The Watermelon Woman**

**MATT RICHARDSON**

## ***Abstract***

*Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film The Watermelon Woman earned a place in cinematic history as the first feature-length narrative film written and directed by an out black lesbian about black lesbians. This article examines how the film provides an important opportunity to mark the burgeoning genre of black queer documentary as a historiographical medium. The documentary film is a tool that highlights underexplored issues in black experience and provides a cultural site for imagining new possibilities for black lesbian subjectivity and creating innovative approaches to representing sexuality in black filmmaking.*

Sometimes you have to create your own history.

—CHERYL DUNYE, *THE WATERMELON WOMAN* (1996)

**A**s the epigraph suggests, history is partially an imaginative process whereby those who cannot be “imagined” as part of the story of black life will not be included in its retelling or representation. It is then up to the “forgotten” to tell their stories. Contemporary black lesbian cultural producers carve out space for their own versions of the past. Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, demonstrates the complexity by which black queer-authored work signifies on history.<sup>1</sup> *The Watermelon Woman* has earned a place in cinematic history as the first feature-length narrative film written and directed by an out black lesbian about black lesbians. As such, it also marked an important moment in black representation; for the first time black lesbians seized the power of the filmic gaze and turned it to look (for) themselves. Dunye’s film is primarily about a young

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African American woman's search for her ancestors. In an attempt to define herself as a "black lesbian filmmaker," the protagonist, Cheryl (played by Dunye herself), is driven to make a documentary. She says, "I know it has to be about black women, because our story has never been told." In her effort to tell the story that has not been told before, she seeks to find a forgotten and disremembered black lesbian cinematic figure.<sup>2</sup>

Cheryl's search for a black lesbian ancestor leads her to Fae Richards in old Hollywood movies. Fae is a beautiful actress from the 1930s and 1940s who has had a limited career portraying domestic servants in films and is listed in the film credits as "The Watermelon Woman." Cheryl's search for Fae is made more difficult because "The Watermelon Woman" is not included in any books about film. Cheryl's frustration with the paucity of film history and scholarship that includes black women in general and black lesbians in particular mirrored the condition of film scholarship. At the time of the film's theatrical release (1996), there were only a few books by black feminist scholars that focused on the interpretations and experiences of black women spectators, such as bell hooks's *Outlaw Culture* (1995) and Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1994).<sup>3</sup> Popular books at the time about the secret world of lesbians in the mainstream film industry, such as *Hollywood Lesbians* (1994), gave a history of the lesbian experience in the industry that was entirely white.<sup>4</sup>

In order to find out about Fae, Cheryl must negotiate the hostile terrain of the traditional archive. As Ann Cvetokich has pointed out in the film, "traditional and grassroots," archives become a source of narrative drama.<sup>5</sup> Her experience in the library is fraught with condescension and disregard as the white gay man who is the reference librarian and gatekeeper of information treats her with little courtesy or respect. In the alternative lesbian archive, Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (CLIT), Cheryl encounters another queer gatekeeper, this time a white lesbian who again, proves to be more of an impediment to information than a help. Even the more informal archive of a black gay male family friend who keeps a collection of early black cinema is oblivious to the history of black women in film. The film makes an argument for black women to create and control their own archives and posits the documentary as a form of archival practice.

*The Watermelon Woman* serves as an archive of black queer life, bringing attention to the documentary form as a site of retelling the stories of black communities and historical events from a black lesbian perspective. Black documentary is an emerging genre of investigation, producing subjectivities and persistent narratives of black history and culture. As Janet Cutler has stated, the documentary film/videomakers are expected to

assume the role of cultural historians, filling in the gaps and creating significant, sometimes imaginative connections to the past and to collective experience,

countering misrepresentations perpetuated by the dominant culture, and constructing more telling narratives of black experience.<sup>6</sup>

The black documentary is an emerging genre of filmmaking that plays a vital role in the narrative formation of black history. As culture increasingly relies on digital video for information via television, DVDs, and internet sources, black documentary becomes a primary source for social political accounts of black life. Documentarists are looked upon as “griots” who “record and elaborate” on community achievement and suffering.<sup>7</sup> The potential for documentaries to “express the richness and multiplicity” of black experiences helps explain its popularity among black lesbian filmmakers.<sup>8</sup> The creative element of documentary is particularly productive as a medium of representing black queer life as it “highlights the shifting nature of black experience” providing a cultural “site for the imagination of future possibilities.”<sup>9</sup>

Since the 1980s there has been a stream of documentaries made by people of various races, genders, and sexualities about black gender variance, lesbians, and bisexual women: *Stormé Lady of the Jewelbox* (Michelle Parkerson, 1987), *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin’ Women* (Andrea Weiss, 1988), *Among Good Christian People* (Jacqueline Woodson, 1991), *B.D. Women* (Inge Blackman, 1994), *Frankie and Joice* (Jocelyn Taylor, 1994), *Black Nations/Queer Nations* (Shari Frilot, 1995), *A Litany for Survival: The Life of Audre Lorde* (Michelle Parkerson and Ada Gay Griffin, 1996), *Living With Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* (Yvonne Welbon, 1999), *Butch Mystique* (Debra Wilson, 2003), *The Edge of Each Others Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde* (Jennifer Abod, 2004), *The Aggressives* (Daniel Peddle, 2005), *Still Black* (Kortney Ryan Ziegler, 2008) and *black. womyn.* (tiona.m., 2010), plus Dunye’s own short film, *Janine* (1991).<sup>10</sup>

Though the documentary is a powerful means of representation and a medium to archive events that otherwise would go unrecorded, it is no less a constructed narrative. *The Watermelon Woman* suggests that documentary film is another historiographical tool and a method of signifying on the gaps in written history, not a replacement for history. The “imaginative connections to the past” that documentary filmmakers create are often mistaken for uncorrupted “evidence” and “fact.” The role of ideology in the construction of documentary images often goes unnoticed because of the kinship between documentary films and “nonfictional systems” of information/knowledge production.<sup>11</sup> Its persistent perception as a medium of “evidence” explains its popularity as a form of representing gender transgressive and black lesbian subjects. Clearly, black queers are hungry for representation in both literature and film.<sup>12</sup>

As a work of fiction disguised as documentary, *The Watermelon Woman* speaks to the tendency of black queer documentary filmmaking to blur the

line between fact and fiction. Valerie Smith argues that black-directed “documentaries gesture toward the fictional...in an attempt to enter suppressed narratives into public discourse.”<sup>13</sup> Making use of alternative sets of resources, from the library to the lesbian archive, to oral histories, music, dance and living memory, the documentary is yet another historiographical tool. The potential of film to reach masses of people simultaneously, the ease with which it is consumed, and the relative accessibility of equipment affirms the ability of black bisexual women, lesbians, and gender transgressive people to become the “architects” of their own histories.<sup>14</sup>

A significant point in Cheryl’s journey is her acknowledgment that film is a medium that has changed with the advent of the video camera. This technological innovation has allowed almost anyone to become a filmmaker. What was once out of reach for the masses is now possible. Cheryl and her friend Tamara are working-class black women who have combined their resources in order to purchase a video camera that they pay for by videotaping weddings. The opening scene of *The Watermelon Woman* portrays Cheryl in the midst of an interracial, heterosexual, middle-class wedding. She is the videographer for the wedding, yet she (along with her friend and assistant, Tamara) are “unseen” by the white male wedding photographer (and his assistant). Even though Tamara is working with the posed family, the wedding photographer sets up his equipment and begins to rearrange the group. This scene is particularly telling in the way that it reveals the overwhelming documentation of middle-class heterosexuality and the concomitant invisibility of black lesbian life. Cheryl’s first moment on screen is when she steps from behind the camera to address the photographer, saying, “Sir, sir, we are working with the family right now. Don’t you even see the video equipment?” The fact that the photographer not only does not “see” Cheryl and Tamara, but also does not “recognize” that the video equipment is in use, illustrates that a black lesbian is not discernible in front of or behind the camera. Black women in general have a long and vexed history of being objectified on screen and in still photography.<sup>15</sup> With these words, Cheryl documents her own resistance to structures of invisibility that ignore and delegitimize her as a filmmaker, whom Laura Mulvey has argued is a “producer” of the look and a maker of meaning.<sup>16</sup> Cheryl and Tamara’s purchase of the video camera symbolizes their move from film consumers and low-wage video store clerks to actual producers of visual representation.

Cheryl’s voice is the first audible speech in the film, compelling the viewer to listen to a black lesbian speaking (up) for herself. She is not silenced. She is not a ghostly presence on the edges of the story, but she is the one in charge of the video representation. The usual cinematic focus on the drama of the middle-class wedding is usurped by an introduction to black

lesbian representations, making the wedding seem banal in comparison. However, as the videographer she documents the union of two families, one white and the other black, through the marriage ritual from which she herself is legally excluded.

Being a wedding videographer (and a video store clerk) is the beginning of Cheryl's journey to becoming "a black lesbian filmmaker" (a category that is only beginning to emerge, partly because of *The Watermelon Woman* itself). Moving away from documenting other people's stories, Cheryl's first interest as an independent filmmaker is to find ancestors. She says that her first film "has to be about black women because our stories have never been told." Cheryl's desires for representation and sexual desires drive the plot and her search for history.

The film reveals the extrahistorical desires behind history. Familiarity with the subject and affective relationships impact the methodology used to gather and sort through historical evidence. During Cheryl's "discovery" of a 1930s film, *Plantation Memories*, Cheryl finds the "most beautiful black mammy," as Cheryl describes her, who the film lists as "The Watermelon Woman." Fae's experience reminds us that part of the routine interpellation of black people in Hollywood included their complete erasure from film credits or the distortion of their identities into base racist monikers. This doubly effaces black actors, first by limiting blacks to grotesquely stereotypical roles and second by the removal of the actors' names from the project. Fae's beauty and the tragedy of her misnaming inspires Cheryl to do more historical research about this particular actress and black women in early Hollywood cinema in general.

Due to her creative use of various grassroots archives, eventually Cheryl discovers that the Watermelon Woman's real name is Fae Richards and that she had a relationship with a white female movie director, Martha Page, in the 1930s. Dunye recognizes the role of desire in the production of black queer history. The film speaks to the myriad of desires functioning in the quest to recuperate "lost" black queer ancestors, including sexual desire for those ancestors. In fact, sexual attraction is the catalyst for Cheryl's search for Fae. Cheryl's desire for the Watermelon Woman calls attention to the idea that the search for history is about attempting to fulfill a need in the present. Cheryl's desirous look at Fae displaces the dismissive gaze of Martha Page who used Fae to satisfy her own desires and then disappeared from her life. Above all, Cheryl recognizes that there is something queer about Fae from the beginning. It is this black-lesbian-to-black-lesbian look of recognition that Cheryl creates in her film about Fae. For her, Fae represents a means of validation and a means through which to represent black lesbian history. The film follows Cheryl on her journey of self-discovery as she makes a documentary in homage to this misnamed and unrecognized actress.

In fact, Dunye's project calls attention to the elision, misrecognition, and misrepresentation of black women (and lesbians in particular) in American cinema. *The Watermelon Woman* refers to Melvin Van Peebles's 1970 comedy, *The Watermelon Man*, in which a racist white man wakes one day to find that he has been miraculously turned into a black man. Dunye flips Van Peebles's critique of the emasculating representations of black men in mainstream film into a commentary on the history of the debasing images of black women as "mammies" in American cinema.

Cheryl's admission that she thinks the "mammy" of *Plantation Memories* has "got it going on" opens up a space for discussing the implicit sexualization of the "mammy" figure. Dunye challenges the historical renderings of the "mammy" figure as asexual, calling attention to the underlying sexual tensions between the white mistress and black female slaves.<sup>17</sup> In *Plantation Memories* the sexual tensions between the mistress and the female slave are masked and mediated through the heterosexual romance plot. *The Watermelon Woman* takes a handkerchief to wipe away the mistress's tears for her absent white male lover, reassuring her that "Master Charles will be back real soon." This scene is reminiscent of countless Hollywood films up until the present day, wherein a black female slave, servant, or "friend" is called upon to comfort a white female main character in her romantic crisis. Far from being confined to an earlier time of representation, the "mammy" role is still a favorite in cinema.<sup>18</sup> The "mammy's" structural subordination to white female economic power demands that she prioritize the white woman's feelings and pleasure in order to secure her own material survival.

The distinction between real life and representation is blurred in *Plantation Memories*. It is not that *Plantation Memories* is verisimilar to the slave plantation, but it represents dynamics of white domination and black exploitation inherent in the plantation economy that persist into the twenty-first century. The film is a theoretical and historiographical device rather than a document of facts, and as such it illuminates how the past and the present operate in close relation to each other. The juxtaposition of Fae and Cheryl underscores the contemporary and historical role that black women have played as emotional, sexual, reproductive, and physical laborers for white women. The film represents the relationship between Cheryl and the *Watermelon Woman* through the concurrence of three black/white lesbian couples. The plantation mistress and her maid echo the off-screen dynamics between Fae and Martha Page, and they also reflect the relationship between Cheryl and her white girlfriend, Diana. Twice in the film, Cheryl looks directly into the camera as she mouths the dialogue of the "The Watermelon Woman," establishing the symbolic link between them. Diana is the double of the plantation mistress in *Plantation Memories*. In

*Plantation Memories* the Watermelon Woman's economic dependence on her mistress is mirrored by Fae's reliance on Martha Page to find work, which is reflected by Cheryl's reliance on Diana to support her film project. Cheryl's relationship with Diana resonates with the interracial middle-class wedding from the film's opening sequence. Through Diana, Cheryl has access to the middle-class world she could only see through the camera before. Cheryl seizes control over the means of representing her visual image, but cannot escape the economic disparity between herself and Diana or white fetishizing desire for black bodies. Their relationship signifies the sexual and emotional labor of having to negotiate materially through white lesbians that black women often find necessary.

### Archive of Black Queer Memory

The racist misnaming of Fae as the Watermelon Woman makes her virtually untraceable in traditional archives. Cheryl utilizes and identifies several grassroots archives of black (queer) memory in order to collect documentation of Fae's life. Cheryl's mother (played by Dunye's actual mother, Irene Dunye) is an important, although unwitting, source of black queer memory. Her mother is at first disoriented by Cheryl's request that she talk about the Watermelon Woman, but she soon recognizes Fae from the picture on the video box as a black woman who used to sing at the club. Seeing Fae's face initiates a flood of new memories about the clubs, "the girls" she used to hang out with, and the "weirdos" (lesbians and gay men) that also went to the clubs. Heterosexual black people know and remember the queers in their communities; however, they have not put them in the context of a broader black history. The distinction between the "the girls" and "weirdos" becomes less apparent as the story progresses. Upon closer examination, queers are actually an integral and important part of Irene's memory of the past. They are singers, like Fae, and also her own friends, like Miss Shirley, a self-proclaimed "stone butch," and an old associate of Cheryl's mother.

The tension between the fact that queers are part of the fabric of everyday black life and the fact that there are distinct black queer cultures is evident in Miss Shirley's interview. It is through Miss Shirley that Cheryl finds out that the actress's real name is Fae Richards and that she is also a black lesbian.<sup>19</sup> Miss Shirley's old cigar box is a "grassroots" archival treasure of old photographs of black lesbian sociality. The women look back at the camera, smiling, caught between moments of laughter and camaraderie. The photographs are evidence of a black lesbian "family" that is not usually part of the representation of black life. The film's director of photography, Zoë Leonard, especially designed photographs and newsreels to look as if they were from

the 1930s and 1940s. The photographs made for the film are interspersed with real photographs from the time period throughout the film. The viewer does not know whether these snapshots of black life from the 1930s and 1940s are of real people, thereby challenging the division between fact and fiction, past and present. The “fact” of the photographs suggests that the film creates its own archive of black queer memory from which another view of “family” and “community” can be formed. As Cheryl finds more alternative archives of the past, she comes closer to understanding herself. The archives of memory give Cheryl both a map to the past and a map to her present.

### **“You’re Just a Mess”: Making Family, Desiring Whiteness**

Black families are vulnerable to a variety of destructive internal and external forces, including racism, misogyny, and homophobia. The fragility and multiplicity of black familial arrangements is evident in *The Watermelon Woman*. Cheryl’s extended family, which unfolds during the course of the film, is constructed through shared experience and identity, which is in direct contrast to the heterosexual wedding that she tapes at the beginning of the film which portrayed affinity through the marriage ritual itself. Cheryl’s extended (black queer) family expands with the project as various people are drawn into the construction of Fae’s life, which stands in for the “lost” history of black queer people. Miss Shirley’s inclusion through Irene Dunye’s oral history interview and Lee Edwards’s (a closeted black gay man) addition through Tamara, expands her black queer family. Cheryl’s primary queer family relationship before Diana enters her life is Tamara, Cheryl’s “butch buddy” and lesbian “brother” who works with her and shares the same social circle. As Cheryl extends her family to include whiteness, in the form of Diana, she puts her primary friendship with Tamara at risk. In the push for creating an interracial queer family, the black queer family is vulnerable to the intervening pressures for white identification. The film warns that it is dangerous for black queers to make the erroneous assumptions that white lesbian interests and black women’s interests in the family are the same.

Cheryl’s friend Tamara is the voice of black female suspicion of white motives of affection that is shut down by Cheryl’s desire to obtain access to the power and resources that middle-class white lesbians have at their disposal. As a character, Tamara is easily dismissed. She is “over the top,” sexualized, selfish, and rude, yet observant and right about Diana’s racial politics. Class mediates Tamara’s position in the film as she is disturbingly aligned with selfish anti-intellectualism. As viewers, we are asked to identify most strongly with Cheryl’s desires for middle-class, upwardly mobile artistic goals, while Tamara’s only desire is to have sex with her girlfriend.

Tamara reveals to Cheryl that she thinks that Diana is “into chocolate,” meaning that she has a fetish for black sexual partners. She accuses Cheryl of no longer being black-identified. She says, “You are being a black girl acting like she wants to be white. I mean, what’s up with you, Cheryl, you don’t like the color of your skin nowadays?” Cheryl’s stance of liberal, racial equality makes her refuse to acknowledge that racial difference impacts her sexual relationships. Eventually, Diana shows herself to be “into chocolate” as she rattles off a list of her previous black boyfriends and the black people her hip, liberal family members dated. Up until this moment Tamara seems bigoted and out of place in her criticisms of Diana. This is the turning point in their relationship, and Cheryl finally questions Diana’s motives, saying to her, “You’re such a mess,” before leaving.

Nevertheless, Diana’s middle-class family connections get Cheryl an interview with Martha Page’s sister, Mrs. Page-Fletcher. What promises to be a source of information about Fae is a source of Fae’s exclusion from history. Mrs. Page-Fletcher proudly proclaims that she tells “every reporter, every writer that my sister was not that way.” By doing so, Mrs. Page-Fletcher participates in Fae’s occlusion from the historical record. When Cheryl confronts the very conservative Mrs. Page-Fletcher about her racism and homophobia, “Diana kept quiet most of the time.” Diana becomes complicit in the erasure of Fae and tries to get Cheryl not to say anymore, apologizing for Cheryl’s refusal to accept Mrs. Page-Fletcher’s racism.

From the right side of the screen, Mrs. Page-Fletcher’s black female maid emerges from the background to see what is happening. The maid is in the same position at the left side of her white mistress as the mammy in *Plantation Memories*, indicating that the “plantation memories” and their exploitative insistence on black emotional and sexual labor is never far away, even as Mrs. Page-Fletcher adamantly denies that her sister (and by extension herself) was “not that way.”

Even though black (queer) familial practices are available to buttress and care for black queer subjects, the invitation to whiteness promises access to phallic forms of power such as material wealth and the freedom and power to represent oneself. Cheryl learns the lesson that white lesbian identity (even in the realm of affection) is not without its concomitant relationship with racial domination. All other feminine presence “pales” in comparison to Diana’s white femininity. While, at the beginning of the movie, Cheryl finds her black femme blind date to be a repulsive and untalented singer, at the end of the film she begs Diana (an equally bad singer) to sing for her while they are in bed together. The black femme character is depicted as a joke while Diana is represented as the ultimate beauty. It is the desire for whiteness that introduces the “affective erethrism” that initiates black (self) immolation.<sup>20</sup>

## **“You Little Freak”: Black Queer Genders and Historiography**

Remembering gender nonconformity is crucial in the act of recalling black queer bodies. In doing so, new dimensions of the policing function of the biopolitical state emerge, revealing previously ignored modes of state regulation and domination of black sexuality and gender.<sup>21</sup> In a sequence that seems out of place in the storyline, Cheryl is out driving when her car breaks down. When she leaves her car with the video camera in tow, she is stopped by the police. This scene brings to light the gendered surveillance of police regulation for black people.

This is the only part of the film that has a hip-hop soundtrack, connecting the function of hip-hop as a vernacular expressive form of black resistance to include issues of sexuality and gender. Cheryl's confrontation with the police is immediately hostile and racist. The white cop says, “Looks like one of our crackhead friends,” from the moment he sees her. The fact that they are a black/white police duo does not interrupt the force with which they approach Cheryl. The white cop says, “Hey boy, where do you think you're going with that video camera.” Even though they interpellate her as a “boy,” it is unclear what the police “see,” a young black man or a masculine woman. However, the class assumptions made by the police are clear. They recognize her as black and not middle class and therefore a “crackhead” from the moment she comes into their line of vision. The term *boy* is used to remind Cheryl that black masculinity is subordinate to and denigrated by white power/authority, no matter whose body it is on. When Cheryl clarifies, “I'm not a boy and it's my camera,” she is met with more derision. “Well, you look like one, you little freak.” In this scenario, the black male cop reinforces white masculine authority. This scene is reminiscent of the opening moments of Haile Gerima's 1976 film *Bush Mama*, wherein the film crew captures their real-life police harassment for being in possession of camera equipment.<sup>22</sup> The equipment itself is dangerous in the hands of blacks who may represent and name themselves. There have been countless films that depict police brutality and oppressive force enacted against black communities. However, Dunye is the first to even give a glimpse of the effect this history of violence has on gender-variant people, especially masculine-identified lesbians.

Many black lesbian documentaries blur the boundaries of “man” and “woman” as a practice crucial to the radical historiographical project that characterizes much of black lesbian work. From this point of view gender fluidity, ambiguity, and flexibility are central to the construction of black identity. Therefore, representing how gender variance and race come together in interactions with the state is an essential contribution to the project of retelling black experience from a queer perspective.

## **“If You Are Really a Member of the Family”: Black Queer (Be)longing**

Black queer culture and life exist in the interstices of various historical narratives of blackness, queerness, women, diaspora, and the nation; however, it is in fragments. The closest Cheryl comes to Fae is a phone conversation with her lover of twenty years, June Walker. In between bits and pieces of Cheryl and June’s conversation the screen goes black. Cheryl cradles the phone; the camera takes a close-up of Cheryl’s face. Each time the screen goes black the audience is reminded of the missing pieces of Fae’s story that Cheryl cannot access. In the “dead space” between frames lies the imagination that is filled by Cheryl (Dunye) herself. We are reminded that the ability to “make up one’s own history” in order to tell what has never been told is the part of the creativity that is allowed in the documentary process. This flexibility and elasticity with fact empower Dunye to remember the past differently, providing a critical engagement with history and memory.

The audience does not hear or see June in the same scene with Cheryl, only as a photograph, in the home movie and as a voice-over. At first, Cheryl is heard reading June’s letter aloud, and then June’s voice takes over and begins to speak for herself:

All that talk about Fae and that white woman got me thinking about some unpleasant things about the past...Why do you even want to include a white woman in a movie on Fae’s life? Don’t you know she had nothing to do with how people should remember Fae? She paved the way for kids like you to run around making movies about the past.

These “lost” ancestors speak through Cheryl; she is the medium for their voices. Interestingly, June’s voice is very much an echo of Tamara’s. Both characters are angry and suspicious of Cheryl’s relationship to whiteness and her willingness to include white women in the story of black lesbian lives. June insists that if Cheryl is “really in the family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other.” For June, black queer family has a primary responsibility to each other, to represent, document, and remember our history. She tells Cheryl to “make our history before we are all dead and gone.” Black lesbian folk singer (and daughter of Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock) Toshi Reagon sings in the background and is literally the ambient sound of this scene. Reagon sings her song, “Fascination,” as Cheryl walks by her; she is the background of the scene, but also the backbone of Cheryl’s living black queer archive. As a producer of black queer vernacular music, Reagon carries forward (and refers back to) a vital archive in her music. Cheryl’s “fascination” with

history that is otherwise “lost” in the empty spaces between memory and forgetting is partially evidenced in Reagon’s music.

Cheryl and June disagree on whether or not Martha should be part of the story of Fae’s life. June is insistent that Martha’s name would only be an insult to Fae’s memory. June maintains that Fae was embarrassed about her roles in the mammy films of the 1930s and 1940s and it therefore should not be part of her life story. However, Cheryl feels that, “The moments she shared with [June], the life she had with Martha on and off the screen, those are precious moments and no one can change that.” There are valuable lessons in the most painful of experiences. It is the impulse to hide what we as black people do not want the rest of the world to see that leads to a “compulsory” heterosexualized version of black history.

## Coda

In 1979 Barbara Smith wrote, “Even now I don’t know that one can write about being a black and a lesbian and live to tell about it.”<sup>23</sup> In 2005, black women write about a variety of sexual and gender identities and live to tell the story. However, the more relevant question is, what now? *The Watermelon Woman* allows us to identify the ways in which black queer perspectives alter the terms and challenge the assumptive logics of black history and cultural production. This work is not simply celebratory, but complicated and often troubling in its depictions. Challenging complicities and compromises to power in order to participate in the “normalizing” narrative project of history, black lesbian filmmaking creates tensions within the historical framework of the black past, speaking queer experience to black history.

## Notes

1. *The Watermelon Woman*, VHS, directed by Cheryl Dunye (New York: Women Make Movies, 1996); all references to and quotations from the film to this source.

2. To distinguish between Cheryl Dunye the filmmaker and Cheryl the character, throughout the essay, “Cheryl” is used to refer to the character and “Dunye” is used to refer to the filmmaker. As a production, the film is a community effort, including in the cast an impressive list of academics, filmmakers, and writers who play characters. Black lesbian filmmaker Jocelyn Taylor portrays Stacy, Tamara’s love interest in the film; Cheryl Clark, black lesbian writer and poet, is Fae’s lover, June; white lesbian novelist Sarah Schulman plays the archivist at the CLIT archives; and white bisexual cultural critic Camille Paglia plays herself. The CLIT (Center for Lesbian Information and Technology) archives are a spoof of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York.

3. Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

4. Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994). Subsequently, there continues to be a series of popular books that deals predominantly with white women in Hollywood: Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood's Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing, 1995); William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* (New York: Viking, 2001).

5. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 239.

6. Janet K. Cutler, "Rewritten in Film: Documenting the Artist," in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 154.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 199.

10. Cheryl Dunye has made a series of short films: *Janine* (1991), *She Don't Fade* (1991), *The Potluck and the Passion* (1993), *Untitled Portrait* (1993), and *Greetings from Africa* (1994). To date, Dunye has directed three feature-length narrative films: *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), *Stranger Inside* (2001) about black lesbians in prison searching for a mother figure, and most recently her only mainstream Hollywood film, *My Baby's Daddy* (2002). *My Baby's Daddy* is about three heterosexual men raising their small children. Co-written by Eddie Griffin and Damon "Coke" Daniels, the film relies on stale humor, homophobia, and ugly stereotypes about black women to tell the story.

11. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 9.

12. Ibid. Nichols discusses how people look to images to "nourish our hunger for Truth," which is particularly true for people who are starved for their own image.

13. Valerie Smith, "The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African American Film," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 57.

14. Cutler, "Rewritten in Film: Documenting the Artist," 170.

15. See Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). According to Muñoz, counterpublic spaces are limited to certain community members and they function as in between the private sphere and the public spheres.

16. See Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Dunye's interest in black lesbians in front of and behind the camera can be seen throughout her films from her first short, *Janine*, where she tells the story of her first love, to *The Potluck and the Passion* where the actors talk directly into the camera about their characters as the film is progressing. In *She Don't Fade* the sex scene is interrupted by footage of the scene itself being filmed, thereby breaking the traditional fourth wall and disrupting the pornographic gaze of the viewer. In her 2001 feature film about prison, *Stranger Inside*, one of the inmates assembles a still camera from various parts and documents the other black lesbian inmates.

17. See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985); Martha Hodes, *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

18. For example, Whoopi Goldberg's role as a New Age mammy in *Ghost* (1990), wherein she is visited by the spirit of the man (Patrick Swayze) of a white heterosexual couple in order to help resolve the suspicious circumstances of his death. In one scene, Whoopi is possessed by his spirit as a means for the couple to have one last kiss. However, when Whoopi's lips meet the wife's (played by Demi Moore) the scene jumps from showing Whoopi kissing the wife to showing the husband, thereby circumventing the implicit tensions between the two women. Whoopi received an Oscar for best supporting actress for this role.

19. A stone butch is a masculine-identified woman who does not receive sex when intimate with other women.

20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 42.

21. For a discussion of the regulatory and controlling nature of the life and death of subjects of the bourgeois state (biopolitics), see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

22. Charles Burnett, interview with the author, November 2004. Burnett worked on cinematography for *Bush Mama*. In *Baadassssss*, Mario Van Peebles's 2003 narrative film about the making of *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971), Mario Van Peebles also re-enacts a similar encounter that the *Sweet Sweetback* crew had with the Los Angeles Police Department.

23. Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell Scott, and Gloria T. Hull (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 198.