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## "Poetry is Not a Luxury:" Dis-ing Self, Dis-ing Archive

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**"Poetry Is Not a Luxury:" Dis-ing Self, Dis-ing Archive**

Senior Project submitted to the  
Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Ehm West

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

"... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives."<sup>1</sup>

As simply as it *can* be put, there is a complex weight in stating that I study a discipline often regarded as eurocentric, hierarchical, gendered, and colonial. I try to exemplify in my work that I understand the complexities of art history and am working against them. Through my research, daily conversations, viewing of visual work, and personal experiences that revealed critical dynamics of race, sex, gender, class and ability, I realized that language and discipline have both an immense power to be and to change. Containers such as "art history" become violent and oppressive if we do not actively interrogate and re-contextualize their contents.

"Poetry Is Not a Luxury: 'Dis-ing Self, Dis-sing Archive,'" is divided into three separate interrogations of such "containers:" arts institutions, archives, and constructions of identity. Each chapter explores how these related categories are challenged by curators, artists and artists' respective styles or forms. In the process of writing this project, it was important that I not only elucidate what the issues were in creating category but also how category was challenged and the difficulties in doing so. I borrow my title from Audre Lorde's infamous essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury." Lorde suggests in this essay that poetry, or what I interpret more broadly as art-making, is a convergence of the personal and the social used to interrogate the self in relation to one's surroundings. For women, Lorde states, "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, "Poetry is a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.



the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”<sup>2</sup> This understanding of art-making as both an intimate and critical tool is vital for the continuation of work made by women, trans, and gender non-conforming people of color whose lives cross many different intersections.

My initial interests for this project were many-fold. I hoped to discuss the both democratic and artful approaches in video art by femme and women-identified artists of color. I contemplated researching the aspect of voice and voiceover in Black cinema. I eventually landed on the idea to write about an artist I valued for her style, humor, criticality, and historical significance. In both her early video works and first feature-length film *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye investigates the complexity of her own Black lesbian identity and the constructedness of identity as a whole. She begins her practice as a moving image artist during a time engulfed in conversations about the politics of identity in art-making. I found that some of the previous ideas I’d thought about for this project were pertinent to her work and would be critical for conversations about how we define both art history’s contents and discontents.

In my first chapter, “Binary Limitations: Institutional Critique in/of The New Museum,” I explore the categorical impulse in institutional work. Looking at the physical innovations, publications, and additional video programs contributing to the museum’s monographic and group exhibits over the course of forty-some years, I cite examples of work that illuminate the museum’s attempt to put institutional critique into practice. My initial interests in The New Museum were based on Dunye’s curation of the 1994 *Bad Girls Video Program* as a filmmaker and not a curator. My exploration of the *Bad Girls Video*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*Program* among other innovations in The New Museum's curatorial framework intend to critique the use of identity as a centralizing component of curation. Through Dunye's own statements about her process as a curator of this show, I evaluate the importance of intersectional and non-binary approaches to curatorial work surrounding identity.

I knew little about The New Museum's history and impact on both the New York and international art contexts before this project. I visited The New Museum for the first time to see their recent exhibition, *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*. The show included several artists such as Stanya Kahn, Wu Tsang, Harry Dodge, Sondra Perry and Tschabalaba Self who I felt were making significant work on the constructedness of identity with both poised and fervent energy. The works within *Trigger* were inventive and eloquent, yet I was conflicted by the curation of the exhibition and the organization of didactic texts and references at the exhibition's periphery. In the exhibition catalogue, the director and curators cited several of the shows surrounding identity that inspired *Trigger's* creation—one of which was *Bad Girls*.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to understand the foundation of shows like *Trigger* that mark important social politics of our contemporary moment, I decided to discuss the *Bad Girls* exhibition and its additional video program. Additionally, I would elaborate on the makings of the New Museum as a contemporary arts institution and its engagement with discussions surrounding so-called "identity politics" in contemporary art practices.

Identity politics is a term I find perplexing. It is both a term that I feel consciously addresses the social and political implications of identity while often facilitating discussions of identity in a binary-opposition of whiteness and "other." The latter indicates

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<sup>3</sup> New Museum of Contemporary Art, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," New Museum Exhibitions, last modified 2017, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/trigger-gender-as-a-tool-and-as-a-weapon>.

that non-white, non-male-identified, or other minoritarian-identified artists are presumed to interrogate their identities in art, or to perform marginality, for a majoritarian audience. While these performed politics of identity can and do challenge white, male-identified, able, or economically advantaged individuals to look reflexively at themselves, the category of “identity politics” by nature connotes that these interrogations are not necessary for majoritarian individuals to embrace in their own practices. Several artists and academics of color have struggled to embrace this term as constructive and debates about the use of this term in intellectual settings continue into the present-day.<sup>4</sup>

In this first chapter, I offer terms such as identity politics, marginality, minoritarian and majoritarian lightly. I have tried several methods to reorient the terms and put them into a critical context. Majoritarian and minoritarian are terms I borrow from the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who reinterprets these terms from the writings of Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze on minor literatures and identity in capitalist states. In their collaborative writings, Guattari and Deleuze have defined majoritarian as a privileged state of identity that operates as a political constant and minoritarian as an identity-formation in relation to that state.<sup>5</sup> Muñoz reinterprets the latter as minoritarian subjects who navigate the self by interfacing with different subcultural fields to define themselves along a myriad of intersections. He interprets majoritarian subjects as those individuals who often access this fiction of “identity” with ease.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, marginal and center are terms I take from The New Museum’s own use of the terms and reinterpret through bell hooks’ definitions of the two in her writings *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and “marginality as a site of

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<sup>4</sup> See Hannah Black and Audre Lorde’s quotes in conversation in Chapter 3, pp. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “4. November 20, 1 923-Postulates of Linguistics,” trans. Brian Massumi, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “Performing Disidentifications,” introduction to *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, vol. 2, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5

resistance.” In the former text, hooks’ critiques the neglect of race and class in early white feminist movements. In their missions against a “common oppression,” predominantly white feminist movements failed to be revolutionary because they generalized women’s experiences and appropriated a radical vocabulary from “the margins” to serve and promote their own class interests.<sup>7</sup> In her later essay, hooks clearly defines both margin and center, stating, “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.”<sup>8</sup> The main body is implicit in creating the margin much like the majoritarian state is a political constant for the minoritarian subject. Using these terms majoritarian/minoritarian and marginal/center interchangeably, I want to stress that these terms are not finite definitions for those whose race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, or language posit them as different from a white, american and/or heteropatriarchal norm. In both these specific aspects of the chapter and this project as a whole, I welcome critiques of my own positionality and construction of arguments surrounding identity, its related terminology, and the histories of cultural criticism.

In the second chapter of this project, “Reinventing the archive: The Dunelementary and *The Watermelon Woman*,” I discuss Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman* and her explorations of multiple identities through an interrogation of archives. I explore the role of parafiction in *The Watermelon Woman* as a strategic critique of identity construction, the role of humor in art, and archives as powerful sources for historical and art historical intervention. Parafiction is a term coined by art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty that references an artists’ combination of realistic and fictive aspects to reflect on a certain

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory” in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984, 3.

<sup>8</sup> hooks, “Marginality as a Sites of Resistance,” in *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al. (New York, US: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 341.

plausibility.<sup>9</sup> Using both theoretical and visual analysis, I argue that Dunye uses parafiction and the archive to investigate the constructedness of identity at both an individual and institutional level.

In this chapter, I define archives as an important means of defining the self and constructing a past in relation to historical events, persons, or objects. Two definitions arise from this concept—the first being Archives, or institutional collections that prioritize majoritarian or center-ed histories through their organization and criteria for selecting materials, and the second being archives, or the non-institutional collections of materials by families, communities, or individuals. I defend that *The Watermelon Woman* challenges the definitions of archives by bringing attention to the latter archives as a strong resource for cultural and identity production and illuminates the prejudiced and hierarchical organization of materials within the Archives. *The Watermelon Woman* uses fictive archival material, created collaboratively by photographer Zoe Leonard and Dunye, to create a narrative-documentary on the life of the 1930s Black lesbian actress Fae Richards (Faith Richardson). A fictional Cheryl—played by Cheryl Dunye herself—begins her first film project about Richard's in *The Watermelon Woman* and begins to draw parallels between Richard's life and her own. Dunye uses parafiction in *The Watermelon Woman* to introduce the possibility of marginal histories that have yet to be told. She reiterates historical aspects and stereotypical assumptions of early Black Cinema through both the style and content of the archives she creates as well as the stories Cheryl the character collects from family members, friends, academics, librarians, and strangers on the street. Her research within the film mirrors not only the ways Black histories are often lost or

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<sup>9</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October Magazine, Ltd.*, no. 129 (Summer 2009), 54-55.

fragmented but also how this aspect of fragmentation is further complicated when subjects occupy multiple identities. Queer family and queer archives become an important aspect for mapping the intersectional history of Black lesbian presence in film before Cheryl.

The boundaries of and respective challenges to art institutions and the Archives confound in my third and final chapter, “Disidentifying Particulars: Aesthetics and Cultural Production from *The Watermelon Woman* Forward.” Here, I elaborate further on the constructions of self made in relation to both of these institutions by examining the role of “disidentification” in Dunye’s practice, a term coined by José Esteban Muñoz.<sup>10</sup> Muñoz suggests artists use disidentificatory practices to critique not only majoritarian notions of identity but in fact to allude to their inherent fictional construction. In this last chapter, I explore the several traces of this disidentificatory practice in Dunye’s work both in and prior to *The Watermelon Woman* and identify the use of humor and performance in her self-portrait video work to construct multiple selves at once.

Respectively, I look at the ways in which Dunye attempts to disidentify from essentializing narratives of Blackness and through both her moving image work and her daily life strives for a multi-dimensional Blackness. Using some general concepts and ideas from Michael Boyce Gillespie’s text *Film Blackness*, I elaborate on the ways in which Dunye strives to differentiate from a canonical Blackness in film by embedding her practice and her own identity within multiple lived experiences and perspectives. I briefly discuss the ways in which a contemporary of Dunye’s, Marlon Riggs, was also engaging in these same conversations through a different approach to experimental documentary filmmaking. I bring these two artists into conversation with one another not as a way to

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<sup>10</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1999).

draw a comparison of their works as Black queer artists, but to see the ways in which different Black queer artists were working with video and film media to interrogate their own histories.

What is pertinent about this project is that my work concerning the cultural production of a Black queer artists/artist(s) is vested within an art historical context. Through this, it invites viewers, cultural producers and writers to reevaluate the definitions of art historical work. In addition to my analyses, I've included several quotes from Black and Brown writers and artists who speak to Cheryl Dunye's works. I hope that this project will exhibit the way in which an interrogation of institutions, the institutions that make institutions, and the identities as by-products of both is necessary to expand critical art and cultural production histories.

## Chapter 1

### Binary Limitations: An Institutional Critique in/of The New Museum

"The instructor said, / Go home and write / a page tonight. / And let that page come out of you– / then it will be true / I wonder if it's that simple?"<sup>11</sup>

The importance of an artist's identity in their practice has and continues to resonate throughout critical debates in art history. The construction of identity—or the social, economic and cultural factors that shape people as individuals—became a central focus in several artists' work in the later 20th century when this debate took rise. Given the heteropatriarchal and colonial history of museums, an attention to representing artists who were not white, male-identified and economically stable along with further questions of access and accountability became important curatorial challenges for several contemporary arts spaces during this period. This desire to be a more diverse and self-reflexive institution created conflicts for different contemporary arts institutions then that still resonate in the present-day. While claiming responsibility for many of the issues underlined in the institutional critiques of museum history and attempting to use this critique reflexively in their curatorial praxis, contemporary arts institutions can run the risk of normalizing institutional critiques. Moreover, the institutionalization of social political critiques can place a pressure on artists of color, queer artists, queer artists of color, and women artists to perform a certain marginality under an institution's guise of "political correctness."

The crux of art and identity in cultural institutions reaches far beyond the last thirty years. For the purposes of my argument, however, I will focus on the formulation of the contemporary arts movement from the 1980s forward and the notion of so-called "identity

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, NY: Knopf and Vintage Books, 1994)



politics”—a politics based on socially constructed identity categories—that was particularly significant to this period.<sup>12</sup> Homi K. Bhabha characterizes the 1980s as the decade most readily concerned with terms such as political correctness, the politics of identity, the postmodern, and the postcolonial.<sup>13</sup> In his essay, “Making Difference,” he explains the popularity of these terms as an effect of the so-called “culture wars.” Bhabha describes the culture wars as a rupture between the political left and right in the United States beginning in the Reagan Era. Liberal politics became prevalent topics in art and academia in response to Reagan’s government interventions in international communities and Black neighborhood in the United States and the simultaneous lack of interventions made at the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>14</sup> Conversations on systemic issues beyond the value-binary of liberal and conservative such as misogyny, classism, racism, and ableism influenced a number of artists to use the constructedness of identity as a meeting grounds for social, cultural, and political critiques.<sup>15</sup> Noting two shows that took place at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (1984-85) and *The Decade Show* (1990), Bhabha explains that an interrogation of identity rather than an assertion of its inviolability in these exhibitions represented the best version of minoritarian politics at this time.<sup>16</sup> He suggests, “...the desire to open up issues of ‘subjectivity’ as they were expressed in the pluralist political culture of the ‘80s also gave rise to enigmatic and exploratory artistic practices.”<sup>17</sup> Bhabha’s statements are critical in reframing identity as a construct in place of an established category for many artists, and

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<sup>12</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 668, digital file.

<sup>13</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Making Difference: Homi K. Bhabha on the Legacy of the Culture Wars” Artforum, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 73-75.

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Chang, “The End of the World as We Know It,” in *Who We Be: The Colorization of America* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press, 2014), 104-109.

<sup>16</sup> Bhabha, “Making Difference,” 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 75.

allude to tensions between the notions of separate and multiple illustrated by many artists' works. Institutional critique became a method for artists to interrogate the institution of self-hood within physical iterations of institutionality such as the museum, leading to several museum's incorporations of critical frameworks for discussing art and identity.

### **Implementing Critique within the Institution: The New Museum**

The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City was founded with the intention of exhibiting art and creating discourse concerning a postmodern cultural praxis. Positioning itself somewhere between a traditional museum and an alternative gallery space, the New Museum aspired to be a catalyst for dialogues between different contemporary artists and the public through accessible and critical exhibitions, publications, and informational resources.<sup>18</sup> The museum was founded in 1977 by former Whitney Museum of American Art curator Marcia Tucker after she was asked to leave the Whitney by director Tom Anderson, who claimed the museum no longer had any need for a curator who specialized in contemporary art.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the New Museum was established as the first museum in New York City since World War II to devote itself entirely to contemporary art and discourse. From its earliest stages, they focused on the exhibition and documentation of works made in the last decade. Artists exhibited in the New Museum were not widely known and had not yet gained critical public acceptance. Through a variety of exhibits, accompanying catalogues, publications, and innovations in its physical space, the museum shaped itself as a reflexive and accessible arts institution.

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<sup>18</sup> New Museum of Contemporary Art, "History," New History Museum, last modified 2016, accessed October 23, 2017, <http://www.newmuseum.org/history>.

<sup>19</sup> Marcia Tucker, *A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 117.

Central to this innovation was the New Museum's strong attention to monographic artist and group shows organized around social and political issues.<sup>20</sup>

### Attempting to Bridge Margin and Center: The Broadway Window

"We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole."<sup>21</sup>

The New Museum's interests in conversations surrounding culture and aesthetics, especially in the "burgeoning postmodern discourse" on feminism, anti-racism, post-colonialism, and anti-authoritarianism, pushed the museum to extend definitions of the institution both conceptually and physically.<sup>22</sup> In an effort to democratize institutional space, the Broadway Window was founded in 1979 as an installation space where invited artists could create small-scale exhibits for display along 5th Avenue.<sup>23</sup> The Broadway Window provided an extension of the museum that was accessible to all passersby at the street-level, mirroring a store-front (fig. 1.1). The window alluded to the institution's attempts at transparency, creating exhibits that were accessible to a vast public. In attempts to create spaces beyond a binary of margin and center between "minority" artists and large institutions, the New Museum used the Window as a space to mediate in between. Two particular exhibitions come to mind when discussing the intentions of the Broadway Window.

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<sup>20</sup> New Museum of Contemporary Art, "History," <http://www.newmuseum.org/history>.

<sup>21</sup> hooks, "Preface" in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, n.p.

<sup>22</sup> Alicia Ritson, "Pursuing the Unpredictable: The New Museum 1977–2017," New Museum Digital Archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/2395>.

<sup>23</sup> New Museum of Contemporary Art, "History," <http://www.newmuseum.org/history>.

One of the Broadway Window's most foundational exhibitions was the 1987 installation *Let the Record Show...* by a group of artists working within ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). The installation strongly criticized the blatant homophobia in the U.S. government's failure to respond to an epidemic affecting the nation. AIDS statistics highlighting the severity of the disease and the conditions of those affected by it were displayed in a scrolling news banner at the top of the window, with neon lights illuminating large portraits of government officials such as Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms as well as media columnists such as William F. Buckley who exploited or ignored the crisis for their own political advantages (*fig 1.2*).<sup>24</sup> These were combined with images of the Nuremberg trials, a moment of heinous Nazi crimes against Jewish people during World War II, and the "SILENCE=DEATH" logo created by ACT UP. Together, these formed what Roger Hallas describes as, "analogy of genocide as the specter hanging over the AIDS crisis and the invitation to reconsider the historical connections between Nazi persecution, gay liberation, and the AIDS epidemic."<sup>25</sup> Curator and ACT UP member William Olander suggested through the curation of *Let the Record Show...* that this installation could both occupy a status of political propaganda on the street level, extending the messages of activist groups, while also being attached to The New Museum's larger institutional critiques of art and accessibility.

Less than a decade later, Lyle Ashton Harris' self-portrait project *FACE* was installed in the Broadway Window. Harris is a multi-media artist mostly known primarily for his self-portraits and investigations of pop culture references, both of which examine the affinities between the personal and the political and interrogate the construction of his

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, "AIDS Activist Graphics: A Demonstration," *AIDS Demographics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 48.

own identity.<sup>26</sup> His installation is explained in the New Museum's "On View" program as a continuation of his series *The Secret Life of a Snow Queen* (1990) which visualizes his identity as a Black gay man through the juxtaposition of performance, text, and photography. The installation exhibits a variety of studio-style photographs in which Harris poses for the camera in lavish feminine clothing (fig. 1.3). Many of these self-portraits are attributed to the *Snow Queen* series of black-and-white photographs in which masquerade renders Black masculinity to parody white femininity—which Tucker describes in the program as "a category of identity characterized by its own highly constructed and composite artificiality" (fig 1.4).<sup>27</sup> These photographs were displayed in the glass frame with an array of slide projections and other photographs of varying sizes affixed to hanging strings and odd structures. Next to this display was a mirror, facing outwards towards the viewer at the street-level. This allowed the viewer to examine both Harris' reflections and their own.

Kobena Mercer writes about the series of masquerade photos in his book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, stating that both Harris' series *The Secret Life of a Snow Queen* (1990) and his earlier series *Americas* (1988-89) "show that there is no unitary, authentic or essential 'me' to begin with, only the contradictory range of subject-positions and composite identifications that 'I' become" (fig. 1.5)<sup>28</sup> Mercer continues:

Harris not only parodies the existential anguish of inauthenticity that remains unsaid, and unspeakable, in the discourse of black cultural nationalism (by making literal Fanon's metaphor of 'black skin, white mask'), but camps up the categories of gender

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<sup>26</sup> Lyle Ashton Harris, "Artist Bio/CV," Lyle Ashton Harris, last modified 2013, accessed October 30, 2017, <http://www.lyleashtonharris.com>.

<sup>27</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 231.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

identity by positing a version of black masculine identity that mimics Judy Garland and a hundred other (white) feminine icons of metropolitan gay sensibility.<sup>29</sup>

Through these images-as-artifacts, Harris connects two seemingly different identities—white femininity and his own Black queer identity—and provokes the viewer to imagine through and beyond fixed identity categories. Mercer declares, “...black queer artists speak of a cultural politics in the making which has little patience for the antidemocratic tendencies of an ‘identity politics’ that would normalize, psychologize and individualize our mutant diversity. It invites instead the democratizing of our desires in all their diversity and perversity.”<sup>30</sup> In complicating his own presentation in his self-portraits, Harris alludes to the inherent constructedness of Black queer and white feminine identities and urges viewers to realize the inherent limitations of identity as category.

Both of these exhibitions illuminate how the Broadway Window physicalized the New Museum’s social critical practice of redefining artists within the institution. In each of these examples, essentialism becomes a strategy by which to interrogate conflicts surrounding marginal identities within the physical margins of the museum. *Let the Record Show...* uses a strategic essentialism to denounce the white patriarchy in government whose homophobic policies denigrated the severity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. *FACE*, on the other hand, challenges the construction of essentialist identity categories as a whole through Harris’ own investigation of his intersecting Black, queer, and femme identities. The implementation of institutional critique within the museum is visualized through these exhibits’ physical challenges of a margin-center binary. The politics of marginality within the museum was continually explored through the New Museum’s documentary sources by a number of outside artists and academics.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 32.

## Positionality Politics

"Voyeuristic cannibalization of popular culture by cultural critics is definitely dangerous when the intent is purely opportunistic. However, when we desire to decolonize minds and imaginations, cultural studies's focus on popular culture can be and is a powerful site for intervention, challenge, and change."<sup>31</sup>

The New Museum was dedicated to circulating the institutional critiques with texts by predominant cultural workers through their four volume written-publication series *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art*.<sup>32</sup> In the fourth publication of this series published in 1990, *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures*, Cornel West notes the increasing number of discussions surrounding cultural difference in artistic spheres.<sup>33</sup> He highlights how the inclinations of privileged academic and artistic figures create conversations around race, gender, and sexuality— something he defines as the "new cultural politics of difference"—so that they may politically align themselves with oppressed peoples without accounting for their own systemically-privileged positions.

West states that during the moment in which his essay is written, new cultural workers who position themselves between cultural critic and artist begin to move away from notions of homogeneity and abstraction to embrace multiplicity, the concrete, and the historically contingent.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to other cultural critics of the past, these figures take on a much wider range of "differences":

...what makes them novel—along with the cultural politics they produce— is how and what constitutes difference, the weight and gravity it is given in representation and the way in which highlighting issues like exterminism, empire, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, nation, nature and region at this historical moment

<sup>31</sup> hooks, "Introduction: The Heartbeat of Cultural Revolution," introduction to *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 4.

<sup>32</sup> New Museum of Contemporary Art, "History," <http://www.newmuseum.org/history>.

<sup>33</sup> Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, et al., vol. 4, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, *Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 19-38.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 19-21.

acknowledges some discontinuity and disruption from previous forms of cultural critique.<sup>35</sup>

West acknowledges the efforts of these cultural workers but scrutiny examines the privileged aspects of why and how this cultural critique happens. West claims that cultural contributors who fit within this realm of the new cultural politics of difference align themselves with “demobilized” or “depoliticized” individuals, or systematically-oppressed people, in order to claim certain roles as change-makers. As an effect of this work, cultural critics and artists must recognize inherent operations of power within their immediate contexts. West states, “...this strategy, however, also puts them in an inescapable double bind—while linking their activities to the fundamental, structural overhaul of these institutions, they often remain financially dependent on them...” Henceforth, he states, “...theirs is a gesture that is simultaneously progressive and co-opted.”<sup>36</sup> West speaks not only to this political moment, but to a larger history of critical thought and practice that is repeated throughout “Western” culture as a gesture towards self-reflexivity.

Being an administrator of the New Museum, Marcia Tucker contends with the controversial nature of her position as both a collaborator and an authority figure in a major arts institution. In her autobiography, *A Short Life of Trouble: Forty Years in the New York Art World*, Tucker explains the lengths she went to to diversify and critically engage with institutional thinking during her career. She explains that, “Institutional thinking tells us to look very, very carefully before leaping—and such thinking virtually guarantees that we’ll never leap at all. As an antidote to this, my motto has been ‘Act first, think later—that way you have something to think about.’”<sup>37</sup> By this praxis, albeit precarious, Tucker

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker, *A Short Life*, 174.



extends many of the institutional programs of the New Museum to attend to postmodernist concerns such as difference and representation. In 1980, the Museum started the *Minority Dialogues*, a series of meetings that focused on the concerns of emerging artists and arts organizers of color and created lasting bonds between those involved. These dialogues were started primarily because Tucker felt that diversifying the New Museum's staff and audience would necessitate inviting cultural workers of color at all levels whose knowledge extended beyond predominantly white institutions to facilitate exhibitions around cultural difference.<sup>38</sup> This led to a formal program for the Association of Art Museum Directors' External Affairs Committee conference in 1991, entitled *Different Voices*. This prompted the New Museum to collaborate with the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem for *The Decade Show*, which aimed to reframe the 1980s period of "identity politics" by exhibiting works by non-white, non-men artists (*fig 1.6, 1.7*).<sup>39</sup> Painting these moments vividly, Tucker briefly mentions the inherent complications of working within the margins as a privileged authority figure. Noting her errors of judgment as an effect of her "predilection for the margins," Tucker states, "...I always feel that the margins tell you more than the center of the page ever could. Loving the margins is risky, because you're not only in unfamiliar territory, but often in hostile terrain as well."<sup>40</sup> Similar to what Cornel West describes as the "inescapable double-bind," Tucker demonstrates that institutional critique made from a majoritarian perspective is often questionable. With West's critiques in mind, I will investigate yet another effort by The New Museum to expand the dialogues around contemporary art and politics.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 170

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 170-172.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 1.

## Addressing Cultural Change through Media: Video Programs by The New Museum

A series of exhibitions at the New Museum in the 1980s and early 1990s continuing discussions of difference included a moving image program in addition to the physical exhibit. The growing popularity of video among artists of the 1980s and 90s exemplifies a rising interest in creating new genres that differ from a “traditional” history of art. Technological innovations such as this present a set of tools for creating a language between artist and medium that has not been explored in the past. Unlike film, video technology becomes accessible to people of different economic backgrounds across the United States through objects such as television, VHS, and the video tape recorder used for home video and everyday documentation. The medium of video could be easily accessed and easily distributed. Seen as a “lower” art form, video allowed artists to work outside of the institution; it was a socially accessible medium that functioned as a personal and political tool.

By catering to broader and more accessible forms of media, The New Museum’s video programs became platforms for a number of artists of ranging social, political and cultural identities to share more accessible forms of moving image media within a predominant contemporary arts institution. The first video-exclusive exhibition in 1986, *HOMO VIDEO* which exhibited the video works of gay men made during the HIV/AIDS crisis, was exemplary of this.<sup>41</sup> Two exhibitions whose programs are of particular significance are the 1984 show *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* curated by Jane Weinstock and the 1994 show *Bad Girls* curated by Cheryl Dunye. These programs display a major shift in using video to confront issues of “difference,” the first program

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<sup>41</sup> Terrie Sultan and Sara Palmer, *Video Program at the New Museum Explores Gay and Lesbian Concerns* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary art, 1986).

being constituted of mainly film works with some included videotapes and the later program containing mainly video with some film. Several other New Museum exhibitions not mentioned here have their own individual strengths and reasons for including video, but these two programs are important to examine together because they were detached from the physical institution and organized by figures outside of the museum. Additionally, these two programs show vastly different approaches to the museum's interests in a "cultural politics of difference" that show the strengths and weaknesses of both a serious and playful approach.

### Theorizing Difference

"...the historical outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity. At a time when critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender 'undecidability,' it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these confluences of meaning, as they appear under the role of dominance, would restore, as figuratively possible, not only Power to the Female (for Maternity), but also Power to the Male (for Paternity). We would gain, in short, the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture."<sup>42</sup>

The catalogue for *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* describes the show as an examination of the ways distortions of "reality" and representation manifest in gender, looking primarily at the role of the "male gaze" throughout art history.<sup>43</sup> In an effort to reorient the "male"-ness of art history, this exhibition attempts to create a discourse that embraces women artists who look critically at the historical notions of gaze. Marcia Tucker describes that *Difference* mirrors the recent phenomenon in literature in which sexuality has been cited as a cultural construction rather than a biological truth.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection*, vol. 17, *Diacritics* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 17: 66.

<sup>43</sup> Tucker "Preface" in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*. New York: The New Museum, 1984, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Kate Linker, "Foreward and Acknowledgements" in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, 5.

By examining the curatorial mission and impetus of Jane Weinstock's curation of a video program inspired by these ideas, it is clear that a reliance on canonized theory in place of an intersectional one creates a critical disconnect in this program. By referencing difference primarily in relation to gender and sexuality, *Difference* fails to account for multiple identifications of race, class, and ethnicity that further complicate men/women gender binaries and the notion of the "gaze."

Tucker's explanations of constructed sexuality are solidified in the thesis of the exhibition, "the continuous production of sexual difference," which relies heavily on both Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of subject-formation in language and the practice of the pose in relation to sexuality. Sexual difference expressed through the body and the pose defines the majority of the works within the exhibit.<sup>45</sup> While continuing to circle around the ideas of marginal and center, these works do not explicitly rely on multiple identities as much as they do on theories on male and female difference. Masculinity and femininity are therefore not contextualized in gender-varied, racial, cultural, or economic positions that delineate from a majoritarian understanding of "male" and "female." *Difference* emblemizes a pressure for artists to incorporate the academic ideas dominating much of queer studies in that time within institutional contexts. By this gesture, the varied relationships *different* minoritarian artists have to institutionality are neglected.

Weinstock's program exemplifies this idea of continuous production of male and female sexual difference through the idea of "the gaze" in film and video (*fig 1.8*). Nodding to prominent feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, Weinstock uses psychoanalytic

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<sup>45</sup> Craig Owens "Posing" in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, 7-8.

theory to expose the patriarchal tendencies in film making, viewing, and editing.<sup>46</sup>

Weinstock quotes Mulvey in her catalogue entry “Sexual Difference and the Moving Image,” stating, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female figure is styled accordingly.”<sup>47</sup> She continues in her own words:

It becomes crucial, therefore, to look again at the look and at the exchange of looks over the course of a film. The three basic looks of the cinema—the look of the camera at the scene, the look of the spectator at the film, the look of the characters at each other— carry the spectator through a series of masculine and feminine points of view.<sup>48</sup>

Weinstock summarizes the theories of Mulvey to render a physical medium that is masculine and the image-as-product of this medium as feminine.<sup>49</sup> Weinstock points to another prominent film theorist Raymond Bellour by concluding, “For the Hollywood trajectory can only reaffirm the spectator’s position as masculine subject, as Identity. And anyone different becomes that which he can easily locate, his Other.”<sup>50</sup> This last sentence is of particular interest, as Bellour’s quote may be interpreted outside of the context of a heteronormative gender binary. Yet, Weinstock does not reorient the theoretical underpinnings of the problematic “Other” to account for an intersectional realm of differences and thereby commits to a conversation surrounding primarily white women filmmakers making work in response to white men.

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<sup>46</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

<sup>47</sup> Jane Weinstock, “Sexual Difference and the Moving Image” in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Male and female are clinical terms to refer to the sex of a person based on the genitalia they are born with. These categories can prove problematic in their erasure of those intersex persons, born with a combination of different “male” or “female” genitalia, and those whose gender identity as a man, woman or gender non-conforming person does not align with the genitalia they are born with. Men and woman can be used as terms to refer to those who identify themselves as such; masculine and feminine can be used to refer to someone’s gender performance or appearance in place of their personal identity as men or women.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

The works exhibited in this program range in length and medium by both men and women. Several well-known women filmmakers such as Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter and Chantal Ackerman are featured among other emerging video artists such as Dara Birnbaum, Max Almy, and Cecilia Condit. Works by men who work predominately with film such as Jean-Luc Godard and Raymond Bellour are seen listed below the headline of "Videotapes," marking their recent explorations in the new moving image form.

Ackerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is an exception among these works in the way that it furthers the critiques of a patriarchal gaze to account for a *heteropatriarchal* one. In her feature-length essay film, Ackerman's voice narrates her movements through the space of her own room and her later sexual experiences with another woman. Weinstock explains Ackerman's work briefly as engaging in a conversation of "Identity" and "Other," describing Ackerman's repeated self-image as a replacement for a subjective self with a narrative mechanism (*fig. 1.9*). This narrative mechanism I would argue is furthered through the use of Ackerman's voiceover, a feminine voice who continually directs these images. The gaze, as I gather to mean through both the descriptions of the program and the catalogue of films, is much more about a generic dichotomized experience of male and female subjects than it is about majoritarian-minoritarian relationships that account for variety of complex and multiple identities.

The artist Theresa Cha stands out on the list below Bellour as the only non-white woman artist contributing to the show about locating this "Other." Cha's video "Paysage, Paysage" is not examined for more than a few words in the catalogue, like Ackermans, and Weinstock moves on fairly quickly to conclude her descriptions of the program works (*fig. 1.10*). It seems that a stress of the psychoanalytic film theories of "gaze" and "Other"

cloud the variety of individuals who have been gazed or other-ed in the history of film and video. While I can only assume that this conversation is left out to not perpetuate the problematics of otherness, binary critiques of such an otherness eliminate the possibility to fully interrogate the heart of a problem in canonized film and art history. These binaries do not only exist in black and white, but in multiples and at various locations. While Weinstock is in favor of pointing to the marginalized experience of women in film, a lack of specificity generalizes the multiple identity-positions in narrative film that are at play. By relying on canonized film theory for the *Difference* program, Weinstock and Tucker visualize an institutional critique with pre-existent academic value in favor of an intersectional approach that may challenge that critique scrutinously.

### The Essentials of Being Bad

“Whiteness can be a situation we have or are in; when we can name that situation (and even make jokes about it) we recognize each other as strangers to the institution and find in that estrangement a bond. Of course, at the same time, I should stress that we do want there to be posts on race and ethnicity. We also want there to be more than one; we want not to be the one. Becoming the race person means you are the one who is turned to when race turns up. The very fact of your existence can allow others not to turn up.”<sup>51</sup>

The *Bad Girls* video program deviates from *Difference* by engaging even more directly with feminism and women’s art, yet further elucidates the issues in dichotomizing experiences of some shared identity. The New Museum opened the first of the two-part exhibition *Bad Girls* in January of 1994, with a second installation of the show in March of the same year (figs. 1.11 and 1.12). The two-program video exhibition took place at the Public Theater and comprised of twenty-two artists, including Sandi Dubowski, Kimberly

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<sup>51</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “On Arrival,” introduction to *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

Stoddard, Heidi DeRuiter, Dawn Suggs, Lee Williams, Angela Anderson, Cecilia Dougherty, Suzie Silver, Jane Cottis, Alix Perlstein, Sadie Benning, Elizabeth Beer, Agatha Kenar, Mary Patten, Peggy Ahwesh, Tom Rubnitz, Lutz Bacher, Glenn Belverio, Meryl Perlson, Cauleen Smith, Mira Gelley, Liss Plaat, Joyan Saunders, Diane Bonder, and Cheng Sim Lim (*fig. 1.13*). The works vary in form, some film and some video. Sadie Benning continues her voyeuristic/diaristic videos made on pixel-vision, scanning found images and drawings while sporadically thrashing around on screen (*fig. 1.14*), Alix Perlstein makes a bizarre montage of sexualized stuffed animals and loner karaoke (*fig. 1.15*), and Dubowski interviews his grandmother on her past feelings for women across the dinner table (*fig. 1.16*). No particular medium choice, auteur-style, or structural component ties these films together—instead they come together in their lack of some unifying element altogether with the aims for something a little darker and a little funnier. Today, these works are hard to come by—distributed by various archival centers or galleries. Additionally, the names of the artists have varying familiarity, indicating that these films may have been more-or-less confined to this breach in women’s video art.

The *Bad Girls* exhibition was one of many art shows in the 1990s that critiqued notions of prescribed femininity, normativity and desire in art made by women.<sup>52</sup> Some of these additional shows included but were not limited to *Who Cares About Feminism?: Art and Politics for the Nineties* organized by the A.I.R. Gallery in 1991; *Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1992; and *Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually Explicit Art by Women* organized by Ellen Cantor, David Zwirner Gallery, and Real Art Ways (RAW) Gallery in 1993.<sup>53</sup> Much like its

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<sup>52</sup> I use this terminology to reference the word as it is used in its original context in the *Bad Girls* catalogue, where “woman” references primarily cisgendered women.

<sup>53</sup> “Bad Girls Exhibition Compendium” in *Bad Girls* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art: New York, 1994), 126-128.



predecessors, *Bad Girls* was embedded in the particular feminist and women's art discourses surrounding art and identity that dominated the latter half of the 20th century.

Feminism as a principle concept in *Bad Girls* became a point of departure and subsequent confusion. Tucker, the curator of the show, describes in the introduction to the *Bad Girls* catalogue that feminism during the time of the show was rumored to have been dead. This statement gestures perhaps more intently towards the conservative disavowal of feminism as a liberal movement, but may additionally illuminate the several critiques of mainstream feminism within the political left as a predominantly white, cis and middle-class school of thought and practice.<sup>54</sup> Explaining that feminism has a much different meaning in the current day than it did in the past, Tucker supplements the singular feminism for a plural feminisms.<sup>55</sup> For Tucker, one of the central concerns for *Bad Girls* is the use of humor as a subversive tool for the self-representation of women artists. This remains a consistent theme throughout the works seen in the exhibition.<sup>56</sup> In her essay for the *Bad Girls* catalogue, "The Attack of the Giant Mutant Ninja Barbies," she writes that "the basic concepts of carnival can provide a framework for the understanding of recent works of art about feminist and gender issues, particularly those which are trying to effect positive social change by being both transgressive and funny (hoping to kill more flies with honey than with the fly-swatter.)"<sup>57</sup> Tucker describes historic notions of carnival as a democracy of pleasure, "characterized by an inordinate ability to mix disparate elements with wild abandon and to confound categories; to provide both a 'festive critique' and an extreme utopian vision of society at the same time; and to reconfigure the word through

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<sup>54</sup> See critiques of "second-wave feminism" in texts such as bell hooks' *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, and *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*; Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism;" and Patrick Califia's "Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism"

<sup>55</sup> Tucker, "Introduction and Acknowledgments," in *Bad Girls* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art: New York, 1994), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Tucker, "The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies" in *Bad Girls*, 23.

laughter.”<sup>58</sup> Like Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “dialogical,” the carnival and the carnivalesque is described as language that understands itself as constantly shifting, relational and socially determined rather than language that is singular and fixed in objectivity.<sup>59</sup> While the concepts of carnival and carnivalesque can be interpreted in a variety of ways, Tucker connects the idea of a shifting language to that of a self-aware humor that can be used to enhance and redefine the concept of feminism.

Humor and feminism(s) for Tucker becomes a methodology for making a collaborative exhibition with the help of different artists and curators. Still, the concept of humor as an *objectively* subversive tool remained questionable to many critics of the show. Expressing her disappointment with the *Bad Girls* exhibition, Laura Cottingham’s essay “How many ‘bad’ feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?” investigates in her own words “...the kind of meta-narrative that was invoked and the particular ways the curators situated the art, and the artists, beginning with their choice of ‘Bad Girls’ as the ruling moniker.” Cottingham highlights what she sees as several faults in the exhibitions, starting with the organizers’ use of the Judeo-Christian patriarchal dichotomy imposed on women (i.e. what she describes as “the virgin-mother versus the whore”) and their later delineation of racial, economic, and sexual norms to justify a “good” against a “bad.” While I do not agree that all of the artists’ works were necessarily in agreement with the organizers’ curatorial or personal aims, Cottingham’s observations are critical in understanding the need for a more accountable and complex language in curatorial work surrounding identity.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 22.

Binary oppositions of good and bad within the curatorial framework of *Bad Girls* are enhanced by Cottingham's note on Tucker's appropriative language, when Tucker suggests the use of "girls" is a reference to African-American women's use of the word as a term of endearment and later that "bad girls" derives from an entertainment slang originally used in "Black English" to mean "really good." Cottingham signifies Tucker's ignorance by using these words, arguing, "That the catalogue assists [sic] locate the term, however speciously and haphazardly, within African-American culture is particularly slippery, given that the "Bad Girl" epithet relies on racism, along with classism and heterosexism, to structure its embrace of sexism."<sup>60</sup> Cottingham notes this slippage perhaps to counter Tucker's explanations of the show as inspired by Black feminist thought.<sup>61</sup> Tucker relays her own stories of growing up as a good girl in a white middle-class environment, which Cottingham suggests creates the designation of poor, non-white and non-heterosexual women the implicit "bad girls."<sup>62</sup> While a subjective positionality in Tucker's catalogue entries is perhaps used to posit a vulnerability and self-reflexivity in her work, Cottingham's strong critiques of this and Tucker's curatorial framework reveal the limitations in the seemingly-subversive tactic in *Bad Girls*.

Cottingham's criticisms reveal the failures of *Bad Girls* to establish a new frame of reference for making and viewing work made by a multitude of female and femme artists. Because it sustains itself within a patriarchal frame of reference that defines women as good or bad on the basis of their relationships to men, both sexually and not, the exhibition necessarily relies on a male gaze to make its definitions of "good" and "bad" coherent. The exhibition therefore fortifies a dichotomous nature of identity—especially as

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<sup>60</sup> Laura Cottingham, "How many 'bad' feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?," *Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft*, no. 19: 74.

<sup>61</sup> Tucker, "The Attack of the Giant Ninja Mutant Barbies" in *Bad Girls*.

<sup>62</sup> Cottingham, "How many 'bad' feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?," 74.

it relates to gender and sexuality—through its very language. Furthermore, the director and curator of the exhibition conflates Black intersectional feminist thought with an act of cultural borrowing from certain Black vernacular. These aspects of the exhibition denote a performance of politics in line with the already-existent conversations surrounding identity politics and subversive art.

The curatorial decisions made in *Bad Girls* as a whole are representative of larger issues surrounding art that deals with identity. Despite its attempts to be subversive, the exhibition fails because it intentionally organizes work within a binary of positive and negative representations while claiming to organize itself around an abstract principle of humor. Humor, like fiction, can function as a methodical ambivalence in the artist's work to abstract difficult issues. Marcia Tucker admits that this exhibition is not revolutionary because it is vested within an institution which continues to function as an institution. But the “bad girls” featured within the show, and the work that they have produced, continue to push the envelope by laughing in the face of an institution and illuminating the uncanny late-twentieth century ideals of women. Play and humor combine, therefore, to become something at once political and ambivalent.<sup>63</sup>

Cheryl Dunye underlines the strengths and weakness of ambivalence through humor in her short *Bad Girls* catalogue entry, “Possessed.” Dunye is a filmmaker known primarily for her works in video that use storytelling, conversation, and parody as primary methods for transformations and critiques of lesbian narratives. Dunye is honest in her discussions of “bad girls” and who they are. She writes about the conflicts between separating “white girl” values and Black school mates growing up, and between being a

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<sup>63</sup> See definitions of “reparative” in Eve Sedgwick’s article, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, eds. Michèle Tina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Duke University Press: Durham, 2003.

Black “lesbian” and being a “black lesbian” later in her life. She grapples with the connotations of being a bad girl, explaining, “a bad girl meant being other, other from who I was and other from the ‘other’ I would soon realize I was.”<sup>64</sup> She posits two realities—her own past “schizophrenic feelings about identity,” or not being able to fit perfectly within one category, and the current conundrum of “bad girlism,” a revolutionary use of humor in women’s art depending on which woman is using it.<sup>65</sup> While many of the artists of the works in the main exhibition are Black and Brown women, Dunye states that bad girl video artists are rarely of color.

### Producing Self and Selves: Introduction to the Work of Cheryl Dunye

“What are the particular details within each of our lives that can be scrutinized and altered to help bring about change? How do we redefine difference for all women? It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.”<sup>66</sup>

Dunye’s statements in her catalogue entry poignantly illustrate the need for an embrace of multiplicity in art concerning identity. Dunye describes herself as an artist who refutes linearity and singularity. In an interview with Alexandra Juhasz, Dunye states, “If you look at it from an African American point of view, I am the bad black girl who is not dealing with being black, or I am the bad woman not being a feminist. I’m not believing in one thing, but believing in too many things. And that becomes a problem for certain people.”<sup>67</sup> Much of Dunye’s work made its way into artistic and academic spheres during this very period in which the art world was dominated by identity politics discourse and

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<sup>64</sup> Cheryl Dunye, “Possessed” in *Bad Girls* (The New Museum of Contemporary Art: New York, 1994), 109-110.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 112-113.

<sup>66</sup> Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Different,” in *Sister Outsider*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 122.

<sup>67</sup> Dunye, “Cheryl Dunye” in *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, edited by Juhasz Alexandra (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 301.

postmodernist theory. Her intersectional position as a Black queer filmmaker is therefore surrounded by several broad conversations about race, gender, sexuality, feminism, and multiculturalism that speak less to individual experiences and more to a taxonomy for understanding human difference. Dunye states, “I’ve been empowered by feminist issues, and I’ve been empowered by African American issues, and by other political battles, anarchist movement issues. A whole bunch of those things have become who I am. But there is no word for the -ism I live from.”<sup>68</sup>

Dunye’s works offer a unique perspective on particular critiques of “marginalized politics” as marginalizing. Rather than creating straightforward critiques of institutional reality, Dunye takes generic ideas of identity and inflates them with humor and fiction to illuminate the contradictions in objectifying individual experience. In the following chapter, I will analyze Dunye’s first feature-length film as a work of *parafiction* using theories that relate directly to the historically singular disciplines of art, art history, and identity and expand on the concept of humor as a (re)constructive tool rather than merely a subversive one. By looking at Dunye’s use of humor to create and critique an “archive,” one can begin to understand the ways in which she continues to challenge institutional thinking and structuring through art.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 295.



Figure 1.1 (above): The Broadway Window. Image credit: New Museum website, <https://www.newmuseum.org/history>. Figures 1.2 and 1.3 (below, from left to right): *Let the Record Show...* and *FACE* installation photos. Image credit: New Museum digital archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/>.







Figure 1.4 (left): Photograph from Lyle Ashton Harris' series, "The Secret Life of a Snow Queen." Image credit: Lyle Ashton Harris' website, <http://www.lyleashtonharris.com/>.

Figure 1.5 (below): Photographs from Lyle Ashton Harris' series, "Americas" Image credit: Guggenheim website, <https://www.guggenheim.org/>

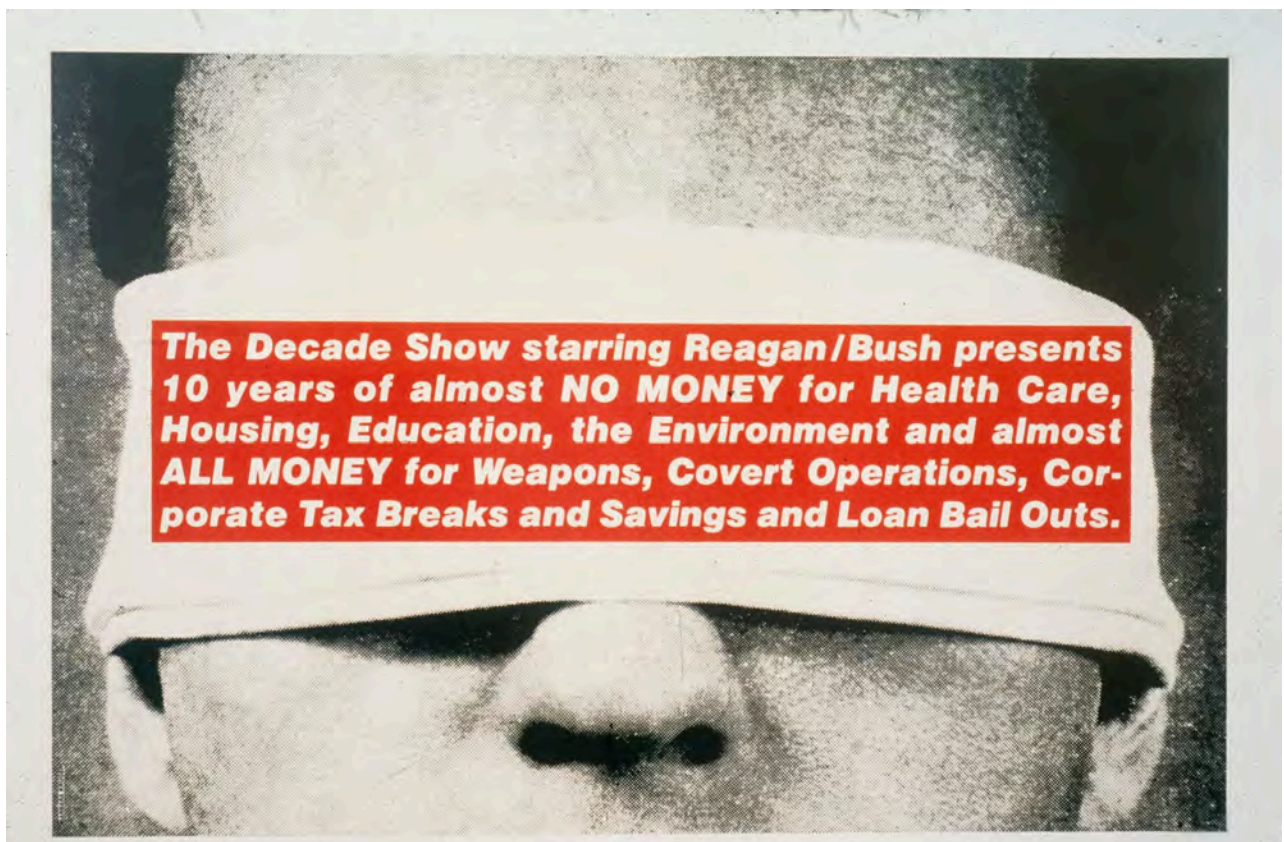






Figure 1.6 (above): *The Decade Show* at the New Museum. Image credit: New Museum Digital Archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/>.

Figure 1.7 (below): detail from *The Decade Show*. "Untitled, 1990" by Barbara Kruger, commissioned by the New Museum. Image credit: New Museum Digital Archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/>.



DIFFERENCE: ON REPRESENTATION AND SEXUALITY

## Video Program

The following program will be shown Tuesday through Sunday, at  
2:30 p.m. and Wednesday, at 5:00 p.m.

Theresa Cha, Paysage, Paysage, 1981 . . . . . (10 min.)  
Dara Birnbaum, Technology/Transformation:  
Wonder Woman, 1979 . . . . . (7 min.)  
Max Almy, Modern Times, 1979 . . . . . (19 min.)  
Cecelia Condit, Possibly in Michigan, 1983 . . . . . (12 min.)  
Judith Barry, Casual Shopper, 1980 . . . . . (3 min.)  
Martha Rosler, Vital Statistics of a Citizen,  
Simply Obtained, 1977 . . . . . (40 min.)  
Stuart Marshall, A Journey of the Plague Year,  
1984 . . . . . (29 min.)

Program length: approximately 2 hours, 5 minutes

In addition, the following videotapes can be viewed at The Kitchen,  
59 Wooster Street, NYC 10012, January 8 - March 2, 1984.

Jean-Luc Godard, France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children,  
1980 (Parts 1-12) . . . . . Tues.-Sat., 2:30 p.m.  
Raymond Bellour and Philippe Venault, The Image  
of Cinema, 1982 . . . . . Tues.-Sat., 4:15 p.m.

We deeply appreciate the support of The Kitchen in participating in  
this exhibition.

The Film Program for this exhibition will be shown at Joseph  
Papp's Public Theater from January 25 through February 3, 1985.  
The Public Theater is located at 425 Lafayette Street, NYC 10003.  
A separate schedule will be available

----Film & video programs organized by Jane Weinstock, Guest Curator

Figure 1.8 (left): Video program for *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the Public Theater. Image credit: New Museum digital archive, <https://archive.newmuseum.org/>.  
Figure 1.9 (below): Stills from Chantal Ackerman's "Je, Tu, Il, Elle." Image credit: Janus Films/Cinémathèque royale de Belgique







Figure 1.10 (above): Installation view of Theresa Cha's "Paysage, Paysage" at PEER UK. Image credit: PEER UK.  
Figure 1.11 (below): *Bad Girls* exhibition. Image credit: New Museum digital archive.



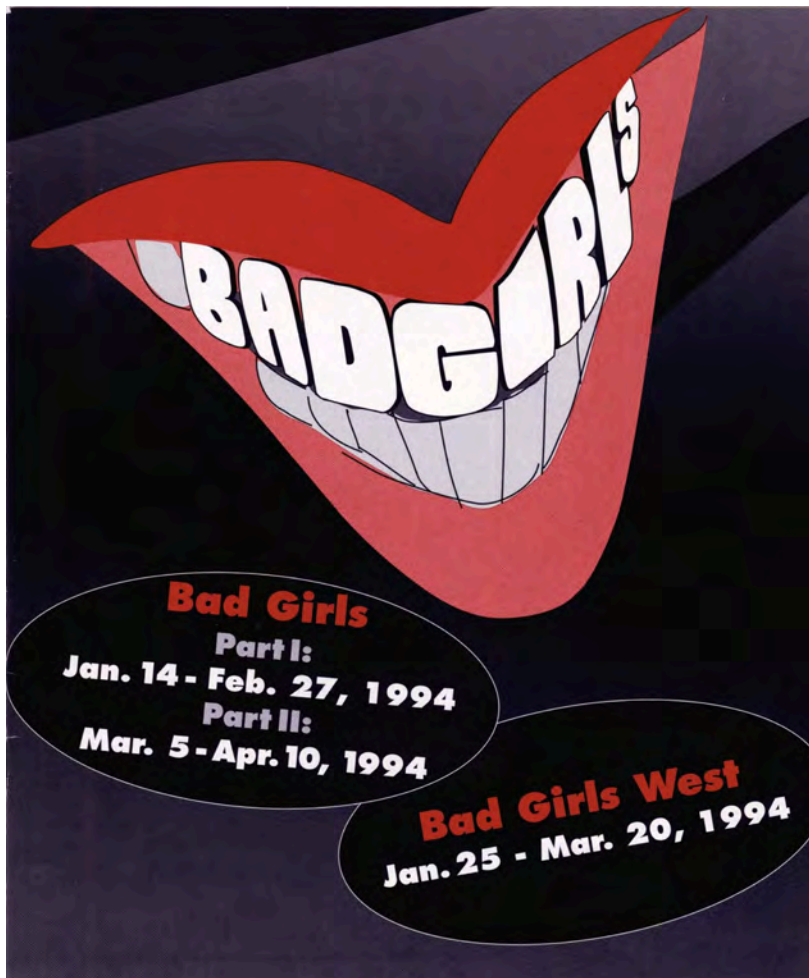


Figure 1.12 (left): *Bad Girls* Zine. Image credit: New Museum digital archive.



Figure 1.13 (right): Pat Lasch's plaster wall sculpture "Birthing My Husband" on the cover of The New Museum "Views" publication. Image credit: New Museum digital archive.





Figure 1.14 (above): Still from video Sadie Benning's "Girl Power."  
Figure 1.15 (below): Still from Alix Perlstein's "Pet, Fluffy, Cheezy, Bunny."





Figure 1.16 (above): Still from video Sandi Dubowski's "Tomboychik."

## Chapter 2

### Re-Inventing the archive: The Dunyementary and The Watermelon Woman

"I made a sideways move from art history into writing, and I think this, in part, is why I also find the distinction between fiction and nonfiction odd. It's not at all a natural way of splitting up narrated experience, just as we don't go around the museum looking for fictional or nonfictional paintings. Painters know that everything is a combination of what's observed, what's overheard, and what's been done before. [...] All I want is to be dragged down into as pace of narrative that I haven't been in before, into a place where, as you say, a truth is created. And let's be frank: even the most scrupulous New Yorker article is an act of authorial will and framing, and is not as strictly 'nonfictional' as it suits us to think it is."<sup>69</sup>

Archives are not only a means of understanding the past, but also a means of defining the self in relation to historical moments, persons, and objects in order to construct a past. An archive can be understood as a representation of identity or record of cultural production of a person or people.<sup>70</sup> These records shape the histories created from them, specifically in relation to collective memory, national identity, and personal identities.<sup>71</sup> While there are several different kinds of archives both large and small, archives are not only responsible for storing information through objects but also a means of putting together a claim about some time or place through a shared cultural understanding. The role of the archivist fundamentally influences the cultural and social histories that may evolve from archives, giving the archivist the power to control what is seen or how things are catalogued.<sup>72</sup> Historians operate differently. The historian's role as a narrator of a past may rely on the content of archives, yet the narratives they craft from their research may also be informed by a lack of historical content. To this degree, historians may work beyond an archive and question the terms and materials of history as they have been recorded to relate to some kind of singular identity.

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<sup>69</sup> Teju Cole and Aleksandar Hemon, "A Conversation with Aleksandar Hemon," in *Known and Strange Things*, comp. Teju Cole (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 79-80.

<sup>70</sup> Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," *The American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 601.

<sup>71</sup> Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory in Archival Science," *Archival Science*, no. 2 (2002): 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Cheryl Dunye is one of several artists who has taken on the role of the historian, specifically investigating the relationships between institutional Archives, as they have been described above, and grassroots archives, or those collections of materials created outside of institutional walls such as a nonprofit, community or family archives.<sup>73</sup> Dunye relates this latter concept of archives to Black queer history and how it has been and continues to be represented. Through her film, Dunye not only critiques the Archive but uses the concept of parafiction, or the combination of realistic and fictive modes of storytelling, to create an archive that in of itself serves as a method of critique.<sup>74</sup>

In 1996, Dunye teamed with photographer Zoe Leonard to create the fictional archives of Fae Richards, a Black lesbian actress and entertainer from the early 1940s, often listed in the credits of films by director Martha Page as “The Watermelon Woman.” *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* collects several photographs that document Richard’s life and career in Philadelphia. In photographs styled to resemble early-studio style portraits, Hollywood cinema set takes, and 1940s era family photographs, viewers are introduced to the friends, family and lovers of Fae Richards (*fig. 2.1 and 2.2*). Through these photographs formal techniques and their pairing with dated typewriter font plate number descriptions, a convincing reality of Black queer life in early 20th century cinema is rendered. In her article “woman’s reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art–feminist perspectives,” Giovanna Zapperi argues, “...the *Archive*’s effectiveness lies in its avoidance of the question as to whether a real Fae Richards could have existed. Its fragmentary narrative instead presents us with a puzzle from which a number of repressed histories might emerge between the lines, thus providing information about overlooked aspects of

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (October 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," 54.



American film history, such as the Black films—so-called race movies—that were popular with Black audiences until the 1940s.”<sup>75</sup> In this way Fae Richards acts as a ghost of an unwritten history of Black cinema(s), implying that the potential of Black queer histories might begin with a recognition of their unfamiliarity as-of-yet.

Cheryl Dunye places a short statement above the cast list of those seen in the photographs:

Fae Richards is a fictional character conceived by Cheryl Dunye. Zoe Leonard photographed and constructed this archive to tell Richard's story. The cast and crew listed below staged events from Richard's life for Leonard's camera. The photographs were then used as source material for a 'documentary' of Fae Richards' life in Dunye's film *'The Watermelon Woman'* (1996).<sup>76</sup>

By creating an imaginary archive, Dunye and Leonard point to the gaps in historical records that neglect or overwrite the lives of Black lesbians and their presence in film history. This provides the physical material for Dunye to approach the role of a historian as an artist and filmmaker in *The Watermelon Woman* to further discussions on Black lesbian representation in film. Using the fictional character of the Watermelon Woman alongside the fictional rendition of herself, Dunye is able to create both a hypothetical narrative and an archival document of a Black queer woman in film longing for a representative history of Black queer women in film before her.

Dunye describes the impetus for creating an imaginary archive for *The Watermelon Woman* as part necessity and part invention. She explains that her preliminary search for archival material to use in the film began at the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C:

While the Lesbian Herstory Archive was filled with juicy material from African American lesbian life, including the Ira Jeffries archive (she appears in the film), it had

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<sup>75</sup> Giovanni Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art—Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review*, no. 105 (2013): 31-32.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

no material of African American women in Hollywood. The Library of Congress, on the other hand, had some material from African American women in Hollywood, but none on African American lesbians.<sup>77</sup>

Caught between a lack of material and the organizations of available material on her desired subject in both grassroots archives and institutional Archives, Dunye decided to pair with photographer Zoe Leonard to create an archive (based on Dunye's mother's family photos) to use the proceeds from the archive's first show and sale at A.I.R. Gallery to help fund the production of Fae Richards' and Dunye's story.<sup>78</sup>

## The Watermelon Woman

In the same year of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive's* publication, Cheryl Dunye released her feature-length film *The Watermelon Woman*—one of the first feature-length films made by and about Black queer women in film. The film follows Cheryl, a young Black lesbian living and working in Philadelphia, as she ventures to make her first movie. Cheryl works at a video store with her friend Tamara and runs a video-taping business on the side. Using the store's video equipment on the weekend to film her movie, Cheryl explores her own desire to make a film on the stories of Black women because, as she states, "our stories have never been told."<sup>79</sup> Throughout the course of the film, she explores the complications of being a Black queer woman both in cinema and in everyday life. Cheryl is first drawn to the later-to-be-recognized Fae Richards when viewing a 1940s race film directed by Martha Page entitled *Plantation Memories*, shocked to find that her name is listed only as "The Watermelon Woman" in the credits (*fig. 2.3 and 2.4*). In conversations with her mother, family friends, and local Philadelphia residents she

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<sup>77</sup> Dunye, "Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue," interview by Julia Brian-Wilson, *ArtJournal*, Summer 2013, 83.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Dunye, dir., *The Watermelon Woman*, First Run Features, 1996.

discovers that Fae Richards was not only an actress but an entertainer at local nightclubs catering to a variety of Black folks in the city who her mother describes solely as “the weirdos” that Cheryl might have associated with back in the day. Cheryl understands this to mean the Black queer folx of Philadelphia and discovers that Richards was involved with the white director Martha Page who cast Richards in many of her race films. Cheryl’s fondness for Richards enhances when she discovers that Richards had a relationship with a white woman, mirroring the relationship Cheryl has to a young white woman named Diana who frequents her video store (*figs. 2.5 and 2.6*). As her research evolves, Cheryl unveils the complications of race and queer identity as it relates to racial and systemic privilege. She begins to question her own relationship to Diana when numerous accounts lead her to believe that Diana’s interests in Dunye are fetishizing and that she is less interested in being an accomplice and accounting for her white privilege.<sup>80</sup> This follows several negative accounts when speaking to white authorities in academia, libraries, Archives, as well as Diana’s relatives who negate or undermine the history of Black women and Black film history.

The film’s ending unveils the importance of Black queer family-making as crucial to continuing the stories of Black queer women. June Walker, the long-time lover of Fae Richards, writes a letter to Cheryl after she is taken to the hospital the same day that she is meant to meet with Cheryl. In the letter she explains that Martha Page’s interests were exploitative to Richards, and that Richards was ashamed of her prominent role as the mammy character in which Page often cast her as. June regards that Richards “paved the way for kids like you to run around making movies about the past.” She concludes,

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<sup>80</sup> Accomplice has been a word used recently in activist circles to replace the term “ally,” which has been seen as a neutral expression of solidarity instead of direct action.

“Please Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in the family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other.”<sup>81</sup> In this statement, June implies that Black queer folx have a responsibility to one another to remember and document their history for the future.<sup>82</sup> Cheryl responds to the letter in a video diary by stating that what Fae may have meant to June is different than what Fae meant to Cheryl (*fig. 2.7*). Cheryl sees Fae as hope, inspiration, possibility, and most importantly history. This is crucial to Cheryl and her self-definition as a Black lesbian filmmaker. The film concludes with Cheryl’s complete construction of Fae’s life, using a montage of images seen within the *Archives* and throughout the film to illustrate fact. Directly before the credits, a title card appears that reads “The Watermelon Woman is fiction. Sometimes you have to make your own history.”<sup>83</sup>

In these last moments, the viewer is left to reflect on the reasons for this film’s fictive narrative and the symbolic nature of creating a document of a Black queer actress who was not real. The most accurate interpretation of this fictive element is that, as stated before, the film challenges us to confront the gaps in American film history, and especially Black film history, as it has been written. By complicating the nature of documentary-style film, Dunye alludes to the historian’s responsibility for looking beyond the Archives as they are presented to us. The film urges viewers to expand the definition of what makes an “archive” and necessarily urges one to approach a singular and linear *History* with caution.

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<sup>81</sup> Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*.

<sup>82</sup> Matt Richardson, “Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in *The Watermelon Woman*,” in “Beyond Normative: Sexuality and Eroticism in Black Film, Cinema, and Video,” special issue, *Black Camera*, n.s., 2, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 107.

<sup>83</sup> Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*.

## Self in Multiples

"When we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I'm not excluding you from joining—I'm broadening the joining."<sup>84</sup>

In his article, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in *The Watermelon Woman*," Matt Richardson suggests that Dunye's film interprets documentary film as a historiographical tool for signifying the gaps in written history, not a total replacement for history. By this, Richardson argues that the role of documentary filmmaking in *The Watermelon Woman* is challenged, as histories may be told in multifarious ways and styles.<sup>85</sup> His article notes that this film was released after several other documentary films made by and about Black lesbians, queer folx and feminists. Some of these titles include *Stormé Lady of the Jewel Box* by Michelle Parkerson (1987); *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* (1988) by Andrea Weiss; *Among Good Christian People* (1991) by Jacqueline Woodson; and *B.D Women* (1994) by Inge Blackman. The importance of these films lie in their challenges to the ways that Black queer identities have been visualized in moving image media.<sup>86</sup> Dunye was a mentee of above-mentioned Michelle Parkerson and Ada Gay Griffin, both Black feminist lesbian filmmakers who focused on representation of queer bodies in history, and a successor and student of filmmakers such as Martha Rosler and Barbara Hammer, who have been recognized as prominent white feminist filmmakers of the mid-20th century.<sup>87</sup>

What differentiates Dunye from several of these filmmakers is not only her combinative mode of documentary and narrative filmmaking, but her strong take on feminism and feminist filmmaking as it relates to her practice. Dunye discloses in an

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Audre Lorde in *The Feminist Renaissance*, quoted in Nancy K. Bereano, "Introduction," in *Sister Outsider*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 11.

<sup>85</sup> Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told," 102.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, in *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, 291.

interview with film theorist and writer Alexandra Juhasz that she feels feminism's whiteness created a categorical and institutional imperative for art made by women. Dunye explains, "When I was exploring feminism, it was a bunch of books that made you a feminist. There was no movement that I, as a young black woman, could run into. It was about a lot of reading and feeling uncomfortable and standing around people I didn't like who said they were feminists."<sup>88</sup> This feeling was shared by many women artists and academics of color, who felt the singular experience of whiteness was a problematic associative quality for defining an early feminist movement about women's collective experiences.<sup>89</sup> Juhasz expounds on Dunye's films on the subject of identity politics, explaining that "by merely articulating her personal position—as black, female, lesbian, artist, intellectual, middle-class, Liberian, American, Philadelphian— she creates a new kind of political art practice based on the complexity and humor of identity. She puts herself into her work, then laughs at her own trials and tribulations as she seeks for meaning and romance in her life."<sup>90</sup>

In regards to her work as feminist filmmaking in the interview with Juhasz, Dunye states, "I've been empowered by feminist issues, and I've been empowered by African American issues, and by other political battles, anarchist movement issues. A whole bunch of those things have become who I am. But there is no word for the -ism I live from."<sup>91</sup> While *The Watermelon Woman* tells the story of Fae in order to understand the ways that Black queer life has been represented in film, a recurrent issue that appears in the film is the character Cheryl's own complexities in understanding her identity as a Black lesbian

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<sup>88</sup> Juhasz, introduction to *Visible Evidence*, vol. 9, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 292.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 298.

who does not entirely relate to the afrocentric politics of her close friend Tamara. At a later point in her interview, she explains “If you look at it from an African American point of view, I am the bad black girl who is not dealing with being black, or I am the bad woman not being a feminist. I’m not believing in one thing, but believing in too many things. And that becomes a problem for certain people.”<sup>92</sup> These quotes mark a desire for multiplicity against singular or linear objectives. Dunye’s subjectivity in her work allows for many possible narratives to become visible between disparate fragments. The multiple style, timing, and humor in several moments of the film allow for each image and text to be confronted with a number of unpredictable interpretations and appropriations.<sup>93</sup>

### **The Dunyementary and Parafictional Strategy in *The Watermelon Woman***

The multiplicity of and in Dunye’s work is foundational for a genre she has coined the “dunyementary,” which combines narrative, documentary, comedy, and autobiography styles. The creation of her own genre points to the inherent subjectivity in making documentary films and her own desires to create films not from an objective frame of reference, but from her own. The dunyementary provides a method for Dunye to work through the conflicts of identity politics that confine one to being only one or the other in the very style and nature of filmmaking by enhancing its both serious and comical aspects through humor and fiction.<sup>94</sup> While the film centers on the character Cheryl’s life as Black

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>93</sup> Richardson, “Our Stories Have Never Been Told,” 102.

<sup>94</sup> See Kimberle Crenshaw’s discussions on the limitations of “identity politics,” specifically in relation to the slippage or separations often encountered in separate LGBTQ and Black community politics of the self. She argues, “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” [Crenshaw, Kimberle “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” in the *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1243.]

lesbian, it also raises the question of what it means to be a Black lesbian both in everyday history and in the larger history of art and film.

The roles of humor and fiction in *The Watermelon Woman* pay a large tribute to the idea of the dunyementary. The way we understand these aspects may best be understood in the several accounts of parafictional strategy that are used to create a pragmatics of trust for believing the story and simultaneously understanding why the story must be fictionalized. Art historian and academic Carrie Lambert-Beatty defines the method of parafiction as a method used by artists of creating something not entirely tangential to reality, but rather combining aspects of reality with fictional ones to create a critical work. She defines the concept of parafiction as follows:

“It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction’s fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacrum, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than towards the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.”<sup>95</sup>

The general notion of blending fact and fiction is common throughout the history of performance, exemplified in many theatrical plays, historical narrative films, and documentary films that rely on historical reenactment or reconstruction.<sup>96</sup> The particular combination of truth and fiction in *The Watermelon Woman* becomes a strategy by which to critique and create history in art. A “pragmatics of trust” is accomplished as parafictional strategies are used to make an art of the plausible for an audience. Parafictioners, like Cheryl Dunye, Lambert-Beatty defines as producing and managing plausibility. Opposed to the idea of accuracy, plausibility is less an attribute of a story or

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<sup>95</sup> Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe,” 54-55.

<sup>96</sup> Examples of such work can be cited as Suzan-Lori Parks experimental theater piece *The America Play* (1995), Barbara Hammer’s film *History Lessons* (2000), or Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston* (1989).



image but a specific relationship that is formed via its encounter with viewers. The viewer's own variable knowledge and 'horizons of expectation' determine whether something can be rendered as plausible. This, Lambert-Beatty argues, allows parafiction to create a specific multiplicity in the viewer's encounters with the artwork.<sup>97</sup> Multiplicity and its relationship to both the form and content of *The Watermelon Woman* allow a number of critiques to be made.

### **Parafictioning in *The Watermelon Woman***

Parafictional strategy can be seen in the moments of the film when Dunye succeeds in making the story plausible. A basic element of this may be seen in the several confessional and personal moments throughout the film that counter events that are filmed in long-shot style, traditional movie format. The first account where we see this is at the very beginning of the film when Cheryl sits down to introduce herself and her project after videotaping a wedding with her friend Tamara. A title-card reading "Bryn Mawr, PA" opens the film. Classical music plays while the camera pans over a wedding reception in a picturesque outdoor setting. Cheryl's voiceover indicates her presence behind the camera as she moves it to focus on different faces of guests within the space. Cheryl and Tamara bicker about setting up correct shots, lighting, and who to focus the camera on (*fig. 2.8*). At some point, Cheryl sets up the camera to shoot the whole family together and instructs them to move closer together to fit the frame. An older white man steps in front of Cheryl's camera with a large photographic film camera and she runs to confront him, appalled that he has not noticed the video camera behind him (*fig. 2.9*). The scene switches from the

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<sup>97</sup> Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe" 72-73.

lower-quality image of video to a more refined filmic image of Tamara and Cheryl leaving the gig. Tamara argues with Cheryl about not being paid enough because she wants to take her girlfriend out to dinner, and Cheryl rolls her eyes and lets Tamara know that she's taking the equipment home to start on her movie. The following scenes are shot on a video camera, capturing the urban landscape of Philadelphia out of a moving car (*fig. 2.10*).

Cheryl asks Tamara to put the camera down because this tape is for the wedding patrons, but Tamara insists that these scenes are what the patrons need—describing that this “urban realism” is her interpretation of their wedding.

This two-fold wedding scene(s) mark the differences between film and video in the history of film. In the first scene, we are introduced to Cheryl directing the camera and the images being controlled by her movements, direction, and most importantly her voice. In the 1980s, video became a significant tool due to its accessibility and low cost. Moments after, when a white man steps in front of Cheryl's camera with a costly and more traditional idea of a photographic medium, he became a signifier for the neglect of video as a valuable medium and furthermore that a Black woman behind a video camera is a recognizable or justifiable camera person.<sup>98</sup> Tamara becomes angry because she thinks she's been shorted in her pay. The scenes following this are shot by Tamara out of the car window. She labels the shots of Philadelphia's urban landscape and several Black folks on the street as urban realism, something she claims to be her “impression of their wedding.” These two scenes in conversation with one another may reference a greater issue of economic inequality as a Black videographer that Tamara gestures towards when receiving shorted pay.

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<sup>98</sup> Richardson, “Our Stories Have Never Been Told,” 103.

The next scene follows in what I would posit as another parafictional strategy to gain the trust of viewers of the film. A camera pans along a room full of pictures, notes and VHS tapes that pile on the surface of a desk and eventually frames the back of a chair. The camera stops and Cheryl runs to the chair and adjusts a lavalier mic on her shirt (*fig. 2.11*). She introduces herself as Cheryl and states that she is a filmmaker. After a few seconds, she reconsiders and explains that she's not yet a filmmaker but she works in a video store and runs a videotaping business on the side and is working on being a filmmaker. She continues to explain that she knows her first film has to be about Black women because, she states, "our stories have never been told." She explains that she has been watching films from the 1930s and 40s that she's borrowed from the store that star early Black actresses such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers.<sup>99</sup> She shows a clip from a movie entitled *Plantation Memories* on her TV set that casts a young Black woman as a mammy but is listed only as *The Watermelon Woman*. The scene plays out as *The Watermelon Woman* chases after a young white southern belle to comfort her. Her dialogue reads, "Oh don't cry Missy. Master Charles is comin' back for sure. I know he is." *The Watermelon Woman* dries the white woman's tears and assures her once again of her husband or lover's return and the scene slowly fades to blue. After marveling over her beauty, Cheryl explains that she is going to find out more about this woman so that she can make a film about her.

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<sup>99</sup> Hattie McDaniel was born in 1898 and arrived in Hollywood in the late 1920s. She was often cast as a mammy figure, acting in films such as *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), *Alice Adams* (1935), *Show Boat* (1936), and *Saratoga* (1937). Throughout her career, she became known for her strong independence and ferocity in playing "mammy roles." She defended her career against several criticisms, stating that if she were not acting these roles and being paid for them she might actually be working as a domestic help for significantly less pay [Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, fourth ed. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001, 82-85)]. Born in 1902, Louise Beavers was also predominantly cast as a mammy-figure. Her large appearance (partial to diets used to make her gain weight for her roles) and good-natured friendliness became prominent features of the characters she played. When cast as Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934), Donald Bogle explains how Beavers protested the use of the term "nigger" in the script and won her case with the NAACP but was harassed by members of the crew to recite the word "negro" repeatedly as punishment. She was later praised for her role in the film by several critics as a result of not being nominated for an Academy award due to racial bias (Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 62-64).

I choose to analyze this scene as an example because it sets a dynamic for the rest of the film. Cheryl's self-set up of the camera instills a sense of honesty, following the form of something like a diary video. Her casual introduction as Cheryl the becoming-filmmaker aligns with Cheryl Dunye's name as the author of the film being viewed, making it hard to distinguish this on-screen Cheryl as a character different from the director. Her mention of actresses such as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, both Black women who held predominant roles as "mammy" characters in the very time period she has mentioned, accounts for the actual reality of Black film as it has been written (*see figs. 2.12 and 2.13*). The mammy, a character type evolving from the so-called race films of the 1930s and 40s, was characterized for exhibiting both her matriarchal power and strong love for the women and children of the families she worked for as well as a stern or independent cadence. The mammy is often associated with what Donald Bogle deems the "aunt jemima," who is generally sweet and good-tempered, or as he explains "mammies who have wedged themselves into the dominant white culture."<sup>100</sup> This derogatory character type falls in line with several others such as the so-called "tom," "coon," "buck," or "mulatto," the latter being a second stereotype that cast light-skinned or mixed race women as highly sexualized, liberated, and often erratic. The mulatto character was often pitted against the desexualized stereotype of the mammy, the former often shaming the latter for being complacent to her white employers (*fig. 2.14*).<sup>101</sup> The actions of Fae, or The Watermelon Woman, in this scene follow closely with the conventional understandings of the mammy character type. Her condolences to the white mistress implicate a certain matriarchal role in taking care of what we perceive is her employer. Uses of the words

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<sup>100</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, fourth ed. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 9.

<sup>101</sup> Bogle, "Black Beginnings: from Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Birth of a Nation," in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 3-18.

“Missy” and “Master Charles” reference an antebellum period vernacular that indicate a structural hierarchy between the white authority figure and the Black housekeeper. The Watermelon Woman’s figure and appearance differ, however, and these physical differences are enunciated through Cheryl’s proclaimed attraction to her. Cheryl’s diary-like introduction as well as the striking affinities and nuances between Richards and historical understandings of the mammy stereotype allow viewers to identify Cheryl as a reliable narrator and historian, thus instilling a trust in the viewer to continue throughout the film as if the character of *The Watermelon Woman* and Cheryl were factual.

Several other accounts in *The Watermelon Woman* permit viewers to sustain a level of trust throughout the film. I would argue that the quality or formal style of different scenes shot using a video camera succeeding this introduction enhance the viewer’s understanding of Cheryl as a reliable narrator. I view these scenes as moments in the film where Cheryl directly confronts various forms of Black community archives. A number of interviews in and surrounding the city of Philadelphia highlight these instances: an interview with Cheryl’s mother—played by her actual mother Eileen Dunye—in her home in Wynnefield, a series of interviews on the streets of Center City, Philadelphia with local residents, a tour of Tamara’s uncle’s Black film archives in his Germantown home, her interview with a family friend of her mothers in South Philly, and lastly her correspondence with June Walker whose name she finds written on a photograph of Fae while visiting the C.L.I.T. (Center for Lesbian Information and Technology) Archives. These interviews allow viewers to perceive the ways in which Black queer family-making plays an important role in shaping and sustaining histories about Black queer experience.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Richardson, “Our Stories Have Never Been Told,” 107.

The first interview Cheryl takes part in is in her mother's home, where Cheryl searches through boxes in the basement for any glimpse of Fae among the piles of memorabilia her mother has held onto. When she does not succeed, she sits her mother down in front of the camera to ask her a few questions about *The Watermelon Woman* (fig. 2.15). Cheryl's mother claims that she does not recognize the name and Cheryl expresses disappointment, showing her the *Plantation Memories* VHS in hopes that the images on the cover may bring something to mind. Her mother recognizes *The Watermelon Woman* quickly, explaining that she saw her perform at several local nightclubs in Philadelphia when she was younger. Donald Bogle explains this overlap of nightclub entertainers and actors as specific to the period, where several actresses were often featured in nightclub performance scenes alongside famous musicians in the major motion pictures (fig. 2.16). At the peak of the swing-era of the 1930s, Black people were more often employed as entertainers in Hollywood film than as actors and would perform during interludes of the films—what Bogle explains as a segregation of Black entertainers from the central plot of the movie.<sup>103</sup> *The Watermelon Woman* as an entertainer sparks an interest in Cheryl, and her mother describes that Cheryl may have found herself hanging around with the crowd of “weirdos” who usually frequented the clubs. As has been explained previously, this signifies the Black queer folx who came to see *The Watermelon Woman* perform—not as the *Watermelon Woman*, but as Fae Richards.<sup>104</sup> Cheryl's mother's revelation emblemizes the importance of queer folx in family histories, and that perhaps an

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<sup>103</sup> Bogle, “The 1940s: The Entertainers, the New Negroes, and the Problem People,” in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 118-119.

<sup>104</sup> “Folx” is a term used largely in LGBTQI circles to refer to persons whose sexual and gender identities are radically and politically non-conforming. For instance, one might use the term folx in a group of predominantly queer-identified people who use pronouns such as she, he, they, x, etc. This term is a way of acknowledging gender variance and non-binary identifications in place of a more traditional “folks.”

impulse to posit a heterosexualized version of Black history may render certain figures invisible unless further questioned.<sup>105</sup>

Cheryl continues her questioning in later scenes of her interviewing local Philadelphia residents on the street. She steps in front of the camera at the corner of two main streets, directing the camera to focus on different urban aspects around her (*fig. 2.17*). The first anonymous interview takes place with a tall Black man wearing a business suit and tie, who when asked about *The Watermelon Woman* responds that she was crucial in developing the “aunt jemima” character in film (*fig. 2.18*). A second white woman responds by stating that by the sound of the name, she must have been involved in early Hollywood cinema (*fig. 2.19*). These two juxtapositions in responses signify the relevance of *The Watermelon Woman* to separate histories, the first a history of Black film and the second a generalized notion of “American” film history as it stands. In scenes following, *The Watermelon Woman* is unrecognized, confused for other Black women in film and entertainment, or simply unknown by a variety of persons young and old, Black and white, who are walking downtown (*figs. 2.20 and 2.21*). Throughout these separate interviews, Cheryl tries to insert images of the streets and herself within Center City—creating a historical document of herself as a historian and artist within Philadelphia’s landscape. While the responses to her questions about *The Watermelon Woman* vary, each response is indicative of the dual importance in both associative and unknown histories that are noted within *The Watermelon Woman*’s name.

The differentiations between heterosexualized Black histories and queer histories is brought into question once again when introduced in the context of Tamara’s uncle’s Black film archive of his own. Cheryl explains before the visit that Tamara’s uncle was caught

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<sup>105</sup> Richardson, “Our Stories Have Never Been Told,” 107.

trying to make a move on Tamara's cousin. Tamara's suspicion of him generally revolves around this incident, and they both joke about his closeted queer desire. An image of his card appears, reading "Lee Edwards, Race Films 1915-1950, Collector-exhibitor-lecturer" before Cheryl is seen at his doorstep in Germantown, PA (*fig. 2.22*). Tamara films Cheryl as she walks through the house, where Lee gestures towards the large movie posters on the wall that advertise race films starring Ethel Moses and Lena Horne—both historical actresses who held lead roles in early race films of the 1930s and 40s (*fig 2.23*). Lee mentions "The Royal," "The Standard," and "The Dunbar" as a select few bars and clubs that were popular for Black folks around that time to go and see Black performers at a Black-owned business. When asked about *The Watermelon Woman*, Lee concedes that women are "not his specialty."

While this scene is just as brief as the past encounters of local Philadelphians, it is significant in determining the way that Black queer histories, but more specifically Black queer figures in film histories, are rendered invisible in place of a heterosexualized image of Black history as a whole. The jokes about Lee's closeted gay desires become crucial for understanding the ways in which even Black queer figures themselves are negligent of a Black queer histories, but additionally the ways that a Black man regardless of sexuality may understand Black women's positions in film history according to the character types prescribed for them. This is evident in Lee's mention of Lena Horne or Ethel Moses—Horne being an early Black actress who was cast to perform seductive tragic mulatto roles, as is the case in the 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky*, and Moses predominantly recognized for her role as both a song-and-dance entertainer and actress who was also noted for her sweet



and innocent sensibility on screen in films such as *Gone Harlem*, one of the film posters Lee prides over (figs. 2.24 and 2.25).

This last scene precedes Cheryl's first endeavors into a more traditional Archives to collect information about Fae. Cheryl visits a local library, collecting all of the books she can find on Fae and related aspects of Fae's life such as Black film history, women in film, and more recent writings about lesbians in film. Cheryl comments to Tamara that the closest Cheryl can get to finding information on *The Watermelon Woman* is the various books located in the basement of the library on Black women in film (fig. 2.26). This goes unfettered when she approaches a white man behind the counter to ask if they have any information on *The Watermelon Woman*. After no results, he suggests that she check the "black section" in the reference library (fig. 2.27). After Cheryl replies that she has already checked there, she asks if he might have any information on Martha Page—implying that white women may have more visible attention in Archives than Black women. This assumption is confirmed when the librarian finds several books on Martha Page. After showing disgruntlement with the lack of organization of material on Black women and Black women in film, Cheryl leaves the library. A scene directly follows, where Cheryl, seen on video-camera quality, shows several photos of women such as *The Watermelon Woman*, Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, and Nina Simone only to reveal her own face hiding behind the photographs (figs. 2.28 and 2.29). This shift from disgruntlement with the Archives and an insertion of her own image within this lineage of Black women in film and entertainment allows Cheryl to counter the Archives with archives, making her own face an archival material for the history she is writing through her film.

A significant turning point in *The Watermelon Woman* takes place when Cheryl meets with a family friend of her mother's Miss Shirley in South Philly. Cheryl's voiceover explains that Miss Shirley was never married and worked in a factory most of her life, to which Cheryl posits "I think she's in the family." By this statement, Cheryl concludes that Miss Shirley is also a Black lesbian and directly introduces the idea of Black queer family for the first time. The interview begins when Miss Shirley expresses disappointment in Cheryl's question about this so-called "Watermelon Woman" (*fig. 2.30*). She frowns at Cheryl's use of the name, reproaching "I don't know where you got that from. Probably from when she was makin' those movies. But her name was Fae Richards. When she sang for us, she used her real name. And she used to sing for all of us stone butches." In this moment, Cheryl zooms in to focus on Miss Shirley's face as she remarks that she and the other Black lesbians in the clubs would fight to get in Fae's line of sight. A series of photographs appear to show the "us" Miss Shirley denotes as the "stone butches" who would frequent the clubs Fae sang at. Miss Shirley continues that the clubs were mixed-owned by white folks known as the "O'Fays," but frequented by Black folks. Her voice narrates documentary footage that shows Black entertainers performing and Black folks dancing at the venues she mentions (*fig. 2.31*). The footage cuts back to Miss Shirley, as she explains that Fae often hung around with one particular woman associated with the O'Fays, to which Cheryl proposes Martha Page's name. Miss Shirley concedes that it was Martha Page, and that Fae and Martha were together so often most likely because Fae wanted to get into the movie business. Miss Shirley's understandings of Martha as a person through the gossip she heard was that she was a "mean and ugly woman," so she assumes Fae's interest in the movies were the impetus for the relationship with Page. She holds up a

photograph of Fae performing in a dress shirt and vest to a young white woman in similar attire that she's stored in an old cigar box, and both Cheryl and Miss Shirley conclude that Fae was "a looker" (*fig. 2.32*).

This particular sequence in which Cheryl combines documentary footage between the interview with Miss Shirley enables Cheryl to reframe the "family" archive. Both the images of Black folx in these nightclubs and the images of Miss Shirley are images of Black queer family, and introduce a new perspective on the Black histories that have been documented in the archives of the other family members and friends Cheryl has spoken with. These documents are not so different in their appearance or content, but constitute a queer perspective on the very clubs and nightlife that have been noted by her mother or Lee Edwards before. Directly following this interview, Cheryl sits down in front of the camera to reflect on her interview with Miss Shirley, excited by the affinities between herself and Fae as Black queer women in film.

Cheryl's next encounter with the Archives, here an academic institution, takes place with a professor at Swarthmore. Camille Paglia, titled a "cultural critic," gives a rapid-fire explanation of the ontology of "the mammy figure" in Black film history (*fig. 2.33*). She claims that this so-called mammy figure is one of her favorites, and expresses disappointment with recent scholarship that paints the mammy as a racist caricature whose large figure is degrading, desexualizing, and dehumanizing. She claims that perhaps this aspect of "the mammy figure" has been misinterpreted, as she understands her large figure to represent fertility and abundance. She disagrees that this domestic figure references a slave, but instead is similar to her own Italian grandmother who spent much of her time in the kitchen caring for her family. In reference to the name of The

Watermelon Woman, Camille concludes that she does not think that watermelon when associated with Black people is a racist or essentializing aspect, and reminds her of her own family celebrations where her family members ate the fruit happily. Within her own explanations, she projects a racist image as if it is not her own of a young boy sitting down to eat a slice of watermelon and asks why this can't be read as joy in place of racist connotations. She concludes by stating that it is rare that Black queer women would enter history, and that she is surprised to hear of a Black lesbian actress in the early 1930s. Ironically, Cheryl thanks her and continues her on-campus discussion of Fae with three punk women donning short hair and numerous piercings. Cheryl asks them if they've heard of The Watermelon Woman, to which one of them responds, "If she's in anything after 1960 don't ask us. We haven't covered women in the blaxploitation movement yet." The ironic duality of these two experiences Cheryl has on a small college campus elucidates whiteness as both ignorance and domination over Archives and Black women's roles in them, noting both the liberal professor's unquestioned power to explain her understandings of Black film history as non-racist to Cheryl and the neglect of Black women in film at all before a movement that posited images of women as seductive, rule-bending women.

With the understandings of Fae as a fellow Black lesbian, Cheryl later visits the C.L.I.T. Archives where she finds a photograph of Fae signed to June Walker. The C.L.I.T. Archives, referred to her by her new coworker Annie, are run by a young white woman who insists that Cheryl is not allowed to take photos of the documents she finds about Fae, but does not hesitate to explain the lack of organization in material and dumps the contents of the lesbian archives on the table carelessly (*fig. 2.34*). Shortly after finding

June's name, Cheryl accompanies her girlfriend Diana to Martha Page's sisters home who Diana knows through a family friend. Martha's sister is completely ignorant of Martha as queer or being involved with Fae, and later implies her disapproval of Martha's socializing with "all those colored people." Diana does not intervene, and Cheryl grows angry at the responses she receives from Martha's sister. As Cheryl announces she is leaving, her sister's housekeeper who is ironically an older Black woman enters the room (*fig. 2.35*). Cheryl leaves upset. The scenes following show Diana and Cheryl in bed together, where Diana reveals her relationships with predominantly Black men in high school (*fig. 2.36*). Through both this encounter and the encounter with Diana's family friend, Cheryl concludes that Diana is, as her friend Tamara proposed, a liberal woman who is exotifying Cheryl but is not interested in being a social or political accomplice.<sup>106</sup>

After finding June's name and researching her name in the phone book, Cheryl calls her and asks to meet with her to talk about Fae. June asks her over the phone if she's a sister, to which Cheryl responds yes and explains that she is making a film about Fae Richard's life to which she learns that June is Fae's long-time partner. The conversation plays out while Cheryl holds the phone and viewers can only audibly decipher Cheryl, not June on the other line. June requests a homemade dish for Cheryl to bring over for lunch and Cheryl is next seen walking down a neighborhood street with a paper lunch-sack in hand. Upon arriving, June's neighbor alerts Cheryl that June's been taken to the hospital but has left a letter for Cheryl to read over (*fig. 2.37*). Cheryl calls Tamara while she's at work to tell her the news, only to be interrupted by Cheryl and Tamara's boss from the video store. Cheryl's voice begins to read the letter in a voiceover, which soon turns into

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<sup>106</sup> Accomplice has been used in contemporary activist circles surrounding Black and Indigenous social movements in place of the term ally. Ally has been criticized as a merely performative gesture of political solidarity by white or privileged persons in place of real, physical measures taken to challenge systemic issues in justice struggles.

an unfamiliar voice that is soon recognized as June's. June vocalizes that she is ashamed of Cheryl for wanting to make a film about Fae that involved Martha Page, who cast her in many films that June calls "those mammy pictures" and presumes Fae was ashamed to be seen in. June's letter concludes by stating, "...She paved the way for kids like you to run around and make movies about the past." She pleads, "Please Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in the family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other."

Matt Richardson states that in this final sequence, Black queer family is revealed to hold a primary responsibility to one another to represent, document, and remember "our" history. It is with this statement in mind that one can begin to evaluate the significance of Black queer family-making in the role of *The Watermelon Woman*, but not without the several other encounters of Cheryl's large network of friends, neighbors, and family. The role of the archives—grassroots or community archives of her mother, Lee Edwards, Miss Shirley, and even the C.L.I.T Archives—over the course of the film becomes Cheryl's point of encounter to understand both Fae and herself in relation to Black history and Black film history. With each encounter, Cheryl accounts for the visible and invisible traces of women like her. To her mother, Fae was marginal to but still existent in her mother's life; to local Philadelphians, Fae *is* a character type, a cinematic trope, an entertainer, or an unknown figure. To Miss Shirley, she *was* an idol and to June, a life-partner; to Lee, she *is* an unknown actress even in his own field of expertise. To Cheryl, she is inspiration. Fae Richards is indistinguishable among a generalized history of Black experiences. By signifying the importance of queer family and archives, Cheryl comes to understand

herself as a Black lesbian filmmaker who must carry on the legacy of Black lesbians in film before her as well as write her own.<sup>107</sup>

The last segments of the film echo how it started, with Cheryl sitting down in front of the camera to disclose her own feelings about what June's letter, and more importantly what Fae Richards, means to Cheryl. She accounts that Fae meant different things to a lot of different people, but to Cheryl, Fae is an inspiration for her own position as a Black lesbian filmmaker. Through the various encounters viewers experience with Cheryl, the conception of Fae Richards is pieced together and her history is created. These archives serve as important emblems for Cheryl and the viewer both to make these conceptions clear. As the film ends, a montage of different photographs of Fae plays out on screen as Cheryl narrates the information she has collected about her life and shortly after, reveals that "The Watermelon Woman is fiction."

Parafiction, as it has been used in this film, allows viewers to conceive of the importance of Black queer family and Black queer archives through the story of Fae. The ghost in the photos of Fae and the story as it has been written by Cheryl edify a Black lesbian family not always represented, but certainly there.<sup>108</sup> Not only do we absorb factual evidence of Black film history through the documentary-style investigations of Cheryl's research, but we are also offered queer perspectives on the plausibility of a not-yet history of Black lesbians in film. Furthermore, Cheryl's own declarations as a Black lesbian filmmaker carry a potency that is visualized in her own relationship to the photos of several Black women in film including Fae who are shown in *The Watermelon Woman*. This choice to include her own face, image, and (fictional) life within the film document

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<sup>107</sup> Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*.

<sup>108</sup> Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told," 106.

her own history-making as a Black lesbian both in film and beyond. Not only does this method allow viewers to look at the stories necessary for the construction of an objective history, but it prompts viewers to consider the constructedness of history at an individual level.





Figure 2.1 (left): Fae Richards with her friend Oscar Williams on top right and Williams with Richard's dog Frankie on bottom left. Image courtesy of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. Photo taken by Zoe Leonard



Figure 2.2 (right): Fae Richards studio shot. Image courtesy of <http://www.archivesandcreativepractice.com/>. Photo taken by Zoe Leonard.



Figure 2.3 (above): Cheryl showing *Plantation Memories* VHS to camera in *The Watermelon Woman*. Image courtesy of <https://www.ejumpcut.org/>.



Figure 2.4 (above): The Watermelon Woman in *Plantation Memories* in *The Watermelon Woman*. Image courtesy of <https://www.ejumpcut.org/>.



Figure 2.5 (right): Fae Richards and Martha Page. Image courtesy of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. Photo taken by Zoe Leonard.





Figure 2.6 (above): Cheryl and Diana in *The Watermelon Woman*. Image courtesy of <https://hyperallergic.com/>.

Figure 2.7 (below): Cheryl ending video portrait, explaining Fav's importance to her. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*







Figure 2.8 (above): Tamara adjusting reflectors. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.9 (above): Photographer interrupting Cheryl and Tamara's shot. Screen grab from *The Watermelon*

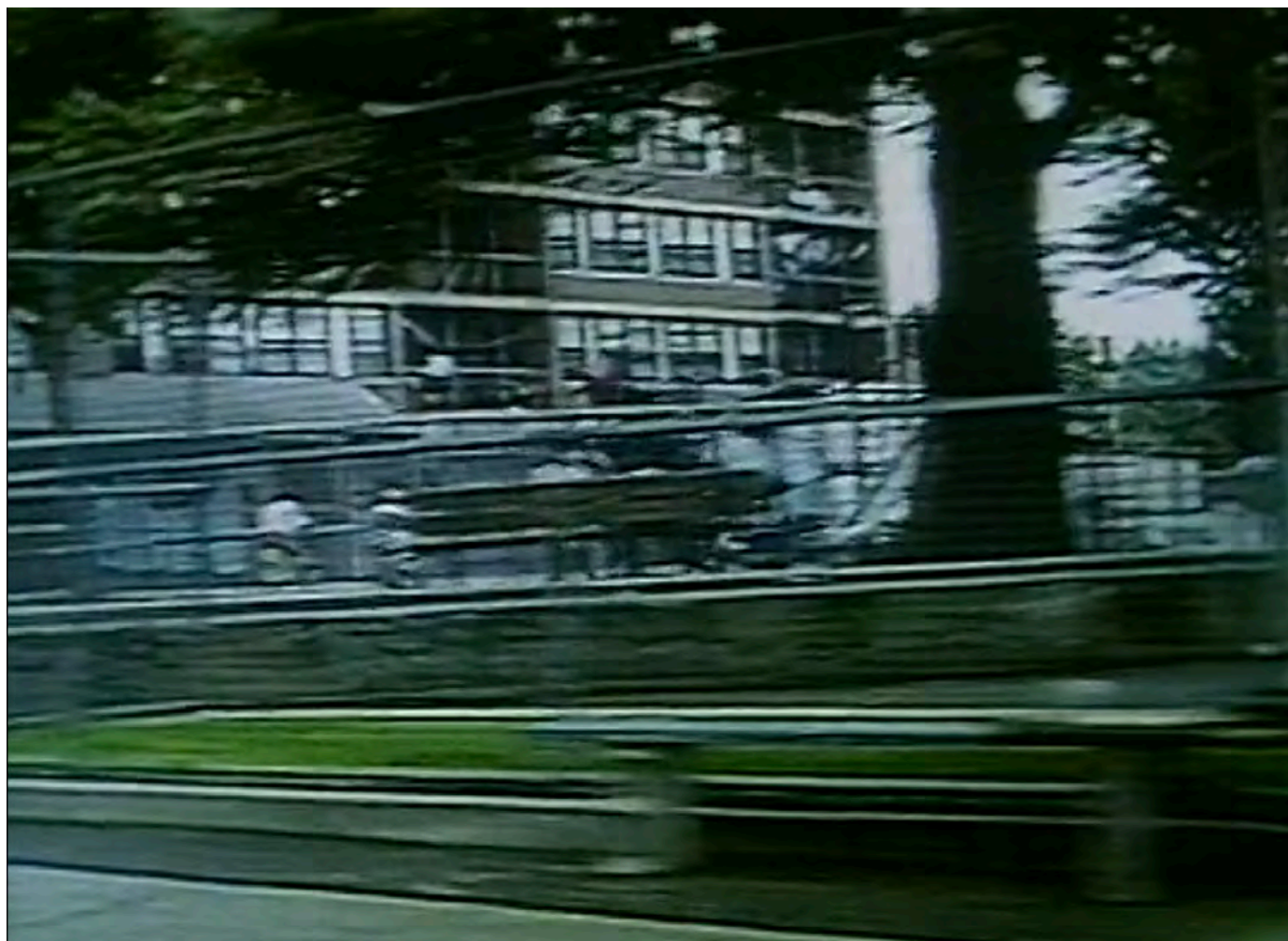


Figure 2.10 (above): Tamara's shots out of the moving car of Philadelphia. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.11 (above): Cheryl's introduction. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.12 (above): Hattie McDaniel. Image courtesy of <https://unfspinnaker.com/>.



Figure 2.13 (above): Louise Beavers. Image courtesy of <https://aaregistry.org/>.





Figure 2.14 (above): Dorothy Dandridge on the cover of Life Magazine for her role as Carmen in *Carmen Jones* (1954). Image courtesy of <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/>.



Figure 2.15 (above): Cheryl's mother's interview in *The Watermelon Woman*. Image courtesy of <https://www.ejumpcut.org/>.



Figure 2.16 (above): Lena Horne performing in *Stormy Weather*. Image courtesy of <https://www.bam.org/>.



Figure 2.17 (above): Cheryl in Center City, Philadelphia. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.18 (above): Interviewee in Center City. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.19 (above): Interviewee in Center City. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.20 (below): Interviewees in Center City. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.21 (below): Interviewees in Center City. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.







Figure 2.22 (above): Lee Edwards business card. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.23 (above): Lee's *Gone Harlem* poster. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.24 (below): Lena Horne with Eddie Anderson in *Cabin in the Sky*. Image courtesy of <https://www.imdb.com/>.



Figure 2.25 (below): Ethel Moses. Image courtesy of <https://www.essence.com/>.





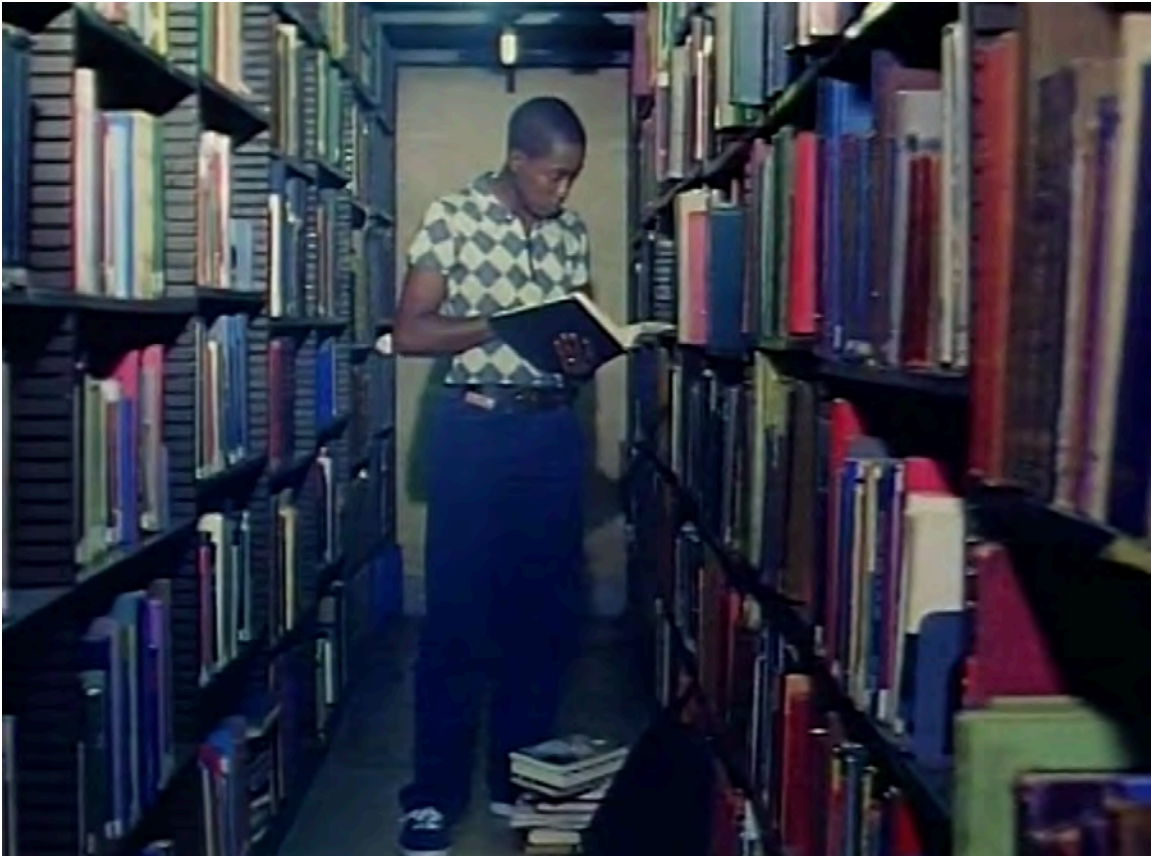


Figure 2.26 (above): Cheryl in the library basement. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.27 (below): Cheryl and Tamara at library information desk. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.





Figure 2.28 (above): Cheryl showing a photograph of Hattie McDaniel in front of her face. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.29 (above): Cheryl's face revealed behind the photographs. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.30 (below): Miss Shirley. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.







Figure 2.31 (above): Photo of Miss Shirley's friends. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.32 (below): Miss Shirley's photo of Fae performing. Screen grab from *The Watermelon*





Figure 2.33 (above): Interview with Camille Paglia. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 2.34 (above): Cheryl and archivist in the C.L.I.T. Archives. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.35 (below): Interview with Ms. Page-Fletcher. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.







Figure 2.36 (above): Cheryl and Diana in bed. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 2.37 (below): Cheryl speaking with June's next-door neighbor. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



## Chapter 3

### Disidentifying Particulars: Aesthetics and Cultural Production from The Watermelon Woman Forward

"If the direction of contemporary black artists' work is any indication—and I believe it is the best we have—we are fast approaching a time when this practice will no longer be viable. It is now less convincing than ever to speak of black artists as if they share an enterprise. The work of black artists for whom questions of culture are a subject but visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end obligates us to displace race from its central location in our interpretations of this work. More, it recommends a turn toward the subjective demands that artists place on the multiple categories they occupy, and that we grant this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies. It obligates us to expand our view of the many contested fields of possibility out of which "black art" is seen to come, so that we might accommodate in our interpretations all that the work itself engaged in order to be possible."<sup>109</sup>

Conceptions of what defines "fiction" and "fictiveness" often posit the real against the imaginary. Through a parafictional lens in *The Watermelon Woman*, the plausibility of Black queer histories becomes a method of critique. The reinvention of Black queer historical narratives, therefore, visualizes new perspectives of american histories and deconstructs polarized understandings of reality and fiction.<sup>110</sup> Cheryl Dunye's feature film along with her earlier works on video use the combinative strengths of fiction and reality to interrogate so-called "identity politics," urging a recognition of multiple identifications in place of a singular one. By interrogating her own identification as a Black lesbian through aesthetic and structural components of her work, Dunye challenges canonical art genres formulated around identity in challenging the construction of identity itself.

To reiterate again from a contemporary standpoint what has been said for decades, the sub-genre of identity-politics was projected onto queer artists, women artists and artists of color by a predominantly white institutions and limited the ability to look at differences

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<sup>109</sup> Darby English, "How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness," introduction to *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 11-12.

<sup>110</sup> In reference to *Disidentifications*, which I will be using as a primary resource in this chapter, as well as Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, I will write "america" in place of "America" as a political gesture and reconfiguration of america as minoritarian.

beyond a binary opposition of the white heteropatriarch and the marginalized subject. This created a fictive understanding of diversity and difference, and furthermore a fictive understanding of concrete identity categories. Audre Lorde expounds on this fictive element in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," expounding, "Somewhere on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me.' In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure."<sup>111</sup> In this statement, Lorde offers the notion of an american "majority" as fictive and enabling the fictive notion of an american "minority" who is directly opposing this *mythical norm* as "other." This tension speaks to the complications of an identity politics genre that posits the role of identity in art as something necessarily confined to this majority critic/minority artist tension. Written in 1984, Lorde's ideas are only enhanced by a contemporary critic who also looks upon the role of identity politics with caution. Hannah Black, a video artist and writer, elaborates on her own understanding of the regressive connotation of identity politics in her essay "The Identity Artist and The Identity Critic." She claims, "The tokenism of white cultural and political organizations is characteristic of this mode of identity politics."<sup>112</sup> Black continues:

To perform as evidence of the institution's purity, the identity artist has to exemplify a race/gender category, but as soon as she steps into the institution's embrace, she becomes an example of universality. She is artificially cleansed of race/gender even as she is called to represent it. Tokens are currency, and currency only exists if there is exchange.<sup>113</sup>

The aspect of exchange Black mentions signifies a necessary crossing of binaries or boundaries for productive conversations around identity. In short, what must be

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<sup>111</sup> Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Different," 116.

<sup>112</sup> Hannah Black, "The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic," Artforum, Summer 2016, 338.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

interrogated by the minority artist in their work must also be interrogated by the majority if identity is to *be defined* as the construction of self instead of *connoting* the antithesis of a fictive majority. I trace these separate considerations of and gestures towards identity politics by Lorde and Black in order to see how the term often corresponds directly to a clear binary of race, gender, and sexuality. Through both of these writers' statements, one can see the ways these binaries have been and continue to be limiting to artists, writers, and other intellectuals who occupy many margins at once—as is the case with Cheryl Dunye. I would offer that Dunye's position as an artist of multiple identifications and perspectives allows her work to move beyond something as simple as black-and-white, and to account for the multiplicity of Black queer experience through the creation and formal presentation of *The Watermelon Woman*.

## Disidentification

*Disidentification* is a term coined by queer cultural studies and aesthetics scholar José Esteban Muñoz that has been influenced and reinterpreted by several artists, philosophers, performers, writers, scholars, and activists.<sup>114</sup> In his text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, he surveys artists whose work concerns the fictional construction of identity/identities.<sup>115</sup> Considering the ways in which identities are determined by one's majoritarian or minoritarian status in society, Muñoz argues that minoritarian subjects navigate the self by interfacing with different subcultural fields to define themselves along a myriad of intersections while majoritarian subjects often access

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<sup>114</sup> In specific to the work I will discuss, Kimberle W. Crenshaw ("Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color"; "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics"), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*), Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (*This Bridge Called My Back*) are of particular importance.

<sup>115</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "Performing Disidentifications," introduction to *Cultural Studies of the Americas*, vol. 2, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.



this fiction of “identity” with ease.<sup>116</sup> In his introduction to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz writes:

[...] the story of identity formation predicated on “hybrid transformations” that this text is interested in telling concerns subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny—cultural logics that I will suggest work to undergird state power.<sup>117</sup>

In reference to the ways that identity politics has been viewed as a genre for a “minoritarian”-identified artists, Muñoz suggests that artists who use disidentificatory practices create a sphere of critique not only against majoritarian notions of identity but in fact allude to their inherent fictional construction. He argues, “...the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted,” continuing that the pattern of identity-politics counter-narratives have become a staple in theory-making processes.<sup>118</sup> Disidentification, he states, can serve to function as a hermeneutic, a productive process, and a mode of performance. It can be understood as a way of moving in between reception and production as an artist and cultural producer.<sup>119</sup> Disidentification as a mode of cultural production is of particular interest because of its affinity with revisionary identification in theories such as film theory, gay and lesbian studies and critical race theory.<sup>120</sup>

I find it especially significant in Muñoz’ work to elaborate further on the question of “disidentifying from what?” In his introduction *Performing Disidentifications*, he gestures to the problematics of an “essential blackness,” or what he posits as a Black nationalist

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

thinking that is often heterosexual. He explains that in the process of making identity, there is often a collision of separately rendered identities. Muñoz suggests:

This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable ways.<sup>121</sup>

Muñoz' quote elaborates on the ways in which artists of color are often obligated to perform certain facets of identity, but not others. Queer artists of color, therefore, often have to navigate different intersections of their identity outside of heteropatriarchal notions of race, gender, or sexuality. Black queer artists may find particular difficulties in finding the affinities between their work and Black heterosexual men-identified or women-identified artists' because their experiences as Black artists are inherently different.

As discussed in the last chapter, Dunye does not subscribe to the notion of any one facet of her identity as entirely defining of herself and her practice.<sup>122</sup> To return to Dunye's own statements on not seeing herself as particularly indebted to only feminist issues or African American issues amidst many other political battles, we can see a push for disidentificatory practices and a simultaneous recognition for the multiple.<sup>123</sup> When asked about the issues she attempts to address in her work, Dunye responds by stating that her work concerns her own personal identity politics. She follows, "This is about me dealing with who I am as an individual, as an identity, as identities plural, which is a battle between race, class, and sexuality."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>122</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 292.

<sup>123</sup> Juhasz, introduction to *Visible Evidence*, 4.

<sup>124</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 294.

## Multiplicity and Disidentifying in Aesthetics and Practice

"It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish, It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*"<sup>125</sup>

In order to see the ways in which these disidentificatory measures take shape, I will examine *The Watermelon Woman* as well as some of Dunye's earlier works on video such as *Janine* (1990) and *She Don't Fade* (1991). In their particular aesthetic bearings, these works achieve a multiplicity through Dunye's interpretations of temporality, mixed media, storytelling, and performance. These observations will allow us to understand Dunye's work alongside contemporaries such as Marlon Riggs, a Black gay documentary filmmaker known for his documentary-narratives about Black representation in media and his later work on the AIDS crisis in Black gay circles. Disidentification as a mode of cultural production in both works of Dunye and Riggs provide a broader picture of the ways in which these artists navigate film Blackness and challenge canonical notions of Black film through formal technique. Michael Boyce Gillespie writes in his book, *Film Blackness and the Idea of Black Film*, that Black film has often held the responsibility of positing an indexical tie to the Black lifeworld. By this sense, Black film is responsible for positing reality.<sup>126</sup> I would take this claim even further and interpret that, as mentioned prior in Muñoz' quotes on essential Blackness, Black film is often responsible for positing *singular* notions of Blackness and Black experience. Gillespie continues that this notion of Black film forgoes the nuances that film allows and occults the complexity of Black film to

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<sup>125</sup> Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, fourth ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015),

<sup>126</sup> Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

interpret, render, incite and speculate.<sup>127</sup> To break this value-measure of real and imaginary, Gillespie argues that Black film should be seen as art and not as a matter of prescription. In that way, the art of the film and the fictiveness of race mimic one another—both symbolizing the differences between referent, a representative of something larger, and the idea of representation, an establishment of visibility.<sup>128</sup> Through both disidentification as a mode of cultural production and the idea of film Blackness as a challenge to Black film, one can begin to see the ways in which Dunye's work as well as her contemporary Marlon Riggs are working at multiple intersections to create media that is both critically engaged and poetic.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which the combination of video and film media in *The Watermelon Woman* allowed for moments of intimate video diary to counter moments of filmic narrative. While providing moments for viewership against moments of reflexivity, the particular combination of film and video are also a challenge to more traditional narrative and documentary film. Looking at the particular historical moment in which *The Watermelon Woman* was made, video holds a certain political weight in its accessibility and capacity to make works of moving image on a small budget. As discussed in the previous first and second chapter of this thesis, the advent of video becomes a popular mode of communication and cultural production for artists emerging after the 1970s. In Michael Newman's essay, "Video as Alternative," Newman expounds that portable video recording technology released by Sony allowed for more flexible and mobile modes of moving image production outside of professional television studios and institutions. Thus, portable video recording was recognized as a democratizing technology

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

that allowed for artists and documentary filmmakers alike to use video as a means to make low-budget works that were accessible and easily circulated.<sup>129</sup> The particular combination of video and filmic quality in *The Watermelon Woman* is pertinent both because of the ways they counter each other formally as well as politically. One can see the ways in which both Dunye's earlier works and queer Black filmmakers before her using video and film inform *The Watermelon Woman's* attempts to critique and challenge the traditional separate notions of documentary and narrative filmmaking. With Dunye's creation of her own genre the "dunyementary," a humorous and subjective configuration of the term "documentary," Dunye creates a new genre that explicitly examines this visual and political tension between definitions of documentary and narrative film.

In one of her first works, *Janine*, Dunye tells the story of her high school friend and crush Janine, who is white, straight, and middle class.<sup>130</sup> Dunye sets up a camera in which she very conversationally tells the story of her friendship with Janine. While Dunye explains that she was middle-class herself, she highlights the complexities of being African-American and queer in predominantly white heterosexual environments in a short 4-minute autobiographical picture. She hangs up photos of Janine, showing them through the camera's lens, and cuts between these images, herself as interviewee, and succeeding images of candles being blown out (*fig. 3.1 and 3.2*). The images of Dunye telling the story of her and Janine is framed in a close-up of her face and it is as if she were speaking to a friend behind the camera (*fig 3.3*). The ease of the video camera technology in its ability to run simply with the press of the record button allows the video technology to serve almost as a diary or essay, being shot by Dunye and of Dunye. *Janine* is one four video-works

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<sup>129</sup> Michael Z. Newman, *Video as Alternative: On the History of the Medium* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31-32.

<sup>130</sup> Dunye, dir., *Janine*, Dancing Girl Productions, 1990.

made by Dunye during her MFA film and video program at Rutgers University. She explained in her interview with Alexandra Juhasz that the MFA had a small amount of video equipment she was able to use and videotapes ran about \$5, making it a fairly accessible and easy process to make short video works with the help of small grants or film festival awards.<sup>131</sup> In the later work of *The Watermelon Woman*, this diaristic technique becomes a way to cheaply and easily intervene among more filmic shots of Dunye interacting with other characters on-screen.

*She Don't Fade* is another work made by Dunye during this time and is a slightly longer work that follows Cheryl as Shae, a Black lesbian living in Philadelphia selling African jewelry on the street. The viewer is introduced to Shae in a similar diaristic video shot, where she explains her "new approach to women" and follows her in her sexual pursuits for a woman she sees one day walking on the streets. Shots of Shae pursuing her romantic interests are countered with shots of her and her friend Paula interviewing one another in front of the camera (figs. 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6). Dunye at some points breaks character to explain her character and what is going to happen in the following scenes, a technique used to establish that the video we are watching is fictional. Eventually, she encounters another woman walking down the street at night and breaks up with her recent girlfriend for her. Shae and this stranger soon exchange names at a party and Paula explains that the rest is *herstory*.<sup>132</sup> Similar to *The Watermelon Woman*, Shae becomes a character like Cheryl for Dunye to explore a fictive narrative that closely mirrors some aspects of her reality. Both *Janine* and *She Don't Fade* mark the use of humor and parody in Dunye's work to explore the self and the role of the artist simultaneously. Her own role

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<sup>131</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 295-296.

<sup>132</sup> Dunye, dir., *She Don't Fade*, Dancing Girl Productions, 1991.

as a Black lesbian artist and filmmaker become opportunities to create new narratives while simultaneously allowing her to laugh at the complexities of identity.

### Returning to *The Watermelon Woman*: Dunye's Cheryl

These small narrative-video vignettes create a structure that is pertinent to the construction of *The Watermelon Woman*, fortifying the importance in multiplicity and complexity of creating narratives that are in part fiction and in part truth. The dichotomy of film and video media in the film I discussed in the chapter prior is again signified as an important distinction in positing the narrative and the documentary, the personal and the political, as necessarily informing one another. In Giovanna Zapperi's article, "woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art–feminist perspectives," she states, "If we consider that histories intersect in archives in ways that can be fragmentary and contradictory, how can we approach single characters through discontinuous narratives?"<sup>133</sup> Zapperi addresses the use of reconfiguring temporality through a feminist approach in *The Watermelon Woman*, taking primarily from Griselda Pollock's conceptions of feminist temporality as discussed in "Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and The Writing of Art History." As I mentioned, Dunye does much to disidentify from any predominant feminist narrative in her own life, yet this interpretation of reconfiguring temporalities may aid one in understanding the ways that Dunye aims to disidentify her own story and that of Fae Richards from predominant narratives around race, gender, and aesthetics in art history.

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<sup>133</sup> Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art–Feminist Perspectives," 25.

Dunye's own circumstances as a Black queer woman in film are carried throughout the film in instances where she mingles with friends, engages in romantic sexual relationships, attends events, and confronts issues of the state. These scenes are placed along the narrative of researching and creating a complete document of Fae's life. Each of these instances are preceded by a title card distinguishing different locations around Philadelphia, which allow the viewer to distinguish each event as individual amongst a larger narrative of the film. Matt Richardson posits that this assemblage of different events involves the artist's subjectivity in a way to constantly recompose possible narratives across disparate fragments. He concludes, "Thus, each image/text is displaced toward the uncertain terrains of interpretation, appropriation and invention."<sup>134</sup> With a sense of humor, Dunye methodically implements these moments as methods to explicate on the exaggerated notion of her own identity politics.

There are several significant moments in determining the multiplicity of the self as created by Dunye through similar modes of humorous, disidentificatory method as seen in her earlier works. In a scene directly following Cheryl's home interview with her mother caught on video where she asks her mother about "The Watermelon Woman," Cheryl is seen re-shelving tapes at the video store she works at. Cheryl informs a young white woman, who the viewer will later know as Diana, Cheryl's romantic partner, about a two-for-one deal happening at the store (*fig. 3.7*). Deciding between tapes, Diana asks Cheryl's advice on choosing between *Cleopatra Jones*, *Jason's Lyric*, or *Personal Best*—the first, a 1970s blaxploitation film starring a Black woman as an undercover federal agent; the second, the story of a Black couple finding romance in drug-torn neighborhood; and the third, a story of a white woman athlete who develops a sexual relationship with another

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<sup>134</sup> Matt Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told," 27.



woman athlete. To this, Cheryl responds, "Cleopatra Jones is really fun. Why don't you do... *Cleopatra Jones* and *Carrie*?" Diana responds that she doesn't like Sissy Spacek, describing her as "...all weird and pale and thin and anorexic, don't you think? I kind of like girls with a bit more meat on their bones." Cheryl suggests some sci-fi films instead such as *Aliens* or *Repulsion* only to get another dismissive response from Diana, to which she shrugs and reiterates the two-for-one deal. In this short and casual interaction between the two women, Diana seems to perform a liberal sense of self in wanting to identify herself as a lesbian interested in Black and lesbian films. Cheryl's response reads to the viewer as a sort of negligence in taking popular media too seriously, proposing the pairing of a blaxploitation film with a horror film or sci-fi thriller to put them on the same level of fictiveness and exaggeration. By this approach, Dunye seems to be hinting at a comical performance of political correctness in activities as simple as choosing a movie to watch and counters the idea that any of the films are truthful depictions of truthful Black or lesbian experiences. In the following scene, Cheryl is seen dancing on a picnic table with her friend Tamara along the backdrop of the Philadelphia skyline (*fig. 3.8*). A beat-heavy melody plays as Cheryl enters the frame. She waves awkwardly at the camera before gesturing for Tamara behind the camera to come up on the table and dance with her. These scenes alongside one another add a humorous and humbling note to Cheryl as a character, not necessarily to attribute any large political connotation of Cheryl and Tamara as Black lesbians in film. For the viewer, these scenes add a strong sense of Dunye's self that disidentifies from any particular narrative of identity. If anything, like Juhasz has stated about Dunye's work, "[Dunye] puts herself into her work, then laughs at her own trials and tribulations as she seeks for meaning and romance in her life."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 292.

Both of these scenes together function as the first of many micro-narratives throughout the film that deal with Cheryl's confusion about her position as someone who is Black, lesbian, but not always interested in the afrocentric mentality of her friend Tamara. Tamara is often characterized as selfish and highly sexualized throughout the film, constantly challenging Cheryl and her interests in historical research on old race films or white women. Matt Richardson claims that viewers of *The Watermelon Woman* are asked to identify with Cheryl's desire for middle-class, artistic goals while Tamara is posited as an overtly sexual lesbian woman who is more interested in her relationships to Black women. As Cheryl's research evolves and she begins to find the problematic parallels between Fae Richard's relationship to Martha Page and her own relationship to Diana, the viewer's perspective on Tamara changes and begins to mirror Tamara's cautious approach to Diana and her fetishizing tendencies.<sup>136</sup>

Cheryl's last encounter with Diana on-screen solidifies her opinions of Diana. In a filmic shot, Diana sings to Cheryl in bed. Diana recalls her numerous relationships with Black men in high school before she realized she was interested in woman, adding that a significant other of one of her relatives was a Black Panther. Laughing, Cheryl gathers her things and tells Diana, "You're a mess," connoting the laughable performance of diversity tactics on Diana's part and Cheryl's own blindness to the situation. Soon after, Cheryl drives her car in a large coat listening to Shä-Key's "Blunted Blitz" (*fig. 3.10*) Her car begins to malfunction, and she pulls over to pop the hood and inspect it. The rap track carries over to a following scene of Cheryl with her video camera inspecting the boarded up theaters and entertainment spots that Tamara's uncle had mentioned to her in their interview. Two police officers approach her and reprimand her as one of their "crackhead

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<sup>136</sup> Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told," 107.

friends.” They arrest her for trespassing, insulting her by calling her “boy” and accusing her of stealing the video-camera she has (*fig. 3.11*). Cheryl tries to explain she is a filmmaker and not a “boy,” a historically derogatory term used to insult Black men . This second collection of scenes exemplifies a certain disidentificatory motives in Cheryl as a character, first in her ways to disidentify from the overbearing identity politics of white lesbianism and second in her own complications of gender non-conformity.

In Cheryl’s interactions with Diana, she soon realizes that Diana’s race, gender presentation, and socioeconomic position differentiate her lesbian identity from Cheryl’s. In many scenes before, Cheryl goes on a date with Stacy, a high-femme friend of Tamara’s girlfriend who performs “Loving You” by Minnie Riperton at a karaoke bar and dedicates it to Cheryl (*fig. 3.9*). Cheryl turns in the opposite direction, ashamed of her associations with Stacy and expresses her irritation towards Tamara. Matt Richardson alludes to Cheryl’s entertainment in this scene of Diana singing to Cheryl and her earlier irritation with Stacy, stating, “Black femininity is shamed by Cheryl on her date but white femininity emblemizes a desire or admiration for a femininity that also holds a power of freedom, economic, intellectual, sexual etc that relates to a power of whiteness.”<sup>137</sup>

Cheryl’s queer sexuality and gender become more complicated when alone and her gender non-conformity is turned against her in issues of state law enforcement.<sup>138</sup> These two separate occasions posit different identifications of Blackness, the first in an account of a programmatic multi diversity tactic and the second in an account of oppressive state apparatus. Cheryl’s Black identity and its in-betweens are neglected in both situations, leaving her to reinvestigate her identity through Cheryl’s research on Fae

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 109.

and the extensive Black queer family Cheryl creates through the process. The sequencing of these events allows each event to speak to different experiences of the same central subject. These instances in relation to the narrative of Fae Richards and her legacy in *The Watermelon Woman* create a discourse around the complexity of identity as a singular entity. As a contrast to notions of identity politics, Cheryl examines her own search for clarity of her position as a Black lesbian filmmaker who does not fit into mold of conventional Black womanhood or heterosexuality, and further polarized notions of white or Black lesbian sexuality in reference to Diana or Tamara.

## Rendering Blackness

"So. As a Black person writing for theatre, what is theatre good for? What can theatre do for us? We can 'tell it like it is'; 'tell it as it was'; 'tell it as it could be.' In my plays I do all three; and the writing is rich because we are not an impoverished people, but a wealthy people fallen on hard times."<sup>139</sup>

I feel that Dunye's use of these disidentificatory modes of cultural production speak to larger conversations of film Blackness, a notion that Michael Gillespie believes accounts for a nuance in filmmaking and moving image media to understand different Black experiences as necessarily informing one's aesthetic choices. This raises the question of what constitutes Black film and what necessarily informs a pull for film Blackness and a concentration on aesthetics. The question of what constitutes Black film has been a probing question among several different film theorists, writers, critics, and makers. For certain critics, this has been defined loosely as "cinema"—films, movies, and television—created by Black filmmakers for a predominantly Black audience.<sup>140</sup> Tommy Lott in his

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<sup>139</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People Onstage," in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 21.

<sup>140</sup> Tommy L. Lott, "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 221.

article “A No-Theory Theory of Black Contemporary Film” for *Black American Literature Forum*, discusses that this tension has caused several theorists and critics to push towards a notion of Black film that accounts for the aesthetics of the film, ie. cinematographic, structural, or stylistic choices in film as a more poetic form of expressing Blackness. To this gesture, Lott expounds that while incorporating the aspect of aesthetics to account for a more politicized idea of Black filmmaking may seem to evade essentialist views of Black film, a new essentialist notion of “black aesthetics” may be created as an alternative. He adds to this, “The political aspects of the notion of aesthetics in film theory is sometimes shielded by the latent connection between biological essentialism and issues of control in film practice.” Lott’s statement elucidates a continuation of theoretical hierarchies of aesthetics that conceptualize films on the basis of identity.

Lott aims to render Black film beyond the categories of any essentializing quality, looking to the political connotations of filmmaking as the seeds for larger conversations of post-colonial notions of filmmaking. Lott poses a critique of Black film that stress authentic Black aesthetics, claiming that many of these films are often well-received by a predominantly white audience but are largely ignored by Black audiences. He explains:

This lack-of-a-black-audience problem shows the need to resist the tendency of aesthetic-based theories of black cinema to position the aesthetic values of the black artist above those of the black audience. In order for black film commentary to acknowledge more pluralistic criteria by which to assess the artistic value of cinematic works, some weight must be given to the viewpoint of black audiences, inasmuch as it is imprudent at best continually to posit a black aesthetic which very few black audiences share.<sup>141</sup>

In this statement, Lott describes the hierarchies between aesthetic judgements of what defines Black film and perhaps “black aesthetics” and posits that Black audiences must become a crucial component to defining Black film so it is not to be raced by

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 228-229.

predominantly white filmgoers and critics. Introducing the presence of Third Cinema, a movement that resists the cultural imperialism imposed by the globalization of the Hollywood film industry, Lott explains that Third Cinema may provide the proper foundations for understanding a theory of Black cinema as political function. He expounds, "As a primarily oppositional practice engaged in resistance and affirmation, Black cinema need not be presently defined apart from its political function (see Espinosa)."<sup>142</sup> Continuing his arguments for a pull from either blaxploitation films, which follow a predominantly white film formula with Black casts, or tensions of realist or avant-garde techniques, he states:

I am more interested in understanding how any aesthetic strategy can be employed to challenge, disrupt, and redirect the pervasive influence of Hollywood's master narrative. To accomplish this decidedly political objective, black filmmaking practices must continue to be fundamentally concerned with the issues that presently define the political struggle of black people.<sup>143</sup>

This, he concludes, posits the notion of Black film as a tool to foster social change rather than canonize Black films by their aesthetic grounds and separate them from moving image that refutes poetics in place of more socio-political narratives of Black experience. Necessarily, the theory he wishes to formulate surrounding Black cinema must incorporate a plurality of aesthetic values which are consistent with the futures of Black people as a group engaged in struggles for social equality.<sup>144</sup>

Without negating certain aspects of conversations around this tension for Black film theory as a political art, it is important to understand again how these tensions can also create complications for Black artists whose experiences may not align with a Black heterosexual experience. Film Blackness here offers a way for aesthetics to incorporate the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 231-232.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

political and the artistic as one. Film Blackness, Gillespie argues, is a resolve to reintroduce the values attributed to Black film and to understand an abounding confluence of the art of cinema and Black discursivity.<sup>145</sup> In regards to the term “blackness” in his text, Gillespie explains, “Blackness [...] functions as a term for art modalities that evince Black visual and expressive culture. Film Blackness particularly focuses on questions of intertextual consequence, visibility, performativity, cultural history, and the politics of cinematic form.”<sup>146</sup> Blackness exceeds an inevitable object, in place becoming a motivated, constructed, corrosive, and productive form of storytelling.<sup>147</sup> This requires that viewers engage with film and film Blackness as an art of what it does rather than what it has been predetermined to do—the latter idea I would argue often positing a homogenous conception of Blackness and Black experience.

Dunye’s work does many things at once, through aesthetics, socio-political critique, content, and humorous affect. Her methodology brings together a number of experiences that understand Blackness as informative to several other experiences of her own lesbian sexuality, gender non-conformity, and even class. The “dunyementary” provides a way for art and film to come into play, to experience the self as a constantly developing and re-interpreting facet in her work. The notion of a homogenous Black experience is questioned by Dunye’s own interactions in *The Watermelon Woman* as Cheryl with Cheryl’s closest friend Tamara. Tamara questions Cheryl’s Blackness because of Cheryl’s ability to find affinities between herself and Diana, at some points accusing her of being anti-Black. Cheryl’s identity as a Black woman is not necessarily predetermined by her former associations with Diana but changing and formulated from it as she begins to understand

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<sup>145</sup> Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 5.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

herself within a larger familial network of Black queer women. In reference again to her earlier works, she toys with this question of belonging to one group, understanding her identity as a Black queer woman through a recollection of her first queer desire for a white woman in *Janine* and her later fictional pursuits for Black queer women in *She Don't Fade*. A further work also made during her MFA program at Rutgers, *Vanilla Sex* (1992), is worth examining in terms of disidentification and multiplicity.

*Vanilla Sex* is a four-minute video that showcases a rolling scroll of photographs of Dunye and a white woman posing for the camera (*fig. 3.12*).<sup>148</sup> A voiceover recalls a conference she attended for lesbians in art and academia, where the topic of “vanilla sex” was discussed. Dunye describes the humor in the situation of being in a predominantly white space where vanilla sex is understood as a conservative account of sex that opposes BDSM notions of sex and sexuality in queer circles against her own understandings of vanilla sex as the term her Black friends use to describe her sexual encounters with white women— in this case, very literally “white” sex. What appears to be a television scan of different “dyke queens” appears— the first image, appearing somewhat like b-roll, of a woman with a tight t-shirt and mullet standing on the street and gazing outwards; the second of a naked woman being carried by two others into a pool of water (*figs. 3.13 and 3.14*). This montage of found footage images, perhaps created by Dunye herself or scanned from another source, asserts the white lesbian as a subject of study. It is not surprising therefore that the second instance of footage outside of the montage of Dunye and her white counterpart is Dunye herself, alone and stripped to her underwear in the woods. She waves to the camera awkwardly and smiles, only seconds before the camera

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<sup>148</sup> Dunye, dir., *Vanilla Sex*, Dancing Girl Productions, 1992.



moves down to her underwear and legs as she jumps in slow motion (*fig. 3.15*). Here, Dunye begins to mock this idea of herself and her body as a subject of study by the camera.

This set of images is vital to understanding the series of intimate portraits that constitute the majority of the film. Here, we see two women— one Black and one white— participating in an intimate study of one another. It is not explicitly sexual, neither is it entirely clear what the relationship between the two subjects really is. This collection of images is a meeting of two seemingly separate worlds that Dunye is contending with: that of a Black lesbian community and that of a white lesbian community.

### Politicizing Black Bodies in New Queer Cinema

B. Ruby Rich has coined the era where Dunye begins her work in video and film the “New Queer Cinema” era, where several artists created works about intersectional queer identities. New Queer Cinema was an approach in filmmaking taking shape in the 1970s that Rich suggests could accommodate new materials, subjects, and modes of production.<sup>149</sup> Rich explains, “[New Queer Cinema] reinterpreted the link between the personal and the political envisioned by feminism, restaged the defiant activism pioneered at Stonewall, and recorded aesthetics to linked the independent feature movement with the avant-garde and start afresh.”<sup>150</sup> One of the artists which Rich discusses in her book is Marlon Riggs, a Black gay filmmaker living and working in the 1980s at the height of the AIDS crisis. His most well-known film may be the hour-long experimental documentary *Tongues Untied*, which follows his own trajectory in finding community as a Black gay

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<sup>149</sup> Dunye, “Cheryl Dunye,” interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 295-296.

<sup>150</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 222, PDF e-book.

man and artist. Riggs originally intended to make a film about Black gay poets in New York City. When he was diagnosed with HIV at the height of his project, the focus of the film shifted to narrate his own experience as a Black gay man as well as many of his colleagues.<sup>151</sup> Through montage, mixed media, narrative, video-portraits, interviews, poetry and song, Riggs used his own life story as a through line of the film and created a complex picture of the experiences of men marginalized by their race and sexuality at a historical moment of heightened anxiety surrounding a fatal epidemic.<sup>152</sup> Riggs elaborates on his process in making a work that was specifically for Black gay men. He explains, “Making that very conscious, deliberate choice allowed me to be very free in terms of my structure, the form of what I wanted to say as well as how I was saying it... and not fear alienating an audience that may not understand the terms, or the rage, or the degree of sexual attraction.”<sup>153</sup> Riggs’ elaborations of multiplicity here informs the stylistic and structural aspects of *Tongues Untied* that connote a diverse community of Black gay artists and cultural producers.

*Tongues Untied* showcases the works of poets such as Essex Hemphill, Steve Langley, Reginald Jackson, Craig Harris, Alan Miller, and Donald Woods.<sup>154</sup> Poetry throughout the course of the film becomes a structure by which to access multiple perspectives, emotions, and desires of Black gay men living in the height of a national crisis. The spoken word of poetry, song, and monologue become stanzas that guide the viewer into the images and separate experiences on screen. Riggs begins the film with the inclusion of a vocal performance of Joseph Beams’ poem, “Brother to Brother: Words from

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<sup>151</sup> Ed Halter, "Target Audiences: Ed Halter on the Films of Marlon Riggs," *Artforum*, Summer 2016, 378.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Marlon Riggs, dir., *Tongues Untied*, Frameline, 1989.

the Heart.” Images of Black men in parks, streets, and clubs occupy the screen in slow motion, as if to allow the viewer more time and space to process the words (*figs. 3.16 and 3.17*). Slow-moving images become important methods throughout the entirety of the film, such as the moments of “snapping,” voguing, or portraiture that accompany monologues and accounts of Riggs’ and his friends lives (*figs. 3.18 and 3.19*). Together, they create moments of reflection, moving from experience to experience as different and inevitably intertwined. One of the most significant facets of the film is the theme of silence. There are few moments of complete silence throughout the entirety of the film, as the auditory sphere is cacophonous with the sound of voices and song.

An important moment in which both the duality of silence and sound and the separate duality of Black gay identity and heteropatriarchal Black experience comes at the beginning of the film. Close-ups of mouths voicing “faggot” and “punk” are contrasted by sermons that shame gay sexuality in the church (*fig. 3.20*). Reaching an end, one mouth voices, “Priorities, that’s what I want to know. Come the final throw down, what is he first? Black? Or gay?” A portrait of man sitting tensely and silently appears on screen, as a voiceover narrates, “You know the answer, the absurdity of that question. How can you sit in silence? How do you choose one eye over the other? This half of the brain over that? Or in words this brother might understand, which does he value most: his left nut or his right? Tell him. Silence is my shield. It crushes” (*fig. 3.21*).<sup>155</sup> This montage of images allows for moments of punctuated silence in the image of a Black gay men contemplating the falsehood of being just Black or just gay. In essence, the silence becomes a methodical moment of contemplation upon the fictiveness of constructed, polarized identifications.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

Riggs intersperses these studio shots of men with found footage in the media, photographs of homophobic and racist caricatures of Black men and documentary footage to allow these silences and fictive perceptions of the self to emanate throughout the film (*figs. 3.22 and 3.23*). Shortly after this scene, clips of Eddie Murphy performing stand-up on stage and making flippant jokes about gay men plays through and is contrasted by a found-footage clip of men dancing around in mocking and effeminate gesture (*figs. 3.24 and 3.25*). An overlaid image of Riggs' face appears and voiceover again responds to the material at hand:

...their jokes, their laughter, form a chorus of content. Each joke levels us a little more and we sit, silently, sometimes join in on the laughter as if deep down we too believe we are the lowest among the low. No one will redeem your name, your life, your love, your manhood but you. No one will save you but you. Your silence is costing. Your silence is suicide.<sup>156</sup>

This tension of silence, of masking complexity and the absurdity of the question "which is he first?" becomes a question responded to in dance, sex, scenes in bars, and scenes of men walking on the street (*fig. 26*).

Riggs, much like Dunye and *The Watermelon Woman*, also uses the archival image to construct a plausibility of his own queer future, only this time tainted by the looming fatality of HIV/AIDS. Riggs speaks, "I noticed a time bomb ticking in my blood. Faces, friends, disappear." His voice narrates a series of obituary photographs in newspapers, changing quickly from face to face and finally landing on his own (*fig. 27*). Ed Halter writes about this intervention in his article "Target Audiences: Ed Halter on the Films of Marlon Riggs," claiming that Riggs use of his own face as an act of plausibility but further,

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

one of solidarity. He explains, "... Rigg's imagined death is thereby amplified, rather than diminished, by its typicality."<sup>157</sup>

Riggs' work, while vested in a particular political moment that is burdened by death and illness, comes into conversation with Dunye's later works through the very themes of disidentification and film Blackness. Much of Riggs' work prior to the project of *Tongues Untied* focuses on the particular imaging of Black bodies in mass media from antebellum period up until the present. His film, *Ethnic Notions* (1987), investigated the use of racial caricatures in American popular culture using representations of Black people found in children's books, music, product design and the predominant racial archetypes in commercial media such as "the mammy," "the coon," "the brute," and "the Uncle Tom" (fig. 28).<sup>158</sup> Much like *Tongues Untied*, Riggs' found-footage is accompanied by music, albeit this time dark synth sounds, to enunciate the the violence in the seemingly cheerful representations of Black bodies.<sup>159</sup> *Tongues Untied* follows after this in a familiar structure or style, only this time Riggs is inserting himself within the narratives of Black experience and unapologetically discussing the celebrations and complexities of Black gay men's experiences. Riggs' use of voiceover and distinct music and poetry performances combine with slow-moving images, overlays, found-footage, and documentary of footage of protests and voguing in city streets. Aesthetics become a powerful tool in which to investigate the self and the role of disidentification as a cultural mode of production.

Through both artists' structural and aesthetic constructions, a new plausibility for disidentification and challenge to canonical definitions of Black identity and larger institutions of identity, art, and film is formulated. While both *Tongues Untied* and *The*

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<sup>157</sup> Halter, "Target Audiences," 379.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 377.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

*Watermelon Woman* hold a certain significance on their own, this formulation is not made without the consideration of each works' audience. Audience serves as methodology for understanding the role and effect of film Blackness and disidentificatory practices. *Tongues Untied* was seen predominantly on public broadcast television via a PBS special while *The Watermelon Woman* primarily circulated in academic and artistic circles—making its way to the Whitney Museum of American Art for the Whitney Biennial of 1997. Riggs' stated that his intended audience was specifically Black gay men.<sup>160</sup> The medium of video and its proximity to television allowed for Riggs' work to be widely circulated through a public broadcast, which made the work fairly accessible to anyone, including Black gay men, who had a television in their home. In contrast, *The Watermelon Woman* was made with the intention of many different audiences and particularly Black audiences, yet Dunye explained that her earlier videos often circulated in predominantly white art spaces.<sup>161</sup> The *Watermelon Woman* as a feature was intended to reach a Black audience not limited to artistic institutions, and Dunye claimed that the feature-length format was the way to access that audience. She stated, "Black audiences are into media that is more clean; it is about them having access to the work." It is significant that each of these films attempted to become more accessible to marginalized audiences through different media and circulation, the first shot on video and circulated through public broadcast reaching many but intended for a very specific audience of Black gay men, and the second a feature-film that intended to play for a broader Black audience beyond beyond just museums and gay and lesbian film festivals. In the end, Dunye's film did mostly circulated to gay and lesbian film festivals and art institutions such as Outfest and the Whitney Biennial of 1997.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye," interview by Alexandra Juhasz, 297-298.

## Reception

Riggs' works received an enormous amount of praise and distribution—he later won an Emmy award for *Ethnic Notions*—yet *Tongues Untied* was met with considerable criticism and several negative reviews after being aired on PBS Television. Senator Jesse Helms shamed The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for awarding a grant to Riggs for work he deemed “pornographic.”<sup>162</sup> Only a few years later, Cheryl Dunye was awarded a grant by the NEA to make *The Watermelon Woman*. After receiving the grant, Dunye exclaims that she was shocked given that a fellow Black queer filmmaker Marlon Riggs some years prior was shamed for his depictions of Black gay eroticism and sex in *Tongues Untied*. Some time later, the NEA is shamed again on the senate floor by Representative Peter Hoekstra, a white man, for awarding a grant to a film project depicting lesbian sex. After he attempted to repeal the grant, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, a Black woman from Texas, defended Dunye and challenged Representative Hoekstra to just accept a difference of opinion.<sup>163</sup> While Sheila Jackson Lee's defense of *The Watermelon Woman* very well might have saved the film and its funding, it is interesting to consider the way in which Black queer experience and disidentificatory efforts continue to be refuted by majoritarian institutional settings. Each work, pertaining to different Black queer experiences, are praised for their innovation by an arts audience while scorned or threatened by state institutions.

Reception becomes a last and final way to understand the historical interventions both Dunye and Riggs make in their work. If one considers the ways that Riggs' work on

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<sup>162</sup> David Mills, "The Director with Tongue Untied," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), June 15, 1992.

<sup>163</sup> Anne Stockwell, "Cheryl Dunye," *The Advocate* (New York, NY), September 17, 1996, Film Fall Preview.

racist caricatures that are largely recognizable in a history american imagery is largely praised but his work *Tongues Untied* is criticized, it is clear that producing narratives that have yet to be seen by a broader american public introduces a risk for artists who wish to interrogate contemporary histories as they are being formulated. Dunye's and Riggs' approaches to their subject matter are vastly different, as Dunye's work uses humorous narratives to reinvestigate the role of Black lesbians in film history while Riggs' work using multiple forms of Black gay cultural production to signify the significance of Black gay artists in the historical wake of HIV/AIDS. Still, each of their contributions elucidate the ways in which interrogations of the self and the institutions informing it are provocative in both marginal and central contexts. Each artist is confounded by the effects of cultural production that seeks to re-interrogate history.

Not only do these works provoke reflexivity in the past and present sense, they introduce a concept of engaging with and invoking possibility for varied queer identities in the future. These works today mark a significant shift in the cultural politics of Black queer experience and representation. Their contemporary significance is held within the *queer futurity* they posit for other queer artists of color who aim to challenge and critique the way Black queer bodies are represented, celebrated, policed, and categorized through a poetics of disidentificatory cultural production.





Figure 3.1 (above): Cheryl's family photograph of her and Janine when they were younger in *Janine*. Image credit: <https://www.fan.do/>



Figure 3.2 (above): Cheryl blowing out candles in *Janine*. Image credit: <https://www.fan.do/>

Figure 3.3 (below): Cheryl speaking in front of the camera in *Janine*. Image credit: <https://www.fan.do/>





Figure 3.4 (above): Cheryl as Shae in *She Don't Fade*. Screen grab from *She Don't Fade*.



Figure 3.5 (above): Paula as Paula in *She Don't Fade*. Screen grab from *She Don't Fade*.

Figure 3.6 (below): Shae on the street in *She Don't Fade*. Screen grab from *She Don't Fade*.







Figure 3.7 (above): Cheryl and Diana meet in video store. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 3.8 (below): Cheryl and Tamara dancing. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.





Figure 3.9 (above): Stacy singing karaoke on Cheryl and Tamara's double date. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.

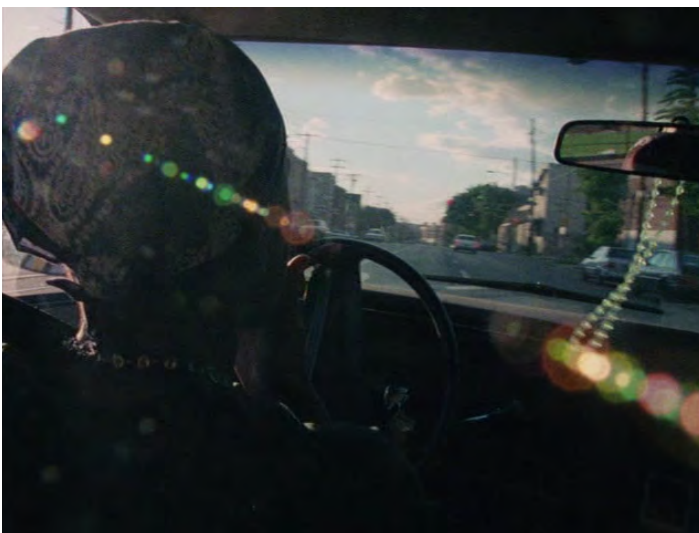


Figure 3.10 (above): Cheryl driving. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.



Figure 3.11 (above): Cheryl approached by cops while filming. Screen grab from *The Watermelon Woman*.





Figure 3.12 (above): Cheryl Dunye and friend. Screen grab from *Vanilla Sex*.



Figure 3.13 (above): Found footage still in *Vanilla Sex*. Screen grab from *Vanilla Sex*.

Figure 3.14 (below): Found footage still in *Vanilla Sex*. Screen grab from *Vanilla Sex*.



Figure 3.15 (below): Cheryl Dunye in *Vanilla Sex*. Screen grab from *Vanilla Sex*.





Figure 3.16 (above): Men gathering in the streets in the opening shots of *Tongues Untied*. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.17 (above): Men gathering in the streets in the opening shots of *Tongues Untied*. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.

Figure 3.18 (below): Snapping portrait in *Tongues Untied*. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.19 (below): Men voguing in the streets in *Tongues Untied*. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.





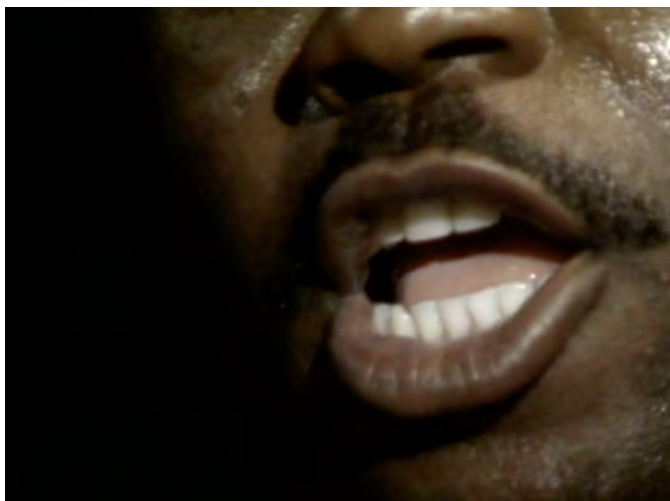


Figure 3.20 (above): Close-up of man shouting in *Tongues Untied*. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.21 (above): Close-up of man sitting in silence. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.22 (left): Derogatory found image of mammy-type drag. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.23 (right): Derogatory found image of white man whipping a Black man. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.24 (above): Eddie Murphy performing stand-up. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.



Figure 3.25 (above): Found footage of fraternity mocking effeminate men. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.

Figure 3.26 (below): Men dancing together. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.





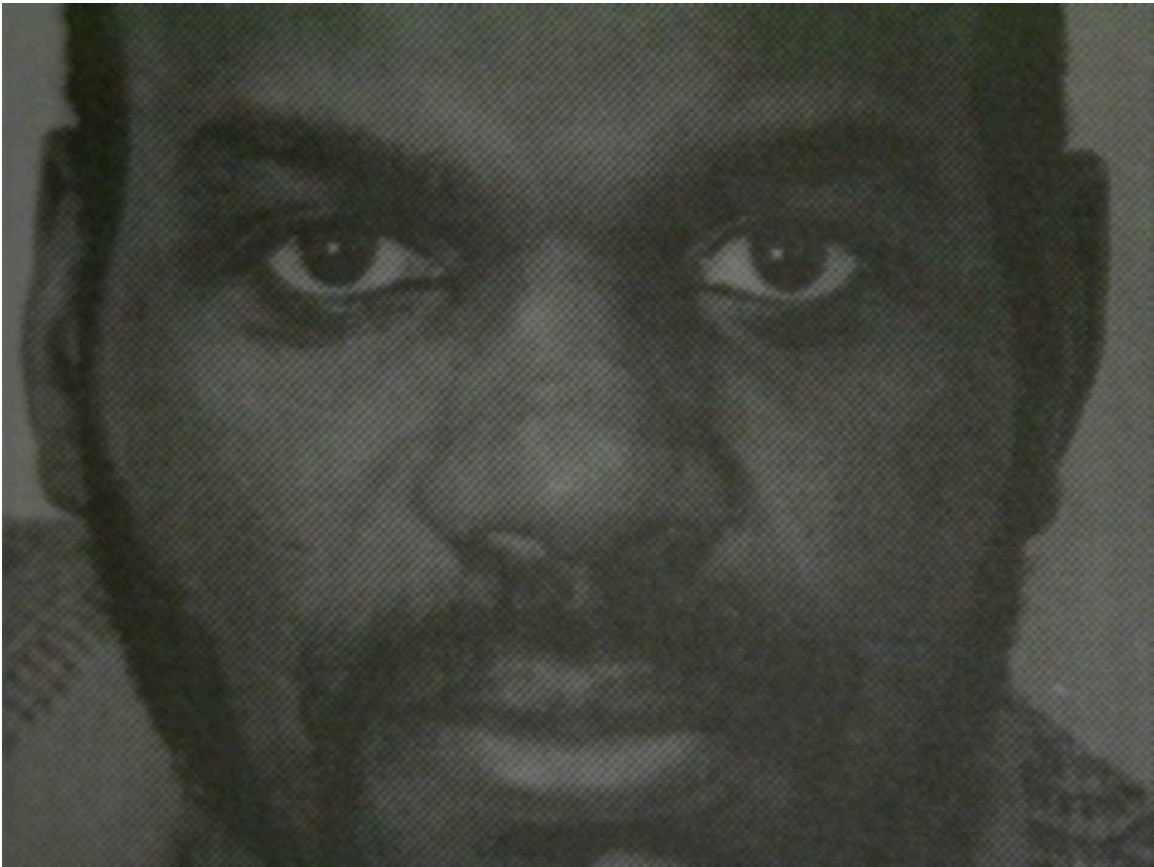


Figure 3.27 (above): Marlon Riggs obituary-style headshot. Screen grab from *Tongues Untied*.

Figure 3.28 (below): Image from *Ethnic Notions*. Image courtesy of Museum of Modern Art website (<https://www.moma.org/>).



## Conclusion

"To call for this notion of the future in the present is to summon a refunctioned notion of utopia in the service of subaltern politics. Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present. I gestures to sites of embodied and performed queer politics and describe them as outposts of actually existing queer worlds. The sites I consider are sites of mass gatherings, performances that can be understood as defiantly public and glimpses into an ensemble of social actors performing a queer world."<sup>164</sup>

This project pulls together ideas from many different angles. The staging of my analyses attempts to interrogate Black queer identity in art making from macro to micro—starting with *Bad Girls*, moving onto the *The Watermelon Woman* and the strategies of parafiction, and ending with the disidentificatory impulses in Dunye's works prior to *The Watermelon Woman* and Riggs' *Tongues Untied*. In each chapter, I engage in topics that I hope to return to in future work. Muñoz' text, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, poignantly illustrates the ways in which many works concerning queer identity introduce the ideas of a queer futurity. Queer futurity transforms the Frankfurt school utopian theories to adhere to a politics that centralizes queer bodies. In his text, Muñoz writes, "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."<sup>165</sup> By the several examples throughout *Cruising Utopia* of different artists who embody this queer futurity, Muñoz suggests that queer identity exceeds beyond the past or present moment as a means of positing a future of queer possibility. As I have stated previously, the work of Dunye and Riggs are not only important for their historical interventions and contemporary potency, but for their ability to introduce new ways of positing Black queer future and Black queer aesthetics. While the historical work in both this project and in the work of these artists is necessary for a

<sup>164</sup> Muñoz, "The Future Is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>165</sup> Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

greater understanding of how work surrounding identity is responding to a political moment, I hope that this futurity remains significant. I allude to many of the cultural influencers I find illuminating to questions of Blackness, queerness, and intersectionality through the epigraphs placed throughout the project. This element of the project is also used to indicate the futurity of Black queer identity in art histories posited by cultural producers of various practices and contexts.

The interrogation of art history that I have claimed is necessary for re-definitions of the canon must also include introducing new art historical work into a public sphere. Over the course of this project, I have developed a weekly screening-series where I present films and shorter video works by artists experimenting with aesthetics and filmic language to interrogate their own cultural identities. This event-series was born out of my own work with the Difference and Media Project at Bard, an interdisciplinary think-tank and collective space that led me to push many of my questions surrounding difference further. As part of a week-long teach-in event for the Difference and Media Project, I screened four of Dunye's earlier works—*Janine*, *She Don't Fade*, *Vanilla Sex*, and *Greetings from Africa*—alongside *The Watermelon Woman*. Watching and discussing these works anew with an audience was valuable for its illuminations of what each person took away. For this reason, I hope interrogations of art history and the plausibility of Black queer futures are not only iterated through words like these but put into practice.

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