

## Preface

### To Be Transparent: Seeing Directions and Connections in Black Lesbian Film

To be transparent, I write these words as a deeply invested beneficiary and longtime fan. . . . Yvonne Welbon, the editor and initiator of this book, and other contributors have participated in the[se] activities . . . and this is as it should be. The future of Black lesbian filmmaking is not something about which we can be objective; it is something we do. It is our lives, and it saves our lives. It is our tangible practice for representing and creating the world.

—**Alexis Pauline Gumbs**

For a number of reasons, this collection ends but also begins with Gumbs's words from "Creating the World Anew: Black Lesbian Legacies and Queer Film Futures." I like the circularity. This construction replicates a number of the preoccupations and commitments expressed throughout this collection and as a form clarifies the unique and complex contributions of black lesbians to American film history and politics, committed as these artists and films are to nonlinear or nontraditional arrangements for time and place, media, and human connection. Although the anthology is organized historically, the delicate tissues that link authors, filmmakers, films, and their audiences become apparent in this anthology's totality as a powerful, exploding constellation of directions and connections defining the subject at hand: an impressive body of films made by and for a tightly knit community characterized by care, protest, and possibility. As Yvonne Welbon explains in her introduction and elsewhere across the volume, this relatively small group of artists has produced a disproportionate number of films within the canons of African American, women's, and queer cinema, and yet they go underrecognized.

Hence this effort; hence so many efforts like it, all built from a small community with important support structures, according to Pamela Jennings in her video interview with Welbon, made for the transmedial segment of this project and included in this volume. And yet, as Gumbs suggests, this tradition *is* known well, and often deeply and dearly, to itself. The intentional knowing, making, sharing, producing, and loving of the black lesbian film community is what allows for its productivity, permanence, and power.

In this vibrant community, artists, activists, and scholars make multi-directional and -dimensional connections of care and creativity to support each other and their work across time and space and in many relations to each other. The loosely chronological structure of the anthology barrels over how this art and these artists circulate. For instance, many of the filmmakers discussed here (as well as their respected critics) make work and community across all of the history marked out in the anthology's title. And there is no one simple or standard trajectory from the anthology's start in 1986 to the present. Rather contributors' movements (and the black lesbian film movement's linked trajectories) are spatial, formal, economic, and cultural: from city to city, job to job, girlfriend to girlfriend, 16mm to digital, digital to analogue. Time flows accordingly. While Gumbs ends by looking forward, and I begin by looking back at her, other authors name influences from moments in American history considerably before there was ever a possibility for the "out black lesbian filmmaking" that flourishes in the 1990s. For instance, Karin Wimbley looks to the antebellum Mammy figure when writing about Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and Marlon Rachquel Moore turns back to Nina Simone's civil rights protest music to better frame Tina Mabry's *Mississippi Damned* (2009).

Just so, in these pages, you will find the names of black (queer) artists who lived and worked before there was this (and other) movements to join. In no particular order we hear of Audre Lorde, Storme, James Baldwin, Josephine Baker, Marcus Garvey, Zora Neale Hurston, Hattie McDaniel, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and many others. Several of the films share this legacy project as well (I think of "Cheryl" in *The Watermelon Woman*, a film that I produced, as she holds up to the camera stills of her black female and lesbian foremothers, or of the Fae Richards archive we faked with the photographer Zoe Leonard so that "Cheryl" could find and hold images of the lesbian precedents she knew had come before her, including the character I played for these photos, the film director Martha Page, who was modeled on Dorothy Arzner). Welbon's media

work also shares this project (*The Cinematic Jazz of Julie Dash* [1992], *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* [1999]), one of finding, naming, celebrating, and sharing those who came before, those who fought and paved the many ways. But not only names return, and no path for black lesbians is simple given the many structural obstacles and possible openings along the way. Jennifer DeClue writes about the “circuitous route of presenting black butch” in the films of Dee Rees, moving, as the films and Rees do, through the many connected spheres of New and even Old Queer Cinema, queer film festivals, and mainstream cinema circuits. Imagining even more paths of connection, Roya Rastegar delineates how “the embodied, participatory relationships incited by [Shari] Frilot’s curatorial approaches reframe linear relationships between the spectator and the screen and generate new dynamics that require people’s collective presence to experience cinema.”

Rastegar’s thinking about Frilot’s work, like Gumbs’s opening words and my recirculation of all of these critical ideas of assembly, also marks the critic’s and historian’s role in these colliding orbits of black lesbian (self-) representation. In our writing we contribute to the world-making project initiated by filmmakers—or was this initiated by relationships? or community? curating? sex? or political exigency?—by placing their images into the traditions and frameworks of scholarly, historical, and teachable analysis. Here you will see black lesbian films situated within long traditions of African American expatriatism and the Black Atlantic (according to Devorah Heitner discussing Welbon’s autobiographical film, *Remembering Wei-Yi Fang, Remembering Myself* [1995]), or artistic movements such as the New Black Cinema, Third Cinema, Black Arts Movement, and the LA Rebellion (in relation to the oeuvre of Michelle Parkerson, the pornography of Shine Louise Houston, or the project to teach filmmaking explained by Gumbs in her essay on the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project and Black Feminist Film School). Some of the work is framed disciplinarily, for instance when Kara Keeling looks at Pamela Jennings’s work through science, technology, and society’s interests in “computational-based creative expression,” or when Candace Moore uses production studies to understand how the work of four producers and three producer-collaborators creates some of the necessary scaffolding for this tradition. Of course, there are many, varied, and sometimes even competing institutional frameworks that support the work, for instance, Indiewood and the New Queer Cinema (for Frilot, Dunye, Rees, and Angela Robinson) and institutionalized Black Feminism for others, some of whom helped to “institutionalize” it, some who learn later from and grow its legacies (the

queer porn of Houston or the current organizing of Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project). Meanwhile, it is the significance of the black church that frames other projects. While Jennifer Brody notes that Coquie Hughes is inspired by religion, Tiny Mabry and Rees make their out black lesbian films through an intense reckoning with the cruel force of religion.

But “us” and “them”—we faithful and they sinners, we critics and they filmmakers—like all the relations discussed thus far, is not a neat or even particularly useful structure for understanding this community. This is because many of the critics writing here are also filmmakers, the filmmakers we write about are curators, and all of this work focuses on people, images, and ideas that are also always circulating. Like me: I write this preface and was also interviewed by Candace Moore as one of the producers in the tradition she studies and details in her contribution. Here’s where the “to be transparent” part circles back in: in being transparent I can begin to better explain my own circulation across this anthology and history, and better yet, I can introduce and frame Yvonne’s. For, to be transparent, Yvonne and I—comparable to the relationships of so many authors in this collection—have worked together, eaten together, celebrated and championed together in uncountable and varied ways across the twenty-five-plus-year history that is the subject of this book, which is the living and loving that make this book: a community that creates its own art, infrastructure, “scholarly proof” (or “materials to teach,” as Yvonne calls it), databases, and archives—and their analyses—not only because no one else would (although this is one of our motivating political critiques), not only because we can do it better, but because the doing of it “*is our lives, and it saves our lives,*” as Gumbs suggests. And no one demonstrates this particular manifestation of power—making one’s life as one makes one’s work and history and community—as profoundly and consistently as does Welbon, who has devoted her career to Sisters in the Cinema: finding, archiving, making, circulating, teaching, and understanding the work of African American women’s media expression. Her voice, influence, and passion—as director, producer, curator, historian, teacher, mentor, friend, and editor of this collection—bubble up again and again across the anthology (as is true for many of the participants) because hers is the force of will that built this particular transmedia project, as she has so many others, for and within the community she documents and so conjures into being and history.

Interestingly, the transparent telling of the community’s making (and re-making) of itself is inextricably connected to the story of the films’ making (how else could it have gotten done given the lack of support elsewhere!) and

also to the films' narratives, which is to say that many of these films are about both the making of this community and the making of these films (see the essays on the self-reflexive work of Hughes, Houston, and Dunye, for instance). "The network among ourselves is born from necessity and proximity. Many of us are closely connected to alternative media networks, know each other from our fields of activism, and have maintained those relationships," explained Jocelyn Taylor in 1997 in a dialogue among black queer filmmakers, "Narrating Our History," selections of which are reprinted here. In 1997, already engaged in this project of self-reflexive self-naming and self-historicizing (at the very moment when the possibility for this tradition comes into being, as the tradition begins because the community makes it so), Taylor and others come together, document the moment, and circulate it.

Our anthology begins with two reprints: "Birth of a Notion" by Michelle Parkerson from 1991–93 and "Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora" (with an update by one of its original authors, Thomas Allen Harris). But neither of these efforts was really the beginning, as many of them attested to then. While Parkerson looks to the "flurry of black gay male visibility" as a critical bellwether of things that will (and indeed did) come—*Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien, 1989), *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990)—Dawn Suggs says, "My first exposure to queer works of color was at the screening of Parkerson's *Stormé* [1991] in 1989." Thomas Allen Harris and Cheryl Dunye organized the first panel of black gay and lesbian artists that I know of," says Welbon as she thinks back to the first national Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Panels, friendships, activism, partnerships, one-night stands—or was it the civil rights or feminist or LGBTQ movement? As I've been insisting, this history isn't lived or told with neat causality. What I can verify is that I knew Jocelyn, Isaac, Jennie, Yvonne, and Dawn at that time. We were all friends or colleagues, lovers or ex-lovers, or at the very least passionate associates.

Jocelyn affirms and questions the role of these associations in "Narrating Our History": "If we're all friends writing our own history, well . . . it's been done before. History is not absolute truth, it's merely a documentation of selective memories and events." And again, she's right, at least in that circular way that I suggest is moving us forward. We've done it all before: narrated our histories in rings of care, taken care of ourselves for ourselves, made our own histories for each other and then for history and others. And yet two expansions, not repetitions, seem useful here. First, over time those

artist-friendship-activist circles and their conversations *change*: new people join, either unaware of the earlier conversations or not able to have joined them in the first place; people die and others are born; relationships change: lovers and partners and even producers become ex; knowledge and audiences develop; the rules of entry and belonging shift, as do the names we call ourselves; American (and international) culture opens new possibilities for people of color and queers as it closes others. Second, technologies of transmission and connection grow. In the short time span of this history, “filmmaking” has taken up any number of media, from celluloid to video to digital, and that alters black lesbian product as much as process. This project, which is transmedial in form—holding this book, and a film, website, and archive—could not have been generated in these many forms when this history began and could never have delivered so much to so many.<sup>2</sup> For instance, “Narrating Our History” was published in the anthology *XII Black International Cinema* in Germany in 1997. This rather difficult-to-access document of a selective conversation among friends is much easier to access here in its book form, and even easier still when it manifests in this project’s online format. Thus, circling back to it via new (and old) media formats serves new uses for the audiences who access it here for the first (or second) time. While documents may stay the same (and a good many are gathered here, and there’s even more in the online archive), our needs, audiences, and uses for them change.

Continuing to cite Taylor, and persisting in being transparent, I attest that our engagements with that particular past dialogue (and the other histories and historical documents shared in this collection) will be no more “objective” or “impartial” than have been any of the critics, filmmakers, or activists engaged by this project because to read or write here is to become part of the tangible process of representing and creating the world of black lesbian filmmaking whether you are friend, lover, ally, student, or even, dare I say, a black lesbian yourself. We do not shy away from our closeness to the objects, people, politics, identities, or analyses at hand. How could we? Why would we? This collection is one part of a greater, growing, and powerful process of transparent, attached community expression, production, and care, the one responsible for the impressive, inspirational body of film and history under consideration.

And, to be clear, I am not a black lesbian, although my roles in this history are many: as friend, lover, coparent, film producer, actor, scholar, co-editor, and collaborator. Here I raise two more concerns, amply covered in the

pages that follow. The first, a definition of *black lesbian*: Who is one? What might this phrase mean? Across these pages you will find that this term and its constituent communities, practices, and issues are used differently, are understood variously, are mobilized toward multiple ends. Authors write about films that are “queer despite [their] lack of explicitness about gayness” (Heitner on Welbon’s *Remembering Wei-Yi Fang*), and how, according to Keeling, “to the extent *black lesbian* does not appear in her work, despite, perhaps, our desire to find it there, [Pamela] Jennings challenges us to generate other logics and language for what does appear there, prompting us to create concepts for whatever we can perceive in her work.” Rastegar explains that, for Frilot, “the goal was not to simply include people of color in the paradigm of gay and lesbian identity but to reconceptualize sexuality entirely so that race, identity, nationality” could be constituent. Houston is interested in black female masculinity and often casts white men in her porn.

Here black lesbians are held to old and new logics, languages, and reconceptualizations, but what you won’t find, perhaps surprisingly, is much drama or anxiety about this particular naming project. Instead each author, and the filmmaker she focuses on, finds a place of comfort from which to speak about, within, and for this community (in its exploding expansiveness and powerful encompassing), and then she gets to work. While the project of defining terms, and the communities and politics that they in turn delineate, is a worthy one, as well as one that takes up a significant amount of time within queer, feminist, and critical race theory and activism more broadly, it simply doesn’t end up being the primary concern of the authors here. Perhaps that’s because preoccupations with naming would get in the way of the task at hand (looking closely at a film and filmmaker), or perhaps authors felt that Yvonne invited them to write, and she had already selected the list of qualified artists from which they could then choose to write, and *Yvonne* called these artists “black lesbians,” so, so be it. But maybe it’s because so many of the films and filmmakers within this tradition have done this work already. The situated, contested, communal making and remaking of names, identities, and connections happen in the films, by and for the community. Houston, explains L. H. Stallings, “instead of replacing one configuration of realness with another . . . simply advises that all impetuses to realness are someone’s fabrication. Is it real black or real lesbian if it is directed and produced by someone who is not black or lesbian?” Or, according to Candace Moore (quoting Louise Wallenberg), in her study of women who have worked as producers of black lesbian cinema, “such media challenges the construct of an ‘essential black queer

subject,' figuring her instead 'in the spaces *between* different communities—at the intersections of power relations determined by race, class, gender and sexuality.'”

Of course the second clear concern raised by my admission that I am not a black lesbian is about the place in this effort, community, and field for white women, women of color who are not African American, men, and queer or trans people who do not identify as lesbians or women. Again, perhaps surprisingly, this does not seem to be much of a concern for those who write here (black lesbians and not). Frilot, quoted in Rastegar, explains how a quite capacious understanding of community organizes her curatorial work of black queer cinema, in this case for MIX 1996: “The blackness of the ‘black’ folk who have made these pieces and who are presented within them tends to be a fairly slippery, perhaps even incoherent phenomenon. Male/Female, Latin/Anglo, Dark/Not-So-Dark, Queer/Not-So-Queer, the identities represented within Victoria MIX are necessarily strung together loosely, a fact that is exacerbated by the resistance to traditional narrative found within many of the works.”

While a resistance to narrative and other traditional forms defines Frilot’s work in supporting and building a black lesbian film community and its media legacy, in these pages you will also find films and filmmakers who fit more clearly within more hegemonic generic traditions. Here you will find analysis of filmmakers sometimes working within the heart of the studio or television systems (Robinson, Rees, and sometimes Dunye) and on its very many generic edges (Hughes in online video, Houston in porn, Jennings in computational media, for instance). But this very binary of mainstream and alternative forms is also challenged by Patty White writing on Robinson: “The opposition between mainstream and independent may be an economic one, but it may no longer be as potent an aesthetic or political one, and not only because studio classics divisions have created something called Indiewood.” And then, of course, there’s Michelle Parkerson, who at the beginning of this tradition made her career by creating what were “traditional” (albeit some of the first) documentaries about black women’s and black lesbian life (. . . *But Then, She’s Betty Carter* [1980] and *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* [1987]). Various filmmakers move from margins to centers and perhaps back to margins again (Dunye is an obvious example, as she made a Hollywood studio movie in the 1990s only to then make another experimental feature in 2010, *The Owls*, that I also produced, then radical porn [*Mommy Is Coming*, 2012], and then, wow, in 2014 a new short, *Black Is*

*Blue*; back to where she started, but this time focusing on a black trans man and not [herself] a black lesbian); filmmakers move from production to curation and sometimes back to production (Frilot comes to mind), or from directing to writing to producing to directing (see Welbon!); artists range across media and platforms (from video to digital, from film to video, from video to 16mm), as they become available, as media helps to expand access and audience; some fluctuate between creating urgent, radical media and a negotiation with a “mainstream” industry that seeks to profit from marginal identities and media production (Robinson, Rees, Mabry, Dunye).

Given this variety and multiplicity, the many merits of black lesbian filmmaking and its history and analysis are of considerable importance for a wide variety of scholarly fields, most obviously those of queer, feminist, black, and ethnic filmmaking, but also indie and American cinema and the many disciplinary studies of social and cultural movements for civil rights and justice. In “Narrating Our History,” Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet explains: “The two books about queer cinema don’t say anything about our works, our critical writings, our friendships, and all the history we have gone through together”—a statement that proves true for all those other kinds of cinema books, I’m afraid. For it is only we who want to and then can transparently explain the deep connections that allow for unsupported, unacknowledged, underappreciated work to be made and seen, and also then to be so damn strong. Authors here attest to how it was always another member of this community who inspired one filmmaker to pick up a camera for the first time, or who showed her the right inspirational images, or who got her a gig, or who wrote that first article about her. It was we lesbians and queers who made posters for each other, carried cables, and together made meals and archives. Of course culture, politics, identities, and technologies have shifted (often because we engaged in activism and filmmaking!) over these twenty-five years. Some members of this community no longer, or never, identified as women or lesbian, for example. Our community responds to and makes such changes. The evidence of these challenges and dynamic relations—to each other, to other activist and artistic communities, and more broadly to American and world culture—is the very subject of the films that are analyzed in the following pages. These films hold black lesbians’ thoughts and images about civil rights, black feminism, neoliberalism, queer and trans politics, the trans- and multinational, American history, aging, religion, pornography, and so much more. This is why Welbon begins each of the anthology’s two sections with a brief overview of the historical, political,

representational, and technological landscape (as these are of particular impact on black lesbian media-making). Here she creates a broader contextual analysis for this formative movement by highlighting the relationships among media technologies, access, media production, and the formation of an out African American lesbian community.

In the essays, interviews, biographies, critical analyses, and loving homages that follow, I hope you will see some of what has been so inspiring and feeding for me and for others in this community. While at times, and in various essays, the place of this work and also its makers can feel utterly vulnerable, precarious, and sometimes unsafe, in that same time, and essay, we also learn how solid, sustaining, and supportive can be the community and the media work that it generates so as to unmask and unmake oppression. Individuals, communities, and our political needs and demands change, but the films stay the same: marking where we've been, what we thought, who we knew, what mattered once. This scholarly anthology uses the films to name and sustain a dynamic history, community, and politics for black lesbians in America.

But I've been trying to emphasize throughout that this is not a traditional scholarly anthology, not because the scholarship isn't traditional but because this is no traditional tradition. Here you will find the requisite footnoted essays, as well as elegant interviews and authorized reprints. But we also provide transcripts from Yvonne's interviews with two of the filmmakers (Jennings and Hughes) because, as of yet, the scholarly writing about them is limited. We include their words to facilitate and inspire that communal (self)production definitive of the work. In 1990 Parkerson observed that, as black gay male and lesbian cinema expanded, "a wellspring of critical analysis and theoretical study has concurrently evolved." Hence, more than a quarter-century later, this volume attests to a critical mass. But there's always more work to be done. Our readers will become the community's new critics and filmmakers. You are welcome to join our authors as they speak with transparency, circularity, and pride, just as do the films considered, by naming their place within, their connections among, and their right to the tradition of out black lesbian filmmaking that Welbon so generously set into radical motion with her life's work. With transparent connection, Gumbs follows, continues, and moves forward: "If we say that Black lesbian feminist filmmaking and Black queer filmmaking are rooted in the lived experiences and organizing culture of Black lesbians, that means not only do the films we make draw resources (audiences, actors, crew, funding) from Black lesbians

and the organizations that we have created, but they also replenish the soil by bringing people together, increasing visibility, and providing a vehicle for necessary conversations in our community.”

Let the conversations begin!

### Notes

- 1 Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet et al., “Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora,” in *XII Black International Cinema Anthology* (Berlin, 1997), 136.
- 2 Please see [www.sistersinthelife.com](http://www.sistersinthelife.com) for more resources, information, objects, and writing from the Sisters in the Life project.