



BLACK QUEER EXPERIENCE AND REGENERATION IN THE WATERMELON WOMAN AND BROTHER TO BROTHER

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, a strong preoccupation with history has been one of the defining features of queer cinema. Many filmmakers, including Derek Jarman and Tom Kalin, have revisited and rewritten official histories, and many others incessantly continue to do so with the aim of constructing a new future via the powerful medium of cinema. Against obliteration by two oppressive historicisms at once, i.e., white and straight, black queer filmmakers Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien have embraced the same method in postmodern terms in *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Looking for Langston* (1989) in the earlier phase of the so-called Queer New Wave. Following in their footsteps, Cheryl Dunye and Rodney Evans have carried the tradition to a new level with *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *Brother to Brother* (2004) in such a way that is still unconventional in form, yet more radical in content. In the following textual analyses, it is argued that both filmmakers not only manipulate history but also posit filmmaking as a means of hope and regeneration for black lesbians and gays of the United States, deploying blackness and queerness provocatively to problematize sanctioned identities of race, gender, and sexuality.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Black, queer, cinema, Cheryl Dunye, Rodney Evans.

Geliş Tarihi | Received: 31.05.2019 • Kabul Tarihi | Accepted: 20.08.2019

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THE WATERMELON WOMAN VE BROTHER TO BROTHER FİLMLERİNDE SİYAH QUEER DENEYİMİ VE YENİLENME OLGUSU

Öz

Doksanlı yılların başından günümüze, tarihe olan yoğun ilgi queer sinemasının belirleyici özelliklerinden biri oldu. Derek Jarman ve Tom Kalin başta olmak üzere birçok queer yönetmen resmî tarihi yeniden yazmak için uğraştı ve tıpkı onlar gibi yeni kuşak yönetmenler de sinemanın gücünü kullanarak yeni bir gelecek inşa etme çabasıyla aynı yöntemi benimsemeye devam ediyor. Aynı anda hem beyaz hem de hetero tarihselciliğin tehdidiyle karşı karşıya olan Afro-Amerikalı yönetmenler Marlon Riggs ve Isaac Julien de *Tongues Untied* (Çözülen Diller, 1989) ve *Looking for Langston* (*Langston'ı Ararken*, 1989) filmlerinde, bugün Queer Yeni Dalga sineması olarak bilinen dönemin ilk evresinde, aynı yöntemi post-modern bir tarzda uyguladı. Onların izinden giden Cheryl Dunye ve Rodney Evans ise *The Watermelon Woman* (*Karpuz Kadın*, 1996) ve *Brother to Brother* (*Kardeş Kardeşe*, 2004) filmlerinde geleneği, biçim olarak aynı oranda sıra dışı fakat içerik yönünden daha radikal, yeni bir boyuta taşıyor. Aşağıdaki metinsel analizlerde, Dunye ve Evans'ın tarihi manipüle etmekle kalmayıp, Siyahiliği ve eşcinselliği yerleşik ırk, toplumsal cinsiyet ve cinsel yönelim kimliklerini tartışmaya açacak şekilde konuşlandırarak, sinemacılığı Amerikalı Siyahî gey ve lezbiyenler için bir tür umut ve yenilenme aracına dönüştürdüğü iddia edilmektedir.

Keywords: Siyahi, queer, sinema, Cheryl Dunye, Rodney Evans.

Introduction

As is evident in numerous examples that range from *Edward II* (1991) and *The Hours and Times* (1991) of the New Queer Cinema of early nineties to more recent examples such as *1985* (2018) and *Vita and Virginia* (2019), one of the major components of queer filmmaking is a devoted occupation with a collective history. Queer films revisit the past, often rewriting heterocentric narratives and cultural productions, not only to reclaim undermined queer identities but also to give uncompromising visibility to undermined queer experiences and desires in creative ways. Nostalgia, time shifts, flashbacks, and recollections have always been among the most common tools in queer cinema to make a critique of the present and to materialize a queer utopia.

Oppressed by two historicisms at once, i.e., white and straight, black queer filmmakers Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien have embraced the same method in postmodern terms in *Tongues Untied* and *Looking for Langston* in the earliest phase of the so-called Queer New Wave. Following in their footsteps, Cheryl Dunye and Rodney Evans have carried the tradition to a new level with *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *Brother to Brother* (2004) in such a way that is still unconventional in form yet more radical in content. Working against the legacy of standard histories in which at least "half the population of the country is missing" as historian Howard Zinn puts it (2005 [1980], p. 103), Dunye and Evans reconstruct the past and invent their own histories through the powerful medium of cinema to give voice and visibility to the multiple-oppressed African American lesbians and gays of the United States.

Both films explore the meaning of being black and queer, but they are also designed to induce hope and inspiration for future generations of black queers. Although the filmic reconstruction of the past in the two films is to a large extent fictional, their narrative space provides a realm of self-expression and regeneration in the face of repression and obliteration. In *Brother to Brother*, the Niggerati Manor in Harlem, which was a rooming house that hosted a camaraderie of young bohemian black artists and intellectuals during the 1920s and 30s, is reenacted as a site of breakthrough with its steamy party scene and intellectual richness. In this setting, the characters strip off from bourgeois expectations, gender roles, race consciousness and homophobia of black and white societies. In *The Watermelon Woman*, a cheerful mockumentary, which is composed of a multilevel narrative structure, witty dialogues, and a well-crafted

fake archival material, a similar transgression is maintained at large by the practice of filmmaking itself.

In her monograph titled *The Witch's Flight*, Kara Keeling argues that "black femme," or the black lesbian figure, who has been denied access to the white screen in almost the entire history of cinema, offers a glimpse into "alternatives to existing organizations of life" because "she challenges racism, sexism, and homophobia" (2007, pp. 1–2). Keeling never mentions *The Watermelon Woman*, but Cheryl, the director and main character of the film, could set the perfect example. Although *Brother to Brother*, which was made a few years later, does not feature a femme or a black-lesbian-feminist framework, it complements Dunye's film in the sense that it decisively challenges black masculinity and homophobia in black society through its characterization. Both films deploy blackness, queerness, and filmmaking provocatively to problematize sanctioned identities of race, gender, and sexuality in black and white communities.

The Watermelon Woman

The Watermelon Woman centers on Cheryl, a video store clerk from Philadelphia, who also makes home movies with her best friend and colleague Tamara (Valarie Walker) for extra money. Apart from their usual working schedule and cruising, both Cheryl and Tamara make fake tape orders under customer names for their personal enjoyment. While Cheryl collects Hollywood films from the 30s and 40s that cast African American actresses, Tamara, who "can barely stand today's Hollywood films, let alone that nigger Mammy shit from the thirties," is more interested in "Bald Black Ballbusters."

Cheryl experiences a sort of epiphany when one day she comes across a beautiful supporting actress in an old film titled *Plantation Memories*, who is credited only as "The Watermelon Woman" (Lisa Marie Bronson) for her "Mammy" role similar to that of Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Having been upset with the fact that black women's lives are never told in history, and getting very curious about the Watermelon Woman, Cheryl decides to start a video project and document whatever she can find about this unknown film actress to achieve her greatest ambition — to be the first black lesbian filmmaker. Working like a detective, she obtains information, archival photographs and footage from several different sources until she finally manages to build up a mock-documentary, which is shown and revealed to be fictitious at the end of the film.

The fake life story of the Watermelon Woman, or by her real name Fae Richards, who later turns out to be lesbian like Cheryl herself, constitutes only a part of *The Watermelon Woman*. The film also recounts a slice of Cheryl's life, her struggles to become the first black lesbian filmmaker, her fluctuating friendship with Tamara, and the hilarious blind dates that Tamara arranges for her — one with an overly idealistic black feminist and another with Yvette (Kat Robertson), a drama queen who messes at a karaoke bar. She also has a short affair with a white lipstick lesbian woman named Diana (Guinevere Turner), a customer that she befriends at the video store¹. Their relationship parallels the one between Fae and Martha Page, the white director of *Plantation Memories*. Hence, Dunye compares and contrasts the experiences of two black queer women from two distant time periods.

The Watermelon Woman uses at least two different types of camera for different purposes. Cheryl uses a borrowed VHS camera to recount the life story of Fae Richards and to shoot interviews with people who may or may not know about her. The fake archival material, which includes the video extract from *Plantation Memories* and the collection of Fae's personal photographs, created by the photographer Zoe Leonard and later exhibited at New York's Whitney Museum Biennial (Stockwell 1997, p. 53), are either shown to this video camera by Cheryl's hand or intercut as still shots. Other than this video camera, a 16mm camera, which is easily recognized for its better image quality, is used to capture the larger narrative context that encapsulates Cheryl's hypothetical actual life, her funny and memorable encounters, and her struggles to make a documentary about the Watermelon Woman.

As a result, *The Watermelon Woman* consists of three narrative levels that can be mapped out by the method of French structuralist critic Gérard Genette (1980 [1972]). In the first level, which can be defined as *diegesis*, Cheryl narrates the life story of Fae and her relationship with Martha Page. Here, she gives information about her research progress, and she expresses her feelings and thoughts to the camera. The second level, a *meta-diegesis*, in which Cheryl actively participates as the central

¹ K. Schoonover and R. Galt write that "video stores are often posed as sites of cultural intersection, and they figure the messy intermingling of community identity and individual desire across such disparate films as *The Watermelon Woman*, *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996), *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Pratibha Parmar, 2006)," etc. (2016, 129).



Figure 1: Screenshots. (From left to right) Cheryl in the first narrative level; Diana and Cheryl in the second narrative level; Fae and Martha in the third narrative level. *The Watermelon Woman*. 1996 © Cheryl Dunye / Dancing Girl.

character, revolves around Cheryl's daily activities, her social circuit, and the love affair she has with Diana. And in the third level, a *pseudo-meta-diegesis*, the spectators watch Fae's life story through still shots, photographs, video footage, and Cheryl's voiceover (Figure 1).

Unlike the first and the third, the camera or the point of view in the second narrative level does not belong to Cheryl (the video store clerk who tries to make a film about the *Watermelon Woman*); it rather belongs to a third person omnipresent narrator, the real Cheryl Dunye, or the maker of this mock-documentary. The relationship between Cheryl and Diana in the second narrative level also plays a complementary role as it gives clues about what might have happened in the less known interracial relationship between Fae and Martha in the third level. Finally, the three narratives culminate in a utopic time and space in which the past, the present, and the future intersect and are crystallized. The past is represented in Fae's monochromatic life narrative, which pays homage to underrepresented black lesbians and their unfulfilled career goals; the present is represented in Cheryl's short experience that bears similar complexities only with more hope; and the future is represented through Cheryl's ambition to be the first black lesbian filmmaker, in which she succeeds with her finished mockumentary, *The Watermelon Woman*.

As the threefold narrative structure unfolds it is seen that Dunye deliberately weaves certain race/gender/sexuality antagonisms into her film, often in a humorous way. The first instance of this occurs in the pre-title scenes which make a spatial contrast between a straight wedding ceremony and Philadelphia streets. The film begins with an inter-title that reads, "Bryn Mawr, PA," an affluent suburban district west of Philadelphia, while Mozart's "Rondo from *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*" plays in the background. The following shots show well-dressed, middle to upper-class guests of different colors. The families of the black groom and

the white bride seem to be standing in distant parts of the yard without making any contact. Cheryl, who is now behind the camera, looks out of place. After a while, the scene cuts to the streets of Philadelphia. This time, jazz rhythms are heard in the background. The blurry canted framing of the streets and the random appearance of pedestrians feel more inclusive, making a stark contrast with the neat camera perspective and bourgeois decorum in the segregated *mise-en-scène* at Bryn Mawr.

This kind of physical contrasts, which position Cheryl as a black lesbian outsider, occur in other scenes as well, for instance, between Cheryl's apartment and Diana's spacious residential loft, as well as in the public library and C.L.I.T. (Center for Lesbian Info and Technology) in New York, where Cheryl does research for her project. In both places, the materials related to African American people are stored in a separate section. They are not even properly cataloged in the library's computer database, and in C.L.I.T. they are kept in a highly disorganized bunch of boxes.² Both places, by the way, are parodied through the characters of the indifferent librarian and the archivist "sister" at C.L.I.T. who talks nonsense in a silly diplomatic manner and throws Cheryl out for recording "confidential material." And in another scene, Cheryl gets arrested in the street by two policemen (one is white, the other is black) who, by looking at her skin color and butch outfit, assume that she is a boy and that her video camera is stolen.

Racial antagonisms become more obvious after Diana, Cheryl's lover, joins the narrative. The sub-story of Cheryl and Diana basically functions to make the spectator dwell upon Diana's privileged whiteness. During a dinner party at Cheryl's place, Diana acts in a snobbish way in front of Tamara and Tamara's girlfriend, Stacey (Jocelyn Taylor). She grabs Tamara's cigarette from her hand without asking for permission. She likes to talk about herself and be the center of attention. As a daughter of a diplomat, she has travelled all around the world, and she has come to Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love" because she is tired of pursuing several degrees and her bourgeois lifestyle in Chicago. Various dialogues in the film suggest that Diana's interest in Cheryl conceals a sexual fetish for black bodies, or, one could say, a penchant for an exotically different type of sexuality, probably in a similar way to the male

² E. A. Raimon tells that *The Watermelon Woman* invests in "dramatizing historical absence and erasure—the aporia of archival lack as it is represented in the search for the elusive title character" (2012, p. 3).

European colonizer's perception of the oriental woman, whose experience may in some ways draw parallel to that of African-American women. While sharing her personal experiences as a black woman about how she has struggled to ward off sexual abuse almost in her entire life, Toni Bell, a web content writer, notes:

Black women and our bodies were hypersexualized to justify white men raping us on the slave ships, on the plantation, and during Jim Crow. In fact, as in any war-torn country, rape was used [as] a method to terrorize black women and their families well through the Civil Rights era. What was natural to our bodies — our hair, our lips, our hips, our thighs — was deemed dark and lascivious and worthy of plunder. (Bell, 2018, online).

Although black women have been decrying oppression for a long time through rallies, boycotts, college sit-ins against violence, and milestone acts of civil disobedience (McGuire, 2011), a considerable body of stereotypical images emerged in Hollywood, which causes controversy among critics. While some people such as the above web writer sternly reject these stereotypes, arguing that such images do not represent black women at all, some others including Dunye and Sheri Parks (2013) reclaim and rewrite one of these Hollywood stereotypes, the Mammy.³

In the black-and-white *Plantation Memories* clip that Cheryl shows on a TV screen, Elsie, the Mammy character who is played by the Watermelon Woman, is worried about her mistress, who is weeping under a tree for a missing Master Charles. Elsie tries to console her mistress by telling that she is sure Master Charles is coming back because she prayed to god all night long and in the morning a little angel has told her that he is coming. According to Parks, the representation of Mammy as a subservient, caregiving, and consoling figure "was made to fulfill the wishes of white slave owners for happy, loving slaves" as part of their pro-slavery propaganda (2013, p. 9); however, Parks adds, "there are few historical instances of women like her" (ibid.). And unlike the stereotypical Mammy type that is defined against the white female lead character, "[h]istorical Mammies [sic] were a varied lot" (ibid., p. 111). In relation to the bandana worn by the Mammy figure, Parks writes that far from be-

³ A small portion of the following paragraph, as well as the short plot summary in the beginning, has been used in an earlier article of mine titled "Yeni Queer Sineması Yeniden," which was published in Turkish in *Kaos Q+* journal, issue 7, 2018.

ing a symbol of subservience, “the head cloth was an African vestige, like the Yoruba head tie, and black slave women wore it as a symbol of status” sometimes with “meanings of revolutionary resistance” (ibid., p. 79) (Figure 2). However, what makes Dunye’s Mammy special is, of course, the fact that she is lesbian, which doubles the revolutionary fervor. As Karin Wimbley argues, “in placing the Mammy stereotype at the foundation of her cinematic matrilineage, Dunye reinstates Mammy’s sexuality through Elsie, and through Elsie, we have the potential ‘mother’ of black lesbian cinema” (Wimbley, 2018, p. 151). At this point, Cheryl gives the floor to the academic Camille Paglia who reinterprets the Mammy, teasing white-centered feminism, in an intercutting mock-interview. When Cheryl mentions Fae’s affair with Martha Page, Paglia is very surprised considering the impossibility of an interracial, let alone a lesbian relationship in Hollywood at that time.

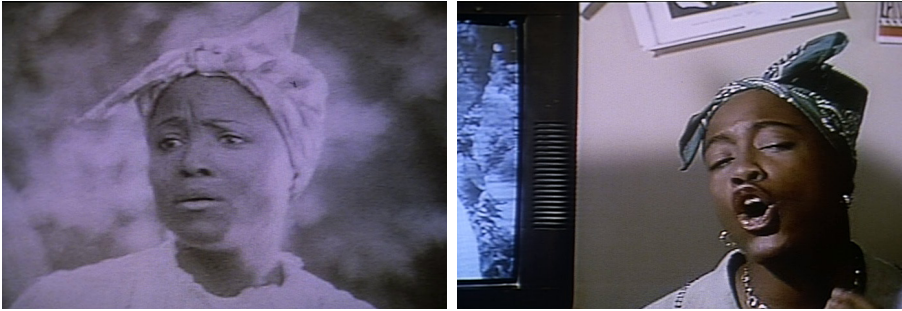


Figure 2: Screenshots. On the left, the Watermelon Woman in the fake Plantation Memories clip. On the right, wearing the same front-tied bandana à la Rosie the Riveter, Cheryl playfully lip-syncs the Watermelon Woman as she plays the clip on the TV set next to her. The Watermelon Woman. © 1996 Cheryl Dunye / Dancing Girl.

What happened between Fae and Martha remains a mystery in the context of the film; however, it is still possible to make inferences by examining certain dynamics in the present-day relationship between Cheryl and Diana. From what Cheryl tells to the camera it is understood that she is a bit confused about her feelings towards Diana after their first sex:

I’m still in shock over the whole “having sex with Diana” thing. I’ve never done anything like this before, let me assure you. The hip-swinging lesbian style is not my forte. [A poignant, slow motion video of Diana and Cheryl cuts in]. I’m just an old-fashioned girl trying to keep up with the times but Diana just threw me for a loop, I mean she is not my

type but I liked it. (*The Watermelon Woman Reference*).

The sex scene between Cheryl and Diana, which Jeannine DeLombard from the *Philadelphia City Paper* described at the time as “the hottest dyke sex scene ever recorded on celluloid” (1996, online), manages to be artsy, lesbian, and sensual at once.⁴ In a series of tracking close-shots the hands of different colors join, the legs entwine, the tongues touch, and the two bodies fuse into each other while “Skin,” a song by Leslie Winer, plays in the soundtrack: “I ain’t afraid of where you come from / I ain’t afraid of where you’ve been / I ain’t afraid of what you’re getting at / I ain’t afraid of your skin.”

However, a dialogue, which takes place later in the film when the two are playing in bed, affirms that Diana is actually “into chocolate,” and it hints that her philanthropy and sympathy with African Americans function only to highlight her distinguished upbringing:

DIANA sings a song.

CHERYL: Wait wait wait... Where did you learn that one?

DIANA: Wasn't it the theme song at your prom?

CHERYL: Diana darling, remember I'm black? And the theme song at my prom was... "Sail On" by Commodores.

DIANA: My boyfriend was black, and he knew all the words.

CHERYL: You had a black boyfriend?

DIANA: I had two... no actually three black boyfriends.

CHERYL in surprise: What did your parents say?

DIANA: Nothing, they are liberal hippie types. Actually, my father's sister's first husband was an ex-Panther, his name was Tyrone Washington.

CHERYL laughs mockingly.

DIANA: What is so funny?

CHERYL: You are such a mess.

DIANA: What does that mean?

CHERYL: Nothing. I have to go and work on the project. (*The Watermelon Woman Reference*).

⁴ Yet, in an update note DeLombard writes that her description has been taken out of context and cited everywhere providing an excuse for the conservative journalists and politicians to launch another attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, which partially funded Cheryl Dunye's film (DeLombard, 1996, online).

Diana's attitude, which is probably familiar to minorities all around the world, is an extension of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) calls "color-blind racism," a contemporary way of preserving white privilege. What makes this new socially humanistic ("I had two black friends in the past, and they were excellent"), and economically liberal and meritocratic ("blacks can have the same opportunity as long as they work hard") post-Civil Rights racism different than the earlier Jim Crow era is that the white actors are not even aware of being offensive. The depiction of an interracial relationship in the film thus subtly warns that, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, black queer women are prone to the same danger of color-blind racism and fetishizing white gaze just as straight blacks.

Nevertheless, Cheryl's positive attitude towards Diana does not change even after they break up. And Dunye, by the way, does not skip the other side of the coin; she is aware that race can easily cut both ways. Tamara's unfriendly treatment of Annie (Shelley Olivier), a non-black co-worker who joins the film later, and her insistence to fix Cheryl up exclusively with black women are presented as signs of prejudices against non-blacks. The same excluding attitude is also observed in June Walker, Fae's long-term lover after Martha Page who, in a voiceover message, tells Cheryl that she should not include Martha Page in her film, because she was a mean white woman, and that she should only be giving the history of her own people before they disappear. Cheryl gives her a critical response in the next scene by speaking to the camera:

I know she [Fae] meant the world to you but she also meant the world to me, and those worlds are different. But the moments she shared with you, the life she had with Martha on and off the screen, those are precious moments, and nobody can change that. What she means to me, a twenty-five-year-old black woman, means something else. It means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history. And most importantly what I understand is that I'm gonna be the one who says "I am a black lesbian filmmaker" who is just beginning but I'm gonna say a lot more, and I have a lot more work to do. (*The Watermelon Woman* Reference?).

What Dunye aims to do here is actually reversing the white filmmaker/black actress hierarchy by putting herself as one of the most underrepresented individuals, a black lesbian woman, in the privileged position. Cheryl's affair with Diana is a phase, a memory, albeit a valuable

one, and it is also a pretext. When she describes her affair with Diana, Cheryl lightheartedly tells the spectators that although Diana is not her type, she liked it. When thought in combination with the third narrative level, it is easy to assume that Martha would probably describe her relationship with Fae in the same way. As a result, in addition to playing with conventional documentary structures, Dunye's project reverses ossified power hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality in film industry. Against the conventions, the filmmaker Dunye and her Mammy are black, queer, and powerful.

Brother to Brother

Brother to Brother resembles *The Watermelon Woman* in many ways. The same ambition to construct a future upon an invented past, and the same need to express the ordeals of black queer experience are determining factors in the narrative. Just like *The Watermelon Woman*, *Brother to Brother* is occupied with the past and the future at once. The black and white archival material of *The Watermelon Woman* gives way to intercutting period-style movie segments in *Brother to Brother*, which recreate an important era for black queers, the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to creating a queer narrative space, *Brother to Brother* contains a utopic setting as a site of transgression for the queer characters.

Brother to Brother chronicles an uneasy period in Perry's (Anthony Mackie) life, a twenty-seven-year-old art student from Brooklyn. Perry is rejected by his parents because of his sexual orientation, and he is also subject to homophobia from black peers, except his straight best friend, Marcus (Lawrence Gilliard Jr.). Amid all the difficulties in his daily life and his occasional hook-ups, Perry is in search of a meaningful relationship to break out of his isolation. His short affair with Jim (Alex Burns), a white classmate, ends in the same way as Cheryl's affair with Diana in *The Watermelon Woman*. He gets up in a hurry and abruptly leaves during a bedroom chat when Jim makes a racist remark that is meant to be a compliment.

However, Perry finds a new type of connection to the outside world thanks to his chance encounter with the writer and painter Richard Bruce Nugent (Roger Robinson/Duane Boutté), who is now old and living in a homeless shelter where Perry works as a receptionist. The two stroll the streets of Harlem to which Perry has not been exposed before, and they spend time together in the dilapidated building of Niggerati Man-



Screenshot. Perry and Bruce roam around Harlem in *Brother to Brother*. © 2004 Brother to Brother Productions, LLC.

or, which was once the meeting point for the rebellious African American *poètes maudits* of the Harlem Renaissance, including Wallace Thurman (Ray Ford), Langston Hughes (Daniel Sunjata), Zora Neale Hurston (Aunjanue Ellis), Aaron Douglas (Leith M. Burke), and Bruce Nugent. While Nugent takes pleasure in being reminded of the glory days of the Harlem Renaissance and his intimate friendship with the writer and editor Wallace Thurman, Perry discovers the hidden treasures of the past, to which he is unknowingly related.

The fictional encounter between Perry and Bruce Nugent in the final days of Bruce's life brings about a remembrance of the past as well as an exchange of hope and inspiration between two black gay men from different generations. Bruce's retelling of his memories is visualized in black-and-white reenactments of the roaring 20s, and they are juxtaposed with color shots that center on Perry's present-day experiences. Since they face similar hardships and have similar ideals, a symbiotic relationship is established between the two characters. At certain moments of the film when Perry is carried away with Bruce's memories and begins to see the past through the eye of Bruce's mind, the film blends the past and the present with shot/ reverse-shot sequences and smooth transitions between monochrome and color.

The black-and-white shots also open up a crack in the narrative time. The nostalgic flashbacks and archival footage present an alternative world in which friendships are more intimate, life is more meaningful, and art is not commodified. They also make a stark contrast with



Screenshot. Perry and Bruce in Niggerati Manor © 2004 Brother to Brother Productions, LLC.

the subway scenes and the fast-motion time-warp shots in the subway station. The film opens with a view of Manhattan skyline taken from the train window while Perry is passing through the Brooklyn Bridge, and the same view, this time at night, is repeated towards the end. Paula Massood argues that in films such as Spike Lee's *Clockers* (1995) "the train references the related tropes of mobility and entrapment, two of the most recurrent themes in African American cultural production in the twentieth century and in African American films from this time period" (Massood, 2003, p. 200 quoted in Christian, 2010, p. 191, n.5).

Brother to Brother opts for a narrative strategy similar to that of *The Watermelon Woman*; the film creates a fictional past and queer heroes for role models. The main bulk of the screenplay is thus reserved for the queer characters' struggles to survive in a homophobic, patriarchal, racist, and classist society. At this point, art and writing become a lifebuoy, a theme that is also employed in *Pariah* (2011), which is about a black lesbian teenager who is expelled from her parents' home like Perry, and who achieves self-realization through writing as Perry does. Concomitantly, the close circuit of artists in *Brother to Brother* resists the surrounding hostility and financial insecurity for the sake of being what they really are and expressing themselves in the way they want to. Together they prepare *Fire!!*, a literary magazine, on a very low budget, which helps to exhibit their artistic and political stance. Their ambition, which becomes a guideline for future African American queer intellectuals, is succinctly expressed in the film by Wallace Thurman in the wake of the first and only issue of *Fire!!*:

We of the younger generation are like all other human beings in a period of transition. We are eternally discovering things about ourselves and our environments which our elders have been at pains to hide. They have been so busy justifying their presence in a hostile, racist environment that they've ceased to be human beings. With the new magazine, we will cease to look for respectability in the white person's eyes. We will express the beauty and ugliness of our individual selves for ourselves. If anything is deemed disturbing or pornographic, then so much the better. (*Brother to Brother* Reference).

As if to dump Du Bois' (1903) well-educated, dignified, and militant "New Negro" prototype, they give primacy to representations of "queers and whores," which Langston and Bruce describe in the film as "two types of people that upstanding Negroes want no part of." By the same token, even the works of Carl Van Vechten, a white patron of art whose homoerotic photography has once fetishized nude black bodies under a colonialist gaze, are reenacted during a party scene, and embraced as a cultural heritage, probably because Vechten "viewed the Negro lower class as unaffected by the oppressive weight of hypocrisy and sham which characterized white civilization and inhibited white enjoyment of life" (Coleman, 1998, p. 115–6).

The main motive behind the group's progressive outbreak is a refusal of seeking ingratiation with what Zora in the film calls "white folks and bourgeois Negroes," both of which are stricken by elitism and color hierarchy (Billingsley, 1968, pp. 129–30, Graham, 1999, p. 377). In other words, they reject to follow what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls "politics of respectability" (1993), which focuses on a strategy of seeking equality by a strong adherence to white and middle-class values to show that black people are also worthy of rights. Politics of respectability has a widespread presence among the black liberation movement, and as Kali Gross (1997) points out, it also lays the foundation for the heteronormative construction of blackness inside the African American community. The "strict adherence to what is socially deemed 'respectable,'" Gross writes, "has resulted in African American scholars' confining their scholarship on African Americans to often the most 'heroic' ... it has also resulted in the proliferation of analyses which can be characterized as culturally defensive, patriarchal, and heterosexist" (Gross, 1997, online).

In his foundational essay, "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart," to which the film owes its title (just like the musical refrain in

Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*), Joseph Beam discusses the disavowal of black queer existence by putting the notion of home in the center of his argument:

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply (Beam, 1986, p. 231).

As can be inferred from Beam's words in regard to the politics of respectability, the notions of home and family play a central role in the crucifixion of queers within the African American society. Sharon Holland writes that "our quareness [quare is a variation of queer in southern African American dialect] exploded upon the ordinary life of childhood and made family and friendship all the more difficult, morphing them into the bittersweet tonic that many of us now refer to as 'home'—a place of refuge and escape" (2005, p. xii). In this regard, it is no surprise that when Essex Hemphill defiantly criticizes the erasure of homosexuality from the African American history, in his satirically titled essay "Loyalty," he chooses "home" as his primary destination:

We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home. [...] I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal (Hemphill, 2000 [1992], p. 70).

Dwight McBride notes that Hemphill's defiant expression, "coming home," in the above extract posits the fact that the heterosexist construction of blackness depends upon the separation of black queers from the location of home. "This rendering of home as a site of contestation," McBride writes:

as opposed to the "welcome table" or "comforting" characterization of home associated with the most dominant, public, and politically salient renderings of the African American community—signals the terms of the relationship of black queer subjectivity to African American identity for Hemphill (McBride, 2005, p. 70).

The separation of black queers from the location of home and fam-

ily also resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's arguments about Oedipus, a category they use to define the principle repression behind the formation of social and economic structures of modern civilization. Deleuze and Guattari note that Oedipus depends on nationalistic, religious, and racist sentiments, which surpass familial ties: being grounded upon a segregation principle, Oedipus entails "an enormous archaism, an incarnation of the race in person or in spirit: yes, I am one of you" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003 [1972], p. 104). Therefore, the dismissal of queerness from the domain of nuclear family, and the violence against black homosexuals in the name of racial solidarity are preconditions for the construction of blackness. As Kara Keeling explains, "'official' representations of black subjectivity insist that 'black' is essentially macho, masculine, heterosexual, and ultimately, amenable to functioning smoothly as part of the moral fabric of a nation held together in large part by the ties that bind the nuclear family" (2005, p. 216).⁵

In this sense, the Harlem group and Perry are expelled from home because they reject to partake in oedipal familialism. They occupy "those regions of the orphan unconscious— 'beyond all law'" (Deleuze *ibid.*, pp. 81–82). Instead of a hierarchical and segregating familialism, they form "extended filiations" and "lateral alliances" (*ibid.*, p. 160) just like the families of the Harlem drag ball scene in *Paris is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990). In a symbolic scene of *Brother to Brother*, when the Harlemites are cornered and spat upon for betraying their family by a mob of middle-class blacks, who burns a copy of *Fire!!*, calling it smut and filth, Zora responds by saying, "don't talk about my family, because we are family."

Perhaps an even more damaging outcome of the patriarchal and heterosexist construction of blackness is that it incidentally perpetuates certain stereotypes of straight black men: "heterosexually deviant (overly sexual; potential rapists) and heterosexually irresponsible (jobless fathers of children out of wedlock)" (Carbado, 2005, p. 199). The film touches upon the same problem in a clever way by designing a fictional conversation that brings two important figures of the Civil Rights Movement face-to-face, James Baldwin (Lance Reddick), an openly gay black writer, and Eldridge Cleaver (Chad Coleman), a chief member of the Black Panthers. The heated debate is presented as a video project that Perry shows in class, and it is intercut with archival footage of anti-racist demonstra-

⁵ Frances Negrón-Muntaner claims that a partly similar masculine discourse is at work in Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*, too (1995, p. 264).

tions, police brutality, and segregated public spaces. The confrontation terminates with Cleaver throwing a chair and coming at Baldwin, who rejects to deny his sexual orientation during the debate. The impersonation of Cleaver, who is apparently chosen to represent the masculine vein in the Civil Rights movement, is particularly interesting. Other than his leadership in the Black Panther Party, which made him "a symbol of black rebellion in the turbulent 1960's" (Kifner, 1998, online), Cleaver is also known for his biting autobiography, *Soul on Ice* (1968), which he wrote at Folsom state prison, where he was doing time for rape. Although at the time of its publication *Soul on Ice* "was hailed as an authentic voice of black rage in a white-ruled world" (ibid.), the kind of masculine discourse that Hemphill, Baldwin, and several other scholars have criticized can be felt throughout Cleaver's memoir. "We shall have our manhood," he writes at the end of Part I, "[w]e shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it" (Cleaver, 1991 [1968], p. 84).

Despite the masculine tone, Cleaver shares the same desire for self-expression through writing with Perry and the real Baldwin. While Perry says, "with words and images, I could convey the truth of my experience, putting it down and passing it on," Cleaver writes in *Soul on Ice*, "[m]y pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered. That is why I started to write. To save myself" (1991 [1968], p. 34). Writing for Cleaver is an act of purification, and a restoration of manhood while for Baldwin and Perry it is a matter of survival and a defiant utterance of existence. That is how Baldwin has used homosexuality in his literary works such as *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), and *Just Above My Head* (1979), fueling critical readings that pose a challenge to the construction of American masculinity and nationality that are based on, as Mae Henderson tells, "illusions, deceptions, stereotypes, and hypocrisies that many Americans accept without question" (2005, p. 319). Hence, the fictional conversation is meant to be a confrontation of direct opposites, and a clash of discourses. When in an earlier scene Perry mentions that Baldwin was silenced in the movement, two black men in the class respond by homophobic remarks; and later one of them, Rashan (Billoah Greene), leads a mob that ambushes Perry in the street at night, beating him almost to death.

However, it should be noted that the characterization in the film is less than true. Although Baldwin's outing and works have certainly been a significant step in African American queer activism and scholarship,

he had a somewhat complicated relation to his sexual orientation. As an African American spokesperson and intellectual, Baldwin has arguably invested more in his blackness and maleness than “his specificity, his sexuality, and his difference” (McBride, 2005, p. 77). As McBride points out, at times he even succumbed to the heteronormative discourse inherent in the black anti-racist movement in several interviews and public speeches, because after all “in order to be the representative race man, one must be both heterosexual and male” (ibid.). Sexuality for him, on the other hand, was an insignificant difference, a matter of love (ibid., p. 76), which belonged to the domain of private bedroom (Wallace, 2005, p. 277). As a result, filmmaker Rodney Evans creates his own heroes just as Cheryl Dunye does. Both filmmakers create their own histories, that is, a quintessentially black queer history. The recreation of Baldwin and the Harlemites challenges the conventional understandings of heteronormative black masculinity. Perry and his experience function as a gateway between the past and the future, reclaiming the existence of black gay identity.

Conclusion

Many black artists and intellectuals in the 1920s did not endorse artistic pretensions to prove racial dignity or cultural eligibility; authenticity and personal expression were deemed central to their work. Yet there was an unavoidable race problem. “It is as if,” in Nathan Huggins’s words, “it were defined in the eternal constitution of things that to be a Negro artist in America one must, in some way, be a race-conscious artist” (Huggins, 2007 [1971], p. 195). Part of the desire to portray the past and the present side by side in queer films like *The Watermelon Woman* and *Brother to Brother* comes from the fact that the same problem is still intact, and it continues to occupy the work of black queer artist.

Dunye and Evans seem to differ in their approach to the everlasting dilemma of the black queer experience in the United States: “Are you black first or are you queer?” Interestingly, or perhaps strategically, Dunye puts her blackness and femininity slightly before her sexual orientation. In the film, Cheryl is not subject to the same violent homophobia and isolation as Perry; she is not excluded from her home or community, either. Evans, on the other hand, embraces a more intersectional approach, paying more attention to not prioritize one identity over the other. In any case, both filmmakers manage to unsettle more excluding

race-gender-sexuality paradigms with the characters of lesbian Mammy and black lesbian filmmaker as well as gay Harlemites and Baldwin.

Interracial queer desire, another important excess in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Brother to Brother*, mount resistance to white and black prejudices. Although both films are queer in form and content, they are marked with a race consciousness. In multiple temporalities, i.e., the monochrome/color division in *Brother to Brother* and the three diegetic levels in *The Watermelon Woman*, the films allude to the exploitation of black bodies during and after slavery, which finely converges into the silencing and erasure of black queer identities. For this reason, the interracial affair in both films (Fae and Martha in *The Watermelon Woman*, and Perry and Jim in *Brother to Brother*) has to fail and be replaced by more stable and "truer" intraracial relationships (Fae-June and Perry-Bruce). However, both films render this replacement somewhat incomplete. In each film, one partner dies in the end because of old age. Moreover, the final pairings are presented as a union of friendship rather than a passionate love affair.

On the other hand, the construction of alternative histories via filmmaking serves the reclamation of an unacknowledged black queer identity. In the end, Perry and Cheryl emerge as triumphant authors of art and history, casting themselves as role models. They take the role of cultural mediators by transmitting what they inherit from Bruce and Fae to future generations. Perry sends a biography manuscript titled "Richard Bruce Nugent and the Rebel Spirit of the Harlem Renaissance" to a black publisher, and Cheryl completes her documentary. Filmmaking and authorship become "revolutionary means of escape (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003 [1972], p. 134) from "the system of social and psychic repression" (ibid., p. 136). In the final analysis, Cheryl and Perry's struggles for survival replaces Fae's and Wallace's mischances via the creation of alternative histories. Both characters represent future and hope, as well as the possibility of a utopia, which is, in this case, black and queer.

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