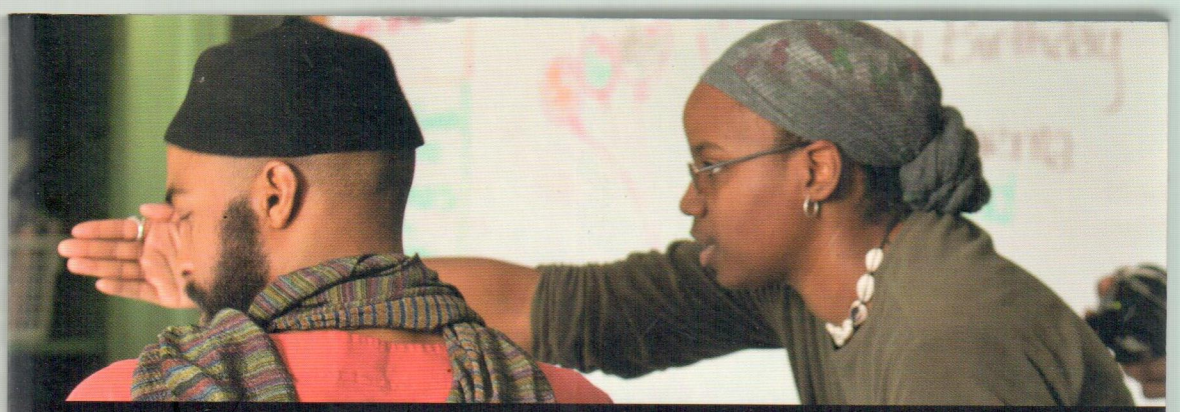
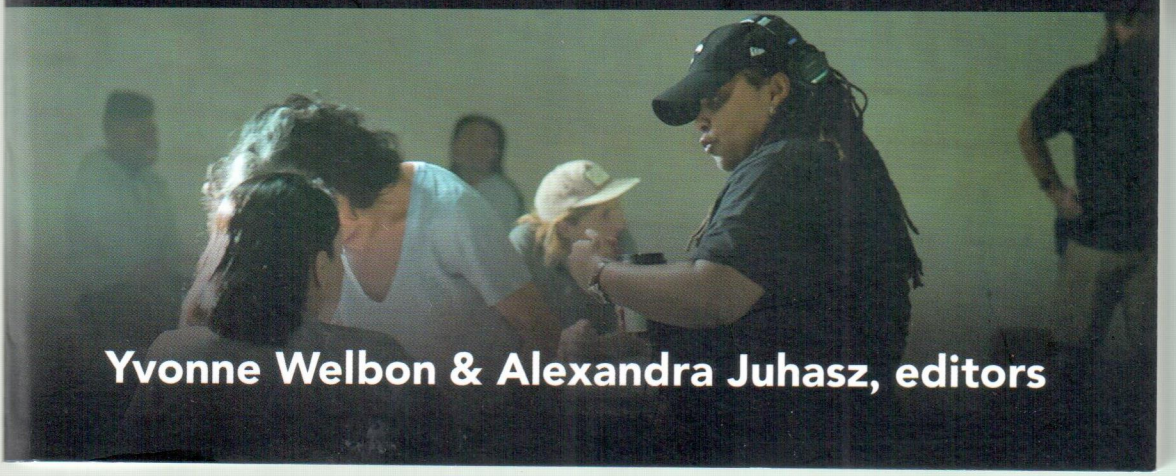


SISTERS

IN THE LIFE

A HISTORY OF OUT AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN MEDIA-MAKING



Yvonne Welbon & Alexandra Juhasz, editors

1 • MICHELLE PARKERSON

Birth of a Notion

Toward Black, Gay, and Lesbian Imagery in Film and Video

In mainstream media, gays and lesbians of color are either woefully present or predictably absent. The litany of black gay and lesbian characters in Hollywood films and network television reads like its own form of blackface.

They range from the burly, black "bulldagger" as whorehouse madam in the 1933 film *The Emperor Jones* (starring Paul Robeson) to the predatory lesbian vamp in Spike Lee's 1983 *She's Gotta Have It*; from Eddie Murphy's ultracamp Miss Thing hairdresser on NBC's *Saturday Night Live* to the snap! queen duo on Fox TV's *In Living Color*.

These relentless stereotypes are part of a continuum of silence and mockery and denial surrounding lesbians and gay men within our own African American community—a community that is, of course, one of the largest consumers of Hollywood and network entertainment. With no other screen alternatives, audiences believe this is who we are.

In reducing our lives and complexity to caricature, such program formulas, capitalizing on homophobia and racism, produce big profits for mainstream media. The constricted images of black gays and lesbians are the same appropriated to all nonwhites in film and video: enemies, entertainment, or exotica.

Recently a new generation of gay and lesbian filmmakers of color has begun to produce imagery countering the invisibility and social stigmas. These filmmakers are using media to reverse decades of misrepresentation, replacing negative myths with whole and humane depictions. The films and videos currently being produced *by* black gays and lesbians *about* black gays and lesbians—this birth of a notion—represent the opening of a dialogue,

1.1 Robert Reid-Pharr, Michelle Parkerson, and Cheryl Dunye, date unknown. Photo by Yvonne Welbon.

overdue and unflinching. From the United Kingdom, witness Isaac Julien's lush cinematic meditation, *Looking for Langston* (1989), and here in the United States, Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). Both feature the incisive poetry of Essex Hemphill and the music of Blackberri. These groundbreaking black gay directors expand the discourse on race and homoerotic desire in their current works: Julien's ebullient *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) and Riggs's video shorts, *Affirmations* (1990) and *Anthem* (1991).

Among younger generations of black gay men and lesbians, the films and videos of Dawn Suggs, Thomas Harris, Sylvia Rhue, Cheryl Dunye, Jacqueline Woodson, Jack Waters, Aarin Burch, Jocelyn Taylor, and Yvonne Welbon are emerging. Their works challenge the boundaries of experimental, autobiographical, and documentary genres. They offer innovative production styles in presenting visions of being "in the life." These productions are also changing the complexion of AIDS media—exploring the devastation and celebrating the courage of a community disproportionately ravaged by the epidemic. These film- and video makers are the first wave of a developing black gay and lesbian film movement. Now a legacy begins.

Several other films by white producers and directors have investigated black gay life: Shirley Clarke's 1967 experimental study of a black hustler, *Portrait of Jason*, and the Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss documentary, *Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women*. This 1987 film highlights the lesbian flam-

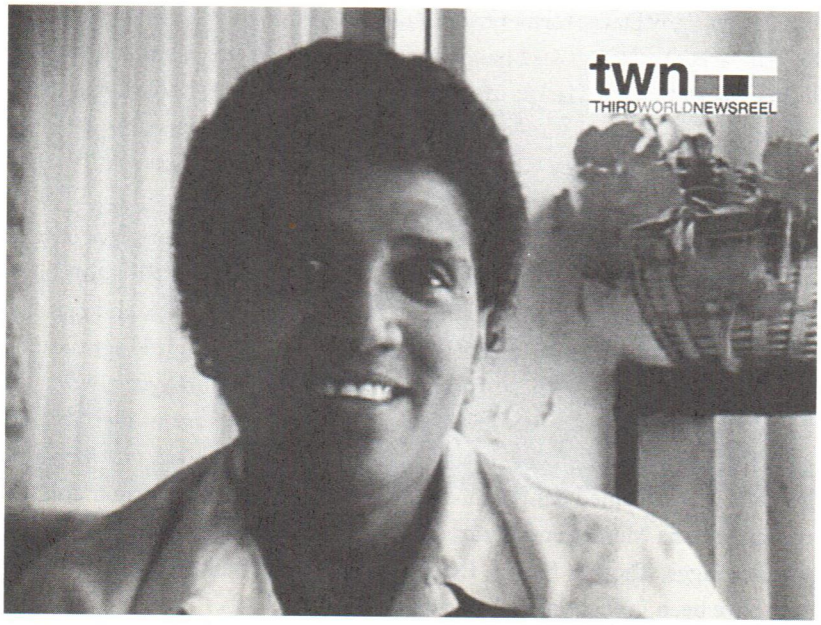
boyance of Tiny Davis, former trumpeter extraordinaire for the International Sweethearts of Rhythm jazz band, and is narrated by the African American lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke. More recently Jennie Livingston's remarkable, controversial, 1990 documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, explores the world of vogueing balls created by young black and Latino street queens in New York City.

As the body of black gay and lesbian film expands, a wellspring of critical analysis and theoretical study has concurrently evolved, validating this birth of a notion. Scholars in lesbian and gay studies, film theorists, and cultural activists have proclaimed, in articles and new publications, the significance of this first wave of black gay and lesbian media (particularly the works of Riggs and Julien) in illuminating the transgressive territory of identity and gay representation. Many of these critics are themselves black gay men and lesbians. In the United Kingdom are the filmmaker Pratibha Parmar and the critics Kobena Mercer and Stuart Hall. In the United States the writings of Marlon Riggs, Thomas Harris, Essex Hemphill, and bell hooks (who is not gay) have been influential and provocative.

Indicative of the growing visibility and accessibility of gay film, a media conference in New York was dedicated to investigating the concept of queer aesthetics unique to lesbian and gay imagery. The most compelling and contentious moments of that 1989 "How Do I Look?" conference were stimulated by discussions of race and representation in the works of Julien and other black gay artists, as well as white gay artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe who were perceived as commodifying black male sexuality.

In tandem with increased production has been an upsurge in the marketing of black gay and lesbian films and videos. Among distributors who have been particularly responsive to the influx of work by African American lesbians and gays are Women Make Movies (the largest distributor of feminist media with a long-standing focus on lesbian issues), Third World Newsreel (targeting the new wave of films and videos by gays and lesbians of color), and Frameline (a lesbian and gay arts organization that supports the distribution and exhibition of films and videos).

In the 1980s and early 1990s Hollywood negotiated easy heterosexist niches for homosexuality on the silver screen, allowing for the commercial success and mainstream acceptance of films such as *Personal Best* (1982), *Desert Hearts* (1985), and *Longtime Companion* (1990). These were palatable categorizations reducing gay experience to lifestyle comedies, sexual preference soaps, and AIDS dramas.



1.2 From *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde*, directed by Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, 1995.

Then, at the top of the 1990s came three films that complicated the issue of homosexuality with affirmations of blackness and differences of race politics. These films imposed diversity upon the lily-white, largely male stereotype of gay experience.

The censorship surrounding the controversial PBS broadcast of *Tongues Untied* brought to public attention the realities and intersection of race and sexuality. *Looking for Langston*, flagrantly breaking the complicity of silence surrounding the homosexuality of the black poet-icon Langston Hughes, swiftly drew condemnation from many in the straight black community and a lawsuit from the Hughes estate. *Paris Is Burning* emerged from subculture success on the gay and lesbian film festival circuit to become the U.S. box office surprise of 1990. All three programs garnered critical acclaim, awards, and enthusiastic international audiences. They catalyzed national debates about freedom of expression and brought to many their first awareness of a black gay community.

But where in the current flurry of black gay male visibility on screen are the black lesbian movies—our own "evidence of being"? The question that remains for us, as we turn the century, is not so much "How do I look?"

as "Where am I?" Lack of viable economic support, limited exhibition and distribution, and, indeed, a real and pervasive racist and sexist bias within our own gay and lesbian community all contribute to the marginalization of black lesbian productions.

Yet the short films and videos of Cheryl Dunye, Dawn Suggs, and Aarin Burch, among others (including my own 1987 film, *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box*), have reached the screen in the face of tremendous odds, against a rising reentrenchment of censorship. These black lesbian film- and video makers embody the cinematic tenet of persistence of vision.

A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde is hopefully the seed of a trend toward full-length documentary and dramatic productions concerning black lesbian life and history. This documentary feature engages the work and perspectives of the late African American feminist poet and the context of her life as a lesbian of color in America. Using Lorde's words and images as its core, the film is referenced with scenes of her literary and political activities and commentary by her family members, contemporaries, students, and others affected by the emergence of an international, lesbian, feminist agenda among women of color.

The recent phenomenon of progressive black gay and lesbian imagery will not continue without growing numbers of openly gay and lesbian African American filmmakers producing works that address ethnicity and sexuality as equally critical identities. Black gay and lesbian filmmakers face sexism and homophobia within the black independent cinema movement, as well as racism in the feminist film community and the whitewash pervasive in gay and lesbian media. Historically we have been locked out of the Hollywood and television industries. But such challenges inspire me to make the movies that *Desert Hearts* and *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) are not: films that are lesbian-specific but, just as important, race-conscious.

As black filmmakers, how can we broaden gay and lesbian experience and imagery beyond "the celluloid closet"? How will we construct an ethnocentric, diverse nation of lovers? How will we undertake this birth of a notion?

Perhaps, twenty-four frames at a time.

Note

 Edited versions originally published in *Advocate*, no. 570 (February 12, 1991) and in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, edited by Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson (New York: Routledge, 1993).