



Histories of *The Watermelon Woman*: Reflexivity between Race and Gender

Catherine Zimmer

Ten years after the release of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (US, 1997), the film remains the only feature-length film made by and about an African American lesbian to have received theatrical distribution in the United States.¹ Despite the seemingly massive impact of the New Queer Cinema and the culture of Sundance and independent film, this film's anomalous status is a testament to how little has really changed in the power structures of cinematic production.² The anniversary of a film that stands uncomfortably alone seems a worthwhile occasion to consider what the film itself has to tell us about its own position in cinematic history. This exploration is further demanded by the fact that—as a film about a woman making a film about a woman in film history—*The Watermelon Woman* is a deeply reflexive and autobiographical text. As a metacinematic work, the film has much to say about the means of its own production and, even further,

caption to come

Camera Obscura 68, Volume 23, Number 2
DOI 10.1215/02705346-2008-002 © 2008 by *Camera Obscura*
Published by Duke University Press

ther, about the way that cinema “at the margins” has been framed within film studies. A discussion of the film’s reflexive movements can illuminate the ways that certain feminist filmmaking practices, though highly influential, are excluded from theoretical discussions on modes of cinematic discourse and maintained instead in a circumscribed arena in which women’s film is allowed to speak about women but not about film. More specifically, *The Watermelon Woman* both presents and represents the negotiations, mediations, and tensions triangulated among dominant film history, white feminist film studies and production, and black film history and production in the United States.

The Watermelon Woman is almost as unusual in its adoption of a reflexive stance toward its subject matter as it is for its mere existence. Reflexive work has often been cited as a mode of resistance to the dominant practices of cinema—exposing the fiction of cinema’s seamless representation of reality—yet the directors of reflexive films seem predominantly to be those who *embody* the very power structures that define mainstream representation: simply put, the overwhelming majority of reflexive films have been made by heterosexual white men. If metacinematic narratives and structures are primed to question and even topple the cinematic discourses that supposedly produce coherent and stable notions of identity (i.e., to render visible the ideological machinations of Hollywood film), then why has the device not been more frequently employed by those for whom the stakes would be more apparent? If we take it, for the moment, as a given that commercial cinema has tended to produce racist, sexist, and homophobic representations—in fact relies on these elements for its smooth functioning—then why is the reflexive stance not more consistently occupied by those considered marginal in that system: women, people of color, and queers?

There are two answers to this question that are seemingly contradictory but not mutually exclusive. First, such uses do exist in other, arguably more populist, forms. The practice of camp, in its insistent reference to the underlying perversity of common cinematic tropes, should be considered one of the most radical structures of self-reflexivity, and it has clearly been a queer practice

from the beginning. Similarly, the parody of commercial film has been employed by those injured by the Hollywood representation machine, notably in Robert Townsend's 1987 *Hollywood Shuffle* (US), such earlier works of the Wayans brothers as *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* (US, 1988), right through to Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (US, 2000). But the second answer is that reflexivity is not in fact in any way essentially radical or resistant. Reflexivity operates far more often as a mode of constructing cinematic relationships than as a method of questioning norms. For example, a surge in reflexive practice in cinema has occurred every time there has been a significant development in moving-image technologies and practices; these reflexive films (found among both independent experimental production and studio pictures) are *using* narrative to explore the possibilities of visual media, not rupturing narrative to critique a technological underbelly. The idea that reflexivity might function as a consolidation rather than as a critique of cinematic practice has certainly been suggested before (e.g., by Jane Feuer in the realm of the musical) but has not really undone the general view of reflexivity as a response to the ideological illusions of the so-called mainstream.³ In this essay, I first examine the manner in which reflexive work, particularly work that seems to address the loss of authorial control by a film director, has in fact functioned to reinstall the primacy of a dominant subjectivity. I then turn to *The Watermelon Woman* to suggest how reflexivity might be used otherwise. Dunye's film has been variously approached as queer cinema, women's autobiographical and documentary cinema, and black cinema;⁴ I emphasize how one might add to all of these discussions and explore their interrelations by looking at the film through a history and analysis of reflexive practice.

The topic of reflexivity (or metacinema), though a touchstone in a variety of film studies contexts, has undergone very little conceptual reworking. The one book-length study of the topic, Robert Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*,⁵ is representative of the predominant view that reflexive work functions in cinema in the same way that it functions in literature: as an undoing of narrative styles that pretend to have no visible author, no process of production, and thus entail no

“knowledge effect” (in Louis Althusser’s words) that would inhibit the reification of dominant ideologies.⁶ The “classical Hollywood cinema,”⁷ characterized by continuity editing in the service of the smooth unfolding of a story, has been presumed to be the norm from which all other cinemas—particularly those that call attention to, rather than attempt to conceal, the process of production—have been a deviation. Reflexive films that highlight production processes have thus been considered antithetical to both the style and content of the classical Hollywood model. I argue that reflexivity is less of a deviation from this norm than has generally been argued. Film studies has been in a kind of recovery from the proposal that classical Hollywood is definitive of cinema in general—despite the fact that it constitutes now only a small fraction of cinematic history, which has on the contrary been characterized by near constant technological, stylistic, and narrative experimentation. Reflexive films have been a part of both Hollywood and other cinemas throughout their histories, and both Hollywood films and independent productions have consistently developed narratives in the *service* of highlighting the technological possibilities of cinema at a given moment.

My more specific focus in this essay is a reflexivity that highlights the director’s subject position and stakes in cinematic production by foregrounding the position of the filmmaker as the author of the cinematic text. Much as reflexive films have often installed (rather than undone) certain myths and realities of cinematic technologies and representations, so have reflexive films historically, though rather backhandedly, privileged a certain kind of cinematic authorship, one that makes the reflexive stance a less straightforward position for marginalized filmmakers. Reflexive practice has largely been the domain of white male filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Federico Fellini because reflexivity is itself a discourse that implies the narcissism of self-criticism and the luxury of undoing a structure in which one has lived quite comfortably. The very process of exposing, critiquing, and deconstructing film production has assumed that one has at least had the opportunity to occupy the position of filmmaking privilege that is now undergoing critique. The political efficacy of

such a style of reflexive work is debatable at this point in time. For instance, the legacy of Fellini's *8 1/2* (Italy, 1963), as interpreted by Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze in *Adaptation* (US, 2002), begs the question: does the explicit reflexive announcement that a film is self-indulgent and masturbatory make it *less* self-indulgent and masturbatory? Or more still, does it make it somehow revolutionary? Perhaps at one time it did, before the frame of the post-modern became so all encompassing, but now such insistent self-referentiality feeds into a refusal to engage with subject positions other than one's own except in a projective mode. The discourse of self-referentiality is often creative and leads to significant insights, as in the implication common to both *8 1/2* and *Adaptation* that the idea of "woman" exists only in the limited discursive strategies of the male psyche. But the very power of the self-abuse that is at the heart of reflexive film structure requires that the protagonist/author-director occupy a position that has already been naturalized before it can be assaulted. The cinematic authorship under fire in such films has yet to be significantly inhabited by women and people of color, and thus it might seem inconsequential to deconstruct the position of, for instance, an African American lesbian filmmaker. Counterintuitively, I would argue that questioning the status of the filmmaker as an authorial subject implies that on some level that status must be unquestionable.

Both critical race and feminist scholars have offered substantial critiques of theories of postmodernity and of the accompanying "death of the author" that have informed discussions of literature and philosophy,⁸ noting that the author seems to have been killed off, or at least seriously questioned, just as the position of authorship is becoming less overwhelmingly uniform and, specifically, nonwhite. As Barbara Christian has so aptly summed up, "Now I am being told that philosophers are the ones who write literature, that authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze, that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea what they are doing; rather they produce texts as disembodied as the angels."⁹ Extending this critique to the case of cinema, we should note that film theorists have similarly glorified the renunciation of an authoritative subject position, a

renunciation best represented by a rejection of classical narrative coherence, less structured control over the technologies of vision, depictions on-screen of those behind the camera, and so on—all those gestures associated with reflexive practice in film. And it is certainly no coincidence that the reflexivity of Godard and Fellini in the 1960s, arguably invested in highlighting processes of production rather than individual subjectivities, emerged from the same cinematic and political culture out of which some of those same filmmakers argued for and achieved auteur status. This simultaneity foregrounds the way in which a reflexive critique of authorship, both cinematic and literary, has functioned to reinstall presuppositions about who the author is. For, as Andreas Huyssen has asked, “Isn’t the ‘death of the subject/author’ position tied by mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius?”¹⁰ It is for this reason that one should perhaps not find it surprising that reflexivity has not been a discursive form adopted in narrative cinema (except in the mode of parodying mainstream imagery) by subjects who have had few outlets in cinematic self-representation and who have certainly not “felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito etc.” (106). But Dunye’s film suggests what a deeply reflexive position might offer for one who is trying to gain, not lose, a foothold in cinematic discourse.

The reflexive moves in the film are multiple. Dunye stars in the film as Cheryl, a young woman working as a video store clerk and a wedding videographer. The film documents her life in these jobs, and then her production of her own video documentary on an African American actress from the classical and race-film era whom she has discovered in supporting roles in such melodramas as *Plantation Memories*; the actress is credited only as “The Watermelon Woman.” The film we are watching traces Cheryl’s efforts to discover the identity of this woman and explores Cheryl’s own stakes in the history of an obscure black actress from the 1930s. In the course of her research, Cheryl discovers that the woman she is documenting turns out to be, like herself, a lesbian, and that both have had troubled sexual relationships with white women. At the end of the film, we learn that the “Watermelon Woman” is a

fictional creation and that the archival photos and footage we have seen are not “authentic,” but were produced for this film.

The film functions on several different levels narratively and aesthetically: Shot primarily on 16mm film, the frame narrative shows us Cheryl and her friends going about their daily lives (with no acknowledgment of a film being shot about them). Then there are a number of episodes of the film shot on video, which include the wedding and performance that Cheryl and her friend and coworker Tamara (Valarie Walker) shoot as videographers and, more significantly, Cheryl’s production of her own film-within-the-film—a documentary on the “Watermelon Woman,” Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson). Cheryl also documents the production of her documentary within the film with numerous scenes of her direct address to the video camera talking about the process of researching and creating her documentary. The film is frequently intercut with what appear to be already completed portions of the documentary: archival photos and talking-head interviews complete with captions. Beyond this, there are several sequences that stand outside of any narrative logic: musical interludes in which Cheryl and other characters dance on a rooftop to apparently nondiegetic music. Narratively, Cheryl’s filmmaking project is coupled with a problematized romantic plot between her and a white woman, Diana (Guinevere Turner), which is itself mirrored by Cheryl’s discovery that Fae was romantically involved with a white female director, Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz).

The Watermelon Woman thus leaves us a variety of reflexive and authorial points of entry with which to contend. First, there are the multiple jobs Cheryl holds in the bottom rungs of motion-picture production and distribution in Philadelphia, a peripheral industry locale. As Kathleen McHugh notes, “The film constitutes a meditation not only on cinematic representation, but also on its modes of production.”¹¹ Video clerk and wedding videographer are some of the real material circumstances in which an African American lesbian seeking to break into the film industry might find herself—without the romantic lore with which Quentin Tarantino has invested his video store past. Tarantino’s directorial “authentic-

ity” has become so insistently associated with his onetime job as a video store clerk that, in 1995, the critic Kevin Maynard went so far as to state in *Interview* magazine that Tarantino’s humble distribution past has “elevated the status of the video store clerk” and explores whether “video stores are the film schools of the ’90s.”¹² But these jobs are, for Cheryl, not offered as the proving ground for the authentic postmodern auteur but as a locus in the relationship between her daily realities and her film fantasies.

The film’s opening scenes provide key moments in this relationship and establish as well the film’s casual but telling tone toward filmic authorship. *The Watermelon Woman* opens with scenes shot on video of an interracial Jewish-black wedding, followed by film footage of Cheryl and Tamara as the videographers shooting the video (immediately introducing black-white relations as central to the representational stakes of the film). As they drive home while the credits of the film play, Tamara turns the camera on the streets and highways they pass through, exploring the very real roads traveled to get from this clearly suburban wedding to their own daily lives. This is followed by a scene of Cheryl’s direct address to the video camera, which serves as an introduction to her documentary and to herself. The film thus draws the connections quite clearly between Cheryl’s working and creative lives, going so far as to literalize a variety of relations by showing the actual roads that lead from one to the other.

In the subsequent direct-address sequence, our introduction to Cheryl’s creative project, Cheryl initially tells us she is a “filmmaker,” but then quickly corrects herself, saying that she is “working” on becoming a filmmaker, and explains her current project. After angling the camera on herself, she plays a clip from *Plantation Memories* that shows the actress known to her as “The Watermelon Woman.” The scene is casual to the point of clumsiness. But this clumsiness, the very everydayness of the moment, shows how a seemingly simple gesture can explore the relationship of a filmmaker to representational systems, from the level of technology to ideology and identification. In this short moment, we see the lines traced between Cheryl’s positions as producer and spectator, subject and object, as well as her tentative trajectory into film authorship. First, I want to note that the character of Cheryl

(who represents the filmmaker Cheryl Dunye) introduces herself as a filmmaker through the filming of herself, reducing the distinctions between herself as speaking subject and filmed object, in fact undoing the more traditional notion that to be in front of the camera is to be removed from the position of cinematic enunciation. Going further, she situates herself as both producer and “naive” spectator, explaining that she wants to make this film because she has become fascinated with a black actress while watching her films. Interestingly, this kind of cathexis to a fantasmatic image is usually designated as belonging to the realm of the supposedly passive movie fan; yet here, it is the position of spectator that spurs Cheryl on to action: to a production that is not a removal of herself from the scene of spectatorship but a logical continuation of that spectatorship. She watches her video on video with us. Spectatorship becomes the scene of production, thus situating *The Watermelon Woman*'s audience as possible producers of future images, and the viewers of those images as themselves future producers, and so on. The suggestion of endless mirroring in reflexive texts often implies that there is no concrete basis for representation, and thus the film becomes a kind of black hole, causing us to question both the stability of the film and our experience of the world;¹³ but here the mirroring opens up the scenes of production and of spectatorship to concrete elaboration in historically real settings.

This mingling of arenas, which I am exploring in the context of reflexive practice, has been very usefully examined in *The Watermelon Woman* by Mark Winokur in terms of identification and desire. Winokur elaborates the same reduction of subject/object distinctions that I have mentioned, but he does so in relation to the visibility of Cheryl's body in her construction of both a personal history and a black lesbian cinematic history. Winokur suggests that the Cheryl I have described above in the scene of direct address be distinguished from both the character Cheryl and the director, Cheryl Dunye, as an importantly ambiguous presence:

I shall refer not only to Cheryl (the character's last name is not given in the final credits) and Dunye (the director) but also to Cheryl/Dunye, the narrator whose identity we shall come to understand as the film's principal structuring device. While Cheryl attempts to establish her identity as a black lesbian filmmaker through an identification

with Fae, Dunye is attempting to integrate or reconstitute Cheryl/Dunye—an identity split by the traditional distinction between actor and director—as Cheryl Dunye. While Cheryl establishes a historical subjectivity for black lesbianism denied by racial repression, Dunye establishes a private lesbian subjectivity denied by classical Hollywood repression. . . . Dunye inserts her own body into the narrative in order to inscribe and integrate herself into a history she is thus problematizing, at the same time insisting on the mutual identification of the vicissitudes of the body and the psyche.¹⁴

Winokur’s description of the persona “Cheryl/Dunye” is extremely apt for a consideration of the subject position explored here through reflexive practice. Rather than describing Dunye in her narrating position as a middle ground between actor and director, Winokur insists that the position is an integration or reconstitution. This formulation holds great promise psychoanalytically speaking: it suggests integration or reconstitution at the site of the image, an image often shattered by representational abuse. But it is importantly an integration characterized by a kind of *ambiguity*, an embrace of the differing positions a subject (and object) might occupy all at once.¹⁵ This is not a refusal to take a position, or the impossibility of a position (suggested by the discourse of post-modernity critiqued above), but a suggestion that one’s position is multiply informed, particularly in the realm of representation.

Winokur’s further description of the film’s “insist[ence] on the mutual identification of the vicissitudes of body and psyche” is akin to what I would describe in the context of reflexivity as the direct relation between material practice and cinematic fictions: technology and image. Just as Winokur suggests that it is Dunye’s insertion of her own body into her fiction that allows her to write herself and other African American lesbians into history,¹⁶ I would argue that the inclusion of the particular technologies of the video monitor, VCR, and videotape in the scene under discussion is an insistence on the connection between Cheryl’s involvement in representation (the fictional-ideological) and the contemporary, and far more economically feasible, forms of moving-image production and viewing offered by video (historical materials of production). While the larger film, *The Watermelon Woman*, is shot on 16mm film

for the most part, Cheryl's film within the film on the "Watermelon Woman" is a video.¹⁷ It is the particular use of video technology that allows Cheryl to shoot herself watching a video version of a film and thus to occupy the positions of subject/object and spectator/filmmaker all in the same moment. Given the expense and the physical configuration of celluloid technologies, it would be virtually impossible to produce this moment in the same way with purely cinematic means.¹⁸ Thus, just as Winokur has explored the specificity of Dunye's physical body in a film he is discussing in terms of black lesbian desire, it seems important to note the specificity of the imaging technologies that are highlighted in the film's focus on past cinematic history and contemporary conditions of production.

In particular, it is the inclusion of multiple media that actually signals Cheryl's (and Dunye's) ability to insert her own creative and enabling fiction into a cinematic past. The incorporation of caption to come



photography and video into cinema suggests that it is through the creative combination of media formats that we might understand what it means to find a productive relationship to history and ourselves. It is a proliferation of media that is enabling—not a reduction or resistance of media as false and oppressive. The fact that these multimedia representations of the faux history of Fae Richards are also collaborations is crucial. The clip we see from *Plantation Memories*, the film that has inspired Cheryl to research the “Watermelon Woman,” was directed by Douglas McKeown and cowritten by him and Dunye. The “archival” photographs of Fae were done by the photographer Zoe Leonard—these photographs were included in the Whitney Biennial and were published as a book titled *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, produced through a collaboration between the filmmakers and Leonard, which simulates a personal photo album.¹⁹ Thus the “lore” of the “Watermelon Woman” becomes dispersed among different artists, media, and sites of reception. What might easily have been characterized as Dunye’s fantasmatic identification with a fictional image has become a shared production and thus, in a way, a shared history. Fae Richards has come to exist outside the film’s narrative.²⁰ Here the fictional reflexive movement is used not to undo cinema’s mythologies but to create new ones.²¹

However, to contend with the full implications of *The Watermelon Woman*’s reflexivity and its insights into the possibilities of cinema (and cinema studies) for subjects marginalized through gender, sexuality, and race—and the relations among these different positions—it is also instructive not only to look at the film in the light of reflexive cinema but also to see how Cheryl’s film-within-the-film is situated in the context of *documentary* history, since this film is, in many ways, experienced as a documentary and because a portion of the information presented in the course of the film’s research into the fictional Fae Richards is actual historical information.²² I think it is important to map the relationships thus established between the narrative reflexivity of Dunye’s film and the documentary practice of her character; it is here that the women’s filmmaking practices mentioned at the beginning of this essay become most salient.²³ Cheryl’s project within the film is a documentary seeking to find out the “truth” about a black woman

hidden within and by film history, a project thus referencing recognizable forms of feminist historiography. *The Watermelon Woman* highlights the kind of speaking/filming positions that have often been carved out for women in particular, when authorial positions have been absent: the exploration of their subjective lives as documentary witnesses. It is the seeming lack of irony with which such explorations have been tagged—in both well-meaning but patronizing histories and in feminist discourse itself—that Dunye’s film stands against and that I want in turn to foreground.

Much as literary criticism has long insisted on reading women’s writing through the lens of the author’s biographical information (far more so than in the case of their male counterparts), the contribution of women’s cinema has often been both presented and read through the idea of women’s “authentic” experience. The documentary form in particular has proven a rather circumscribing area for feminist filmmaking, especially in the 1970s and 1980s when women were beginning to produce films in greater numbers. Documentaries from the explicitly autobiographical *Joyce at 34* (dir. Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill, US, 1972) to the self-righteous *Not a Love Story* (dir. Bonnie Sherr Klein, Canada, 1981) to the historical *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (dir. Connie Field, US, 1980)—all films concerned with the stakes of representation—have nevertheless been interpreted as films that are too earnestly concerned with the status of “real women” to explore systems of representation with the same sophistication as their fictional-but-autobiographical counterparts (think Fellini or François Truffaut) from the arena of the male auteur. The terms of the opposition between “women’s voices” and intervention at the level of representation were set early on, notably by Claire Johnston, in her 1974 discussion of the possibilities of a women’s countercinema:

Much of the emerging women’s cinema has taken its aesthetics from television and cinema verite techniques. . . . These films largely depict images of women talking to camera about their experiences, with little or no intervention by the filmmaker. Kate Millett sums up the approach in *Three Lives* by saying, “I do not want to analyse anymore, but to express” and “film is a very powerful way to express oneself.”

Clearly, if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is always a

product. What the camera in fact grasps is the “natural” world of the dominant ideology. Women’s cinema cannot afford such idealism: the “truth” of our oppression cannot be “captured” on celluloid with the “innocence” of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured.²⁴

Johnston’s call for a countercinema seems committed to the notion that the women who make and appear in the “personal-experience” feminist documentaries are directly opposing their personal voices to discursive systems, rather than exploring the nature of discourse. This position is furthered, perhaps unwittingly, by theorists and historians far less critical of this particular form of women’s cinema (indeed some of the few who address it substantively at all). Bill Nichols’s seminal essay “The Voice of Documentary,” for instance, writes that in a film like *Rosie the Riveter*, “We are encouraged to believe that these voices [the women interviewed] carry less the authority of historical judgment than that of personal testimony—they are, after all, the words of apparently ‘ordinary women’ remembering the past. As in many films that advance issues raised by the women’s movement, there is an emphasis on individual but politically significant experience.”²⁵ Julia Lesage states, “Biography, simplicity, trust between woman filmmaker and woman subject, little self-consciousness about the flexibility of the cinematic medium—these are what characterize the feminist documentaries of the 1970s.”²⁶ The film-historical descriptions of Nichols and Lesage reinforce the logic of Johnston’s account by stressing the way that film allows women to represent themselves, rather than the way these women are presenting film.

While I do not mean to imply that these accounts are repressive or inaccurate, the framing of these documentaries within film studies has posited a wide swath of feminist cinematic voices as distinct from critical thought on cinema, and thus in many ways as also distinct from reflexive cinema. It would be more accurate to suggest that these documentaries are questioning the kind of deconstructive practice that would skip the step in which women would occupy the central subject position. They could thus more usefully be interpreted as women examining the modes of subjectivity offered by cinematic discourse, rather than as women who do not have enough analytical distance from their own represen-

tations to comment on them. As Janice Welsch has noted, these films are explorations of discourse: “Feminist documentaries use language, including film techniques and verbal exchanges, narrative and visual discourses differently; they address issues of special interest to women and develop the new languages needed to discuss them.”²⁷ But despite the attention that some theorists have paid to the ways that discursive practice is explored in these films, it seems clear that the overwhelming characterization of the feminist documentary tradition maintains that this tradition operates in the realm of the personal voice, too invested in the reflections of real women to comment on the production of meaning.

Dunye’s film, a narrative representation of this kind of documentary practice, highlights the complex relationship to cinematic practice at the heart of these seemingly simple testimonial films and positions itself to simultaneously claim and complicate this documentary tradition. By combining narrative reflexivity (traditionally associated with the male auteur voices of Fellini, Godard, etc.) with the style of the personal-women’s-history documentary, the film reduces the distinctions between the two and highlights the degree to which relations between technology and speaking positions were (and are) centrally located in feminist documentary practice. In *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl’s visits to archives and libraries, and her interviews with “experts,” amateur historians, and “everyday women” are rife with negotiations of and humor about where information comes from, who tells what story and why, and how she can present it with photographs, video, and film clips. The film provides ample evidence that none of the choices and processes associated with a feminist documentary are straightforward or without reflection about processes of representation.²⁸

But even as Dunye’s film seems to recuperate prior feminist documentary practice, we cannot ignore that it is simultaneously a rejection of the realism of such films; not only is the film not documenting a real documentary but we are also told at the end of the film that the woman referenced as the “Watermelon Woman,” the subject of the documentary, is not a real person. The moment at which we are presented with the final documentary project, Cheryl’s film, we are also told that the actress called Fae is a creation of this film, and the truth about her that we thought was discovered

by Cheryl and offered to us is exposed as a fiction, calling into question the veracity of the authentic histories the film intermingles with the fictional ones. Initially, the documentary project in the film seems akin to *Rosie the Riveter*, which combines historical representations such as newsreels with women's testimonies that often refute the veracity of those representations. The documentary in *The Watermelon Woman* similarly combines more publicly dispersed histories with interviews that complicate those histories. But while Nichols writes that "the five interviewees [in *Rosie*] remember a past the film's inserted historical images reconstruct but in counterpoint: their recollection of adversity and struggle contrasts with old newsreels of women 'doing their part' cheerfully," *The Watermelon Woman* has a more deconstructive attitude toward official histories.²⁹ Unlike *Rosie the Riveter*, this film combines the telling of a personal history with a fakery of historical documents, not a refutation of them, in combination with both implicit and explicit references to real historical figures and eras of filmmaking, as I will discuss in more detail below. Using the gaps, ambiguities, and blind spots as spaces for creativity and production, Dunye's film shows us that the visible histories often testify to the invisible they are based on—the actress credited as only "The Watermelon Woman" is an opening, Cheryl's point of entry into her own cinematic production and creative contribution to history. Dunye's film makes it clear that it is the mystery surrounding this woman that provokes Cheryl to intervene in history and flesh out the unnamed actress. In fact, the film is less a postmodern response to the women's films of the 1970s and more a revision of some of the early voices of feminist film theory—like Johnston's—that opposed radical cinematic construction to biographical realism.

Significantly, it is Alexandra Juhasz, the producer of Dunye's film and herself the maker of many explicitly feminist video projects (as well as the woman appearing as Fae's partner, the white director Martha Page, in the staged photographs of *The Watermelon Woman*) whose scholarly work argues most forcefully that we only got "one side" of the feminist realist debate in film studies.³⁰ Stating that she received a "feminist theoretical indoctrination which was dedicated almost solely to the critique of realism and endorsement of formalism," Juhasz suggests that the seemingly "realist"

documentaries of the type I refer to above have been mischaracterized as “naïve” (173, 179). I would add that it is the framing of these documentaries as realist rather than as discursive (and not just by feminist theorists) that contributes to the false dichotomy of realism versus formalism. Juhasz notes that “realism and identification are used as viable theoretical strategies towards political ends within these films,” and she continues that “a careful look at the formal strategies of many of the feminist ‘realist’ documentaries of the seventies, eighties and nineties allows us to see what many earlier critics missed: that there is contradiction, antirealism, many realisms within specific ‘realist’ texts” (175, 176). Juhasz makes an extremely persuasive argument that regarding realism as a theoretical strategy challenges the distinction between film theory and the “truth” of film, and that what appears to be a realist approach in much feminist documentary includes formal choices.

In reflexive practice the film is presumed to be calling attention to its own construction, thus seemingly aligning reflexivity with formalism and opposing it to realism. However, the reflexive (particularly as it is deployed in *The Watermelon Woman*) can help us understand why the realism/reflexivity dichotomy does not work any better than a realism/formalism one: insofar as the reflexive is tied to an emphasis on the material conditions of production, it foregrounds what is really happening with a film. But it is also at least attempting to disrupt the perceived transparency and naïveté of realism. Thus in the present context it is crucial to assert that realism and reflexivity need not be opposed: that what is often considered a postmodern deconstructive mode of cinema is also a materialist construction of historical, *real* subject positions. *The Watermelon Woman* shows us, in its reflexive and fictional construction of realist documentary, that the two positions not only can but probably already were operating in concert.³¹

However, it is crucial not to conflate this film with the largely white feminist documentary projects just discussed. One could, and should, ask why I am situating this film in relation to white feminist debates rather than to the black (and queer) documentaries that were more immediate precursors to Dunye’s feature. Valerie Smith has considered Dunye’s earlier short films (her self-described “Dunyementaries”) in relation to Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues*

Untied (US, 1990), Camille Billops and James V. Hatch's *Finding Christa* (US, 1991), and Marco Williams's *In Search of Our Fathers* (US, 1992), arguing that these films "sidestep issues of racial representativeness and accuracy or inaccuracy" that had previously overinformed black filmmaking practice and criticism and "presuppose that black subjectivity is a site of contested negotiations."³² *The Watermelon Woman*—the feature film culmination of Dunye's earlier work—though a narrative and not a documentary, indeed must be read in common with these films in terms of their explicit reflexivity and approach to constructed identities. But it is the aforementioned, and highlighted, black-white interactions in *The Watermelon Woman* that call for an additional reading of the film in relation to white feminist film histories and to the way these histories have been a particular site of contested negotiation for Dunye's filmmaking practice. Indeed, I want to argue that it is in fact through its deployment of white feminist filmmaking tropes that we might begin to understand the relation between the film's reflexive elements and the interracial black-white romances that make up the other narrative thread of this film, and thus the way this film is critically self-situated within several interrelated historical arenas.

While the film's primary narrative energy is directed toward Cheryl's investigation of the elusive "Watermelon Woman," this plot is coupled with the ill-fated romance between Cheryl and a white woman, Diana. The romantic plot is in turn mirrored by Cheryl's discovery that Fae was herself romantically involved with a famous white female director from classical Hollywood, Martha Page (clearly modeled on Dorothy Arzner). I want to suggest that the romances between black and white women in the film, represented as less than ideal, function in part to examine the racial problematics of women's cinema and white feminist practice.³³ The interracial romances in Dunye's film between Martha and Fae, and Cheryl and Diana, suggest that white women in cinematic history, often as written by white feminists, have simultaneously enabled and repressed the possibilities for women of color. The film casts both these white women as figures of privilege and power in relation to Fae and Cheryl. It is suggested that Martha was a domineering influence over Fae, and Diana is presented as supportive of Cheryl, but also fetishistic toward black culture and oblivious

to her own deployments of privilege.³⁴ Despite these representations, the figures of Martha and Diana are not entirely demonized in the film. Diana appears in one of the seemingly extradiegetic sequences dancing on the rooftop with Cheryl; even as her character is problematic within the narrative, her figure maintains a benign visibility in the gaps of the narrative. The explicit homage paid in the film to the actress playing Diana, Guinevere Turner, as one of the makers of *Go Fish* (dir. Rose Troche, US, 1994), the generally accepted groundbreaker for independent lesbian features in the 1990s, complicates any interpretation of Diana as a purely exploitative figure. In the opening scene of the film, as Cheryl and Tamara argue over money, Cheryl says, “You remember what Rose and Guin say in the *Go Fish* book: ‘If you want to make a film, you gotta make some sacrifices.’” Yet this reference also demands our consideration of how the film we are watching must be viewed as a response and challenge to the sometimes too easily written cinematic histories by and of white women.

And while an interview with Fae’s surviving black lesbian lover (played by Cheryl Clarke) suggests Martha to be representative of racist power structures in the film industry, it is clear from Cheryl’s research that Martha’s lesbian history has also undergone historical and familial repression. Without her association with Martha, Fae would not have been as visible to Cheryl in classical films, which were Cheryl’s initial point of entry into Fae’s history. This is not to say that the use and abuse of Fae is ultimately recuperated by the film; rather, it suggests the complex dynamic in which Dunye’s film exists not only in relation, response, and resistance to the white, male-dominated Hollywood machine and the realm of the independent auteur but also to white feminist productions.

The film also traces the very real history of black-cast films and black filmmakers in the race-film era of which Fae was (fictionally) a part—to reverse Marianne Moore’s poetic construction, Fae was the imaginary toad in the real garden.³⁵ As Robert F. Reid-Pharr points out, *The Watermelon Woman* develops both an explicit and tellingly implicit relation to “what we might call the tradition of Black American cinema and to the tradition of Black American cinematic criticism.”³⁶ There is an explicit emphasis on black cinematic culture of the 1930s and 1940s, and Pharr argues that

although the film's title is a direct reference to Melvin Van Peebles's 1970 *Watermelon Man* (US), Dunye's film "remains somewhat aloof from the generations of Black American film immediately preceding it" (133), and, I would add, also from contemporary black male auteurs such as Spike Lee, even as Dunye's on-screen persona in many ways echoes Lee's insistent appearance in his own early films. However, Pharr goes on to read the film in relation to historical constructions of black visibility (as well as to visual constructions of black history) and makes it clear that despite the seeming elision of more contemporary players in black American cinema in *The Watermelon Woman*, these films and filmmakers exist along with the earlier cinematic formations as dynamic features of the cinematic landscape that Cheryl and Dunye are (re)mapping. Thus, in a number of ways, *The Watermelon Woman* forges (in several senses of the word) its way through the interplay of existing cinematic histories and insists on both the problematics and points of entry for Dunye's own film through and against existing cinematic discourses, always making it clear that every visible point refers to both a repression and a productive gap in time and space.

In weaving so many elements together, *The Watermelon Woman* uses a reflexive practice to visually and narratively process the possibilities of its own existence and discursive potential: the film writes cinematic pasts to create a cinematic future. Dunye's investigation in her film does not merely use the (previously) non-existent "Watermelon Woman" to fabricate a virtual reality that provides an alternate sphere of reference. The forgery of a historical figure provides a more concrete (and thus malleable) unfolding of the dispersed cinematic and social history of African American lesbians. The film shows us why it is necessary to explore real histories and daily lives, and simultaneously suggests that what we may well end up with through those explorations is a truth that is not a reality but a representation.

However, the film is not an attempt to break through an oppressive or dominant ideological fiction to undo the orthopedic molds of mainstream representation and the authorial supremacy of the filmmaker. This film encourages us to make our own fictions, fantasies, and histories in the service of producing new molds and new figures of identification. This is what Gilles Deleuze demanded

for political cinema in his assertion of the “powers of the false”: “This is not at all a case of ‘each has its own truth,’ a variability of content. It is a power of the false which replaces and supersedes the form of the true, because it poses the simultaneity of impossible presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts.”³⁷ Deleuze does not insist on the impossibility of truth, as the postmodern theory examined above suggests, but on a superseding of the *form* of truth—an insistence not on the falsehood of truth claims but on the often structural truth of false claims, the political necessity of both representation *and* misrepresentation. When, after all, was the last time in the United States that a revelation of truth triumphed over a political lie? Perhaps it is time to stop waiting for the truth to save us and to admit that falsehoods are not the problem. Dunye’s film clearly demonstrates that it is possible to produce a lie, both politically and artistically, that is not defined in opposition to truth. As Juhasz puts it, “Dunye and Cheryl’s simultaneous avowal and disavowal of the real marks *The Watermelon Woman* as a productive and progressive fake. An (unstable) identity is created, a community (of skeptics) is built, and an (unresolved) political statement about black lesbian history and identity is articulated.”³⁸ While more traditional reflexivity has somewhat disingenuously focused on the fragmentation, crisis, and masculine hysteria at the heart of the cinematic enterprise, Dunye’s reflexivity shows us that the fabrication of a filmic representation can weave together disparate—incommensurate—genres, histories, myths, truths, and lies, into a coherent and enabling body, at least for a moment. Ultimately, *The Watermelon Woman* shows that reflexive practice, while deconstructive for some, can be radically constructive for others.

Notes

Many thanks to Barbara Herman, Homay King, Patricia Clough, and particularly Patricia White and B. Ruby Rich. Their suggestions and insights at various points of my work on this article were invaluable.

1. In 1991, Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (US/UK) became the first feature by an African American woman to receive national theatrical distribution. See Sheila Rule, “Director Defies Odds with First Feature, ‘Daughters of the Dust,’” *New York Times*, 12 February

1992. *The Watermelon Woman* was the first feature film directed by an out African American lesbian (on any subject matter) to receive theatrical distribution (it was released by First Run Features). It remained so until 2004, when Angela Robinson's *D.E.B.S.* (US) was distributed by the Samuel Goldwyn Company. While Robinson is an out African American lesbian, the lesbian characters in the film are both white women. Dunye's 2001 *Stranger Inside* (US) was released on television but not theatrically.

2. B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 2 (1992): 30–34.
3. Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Film Genre Reader*, vol. 2, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 457–71.
4. Essays on the film include Laura L. Sullivan's "Chasing Fae: *The Watermelon Woman* and Black Lesbian Possibility," *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 448–60; Mark Winokur's "Body and Soul: Identifying with the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African-American Women*, ed. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 231–52; Robert F. Reid-Pharr's "Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: *The Watermelon Woman* and the Critique of Black Visuality," in *FIs for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006), 130–40; and Andrea Braidt, "Queering Ethnicity, Queering Sexuality: New Aspects of Representation in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*," in *Simulacrum America: The USA and the Popular Media*, ed. Elisabeth Kraus and Carolin Auer (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 181–88. The film is mentioned in a variety of other contexts, including Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura*, no. 49 (2002): 107–47; and Kathleen McHugh, "Where Hollywood Fears to Tread: Autobiography and the Limits of Commercial Cinema," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, ed. Jon Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 269–76.
5. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
6. This ideological process was perhaps most definitively described by Jean-Louis Baudry in "Ideological Effects of the Basic

Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 286–98.

7. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, eds., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
8. For example, Nancy K. Miller, “Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 102–20; bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Postmodern Culture* 1 (1990): 1–15; Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Deneane Sharply-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 11–23; and Nancy Hartsock, “Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 14 (1989–90): 15–33.
9. Christian, “Race for Theory,” 16.
10. Quoted in Miller, “Changing the Subject,” 106.
11. McHugh, “Where Hollywood Fears to Tread,” 274.
12. Kevin Maynard, “Tarantino’s *Bambinos*—Independent Film Director Quentin Tarantino,” *Interview*, April 1995, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n4_v25/ai_16783287. Tarantino’s introduction of a kind of video-store mythology around himself has become so complete that Charlie Rose refers to Tarantino’s former Hermosa Beach place of employment as “the famous video store.” *Charlie Rose*, PBS, 14 October 1994.
13. See, for instance, Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (Sweden, 1966).
14. Winokur, “Body and Soul,” 235–36. This essay constitutes what I consider to be the most nuanced exploration of the film to date.
15. Julia Lesage refers to a focus on fragmentation in feminist autobiographical documentaries (productions not unrelated to this one). However, I do not think the multiple positions occupied by Cheryl suggest fragmentation here. Fragmentation, after all, is not the same as ambiguity and conflict. This film and its characters are not bodies in pieces, but rich, whole bodies exploring confusion and desire as the process of production. Julia Lesage, “Women’s Fragmented Consciousness in Feminist Experimental Autobiographical Video,” in *Feminism*

- and Documentary*, ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 309–37.
16. Winokur, “Body and Soul,” 236.
 17. While the 16mm/video opposition may now have been superseded by the availability and quality of digital video, at the time of *The Watermelon Woman*’s making, 16mm suggested the possibility of theatrical release while video production was aligned with activism, amateur production, queer film festivals, and other more community-oriented projects.
 18. The film that comes closest to showing a filmmaker as spectator, filmmaker, and filmed object is Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (UK, 1960). For a further consideration of how *Peeping Tom* figures this scenario differently than *The Watermelon Woman* in relation to its own technological specificity, see my article “The Camera’s Eye: *Peeping Tom* and Technological Perversion,” in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 35–51.
 19. Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (San Francisco: Artspace, 1996).
 20. Laura Sullivan has also noted that Fae Richards “visually lives on” beyond this film, but she cites only a German academic journal as having published some of the photos from the film. In fact, the Artspace book of the photos came out simultaneously with the film, and thus I would suggest that Fae’s existence exceeds the “world of academic cultural criticism” that Sullivan mentions (Sullivan, “Chasing Fae,” 456).
 21. In another context, Jane Feuer argues something similar about the reflexive Hollywood musical. However, Feuer’s argument, as I note above, is that a film like *Singin’ in the Rain* (dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, US, 1952) is using reflexivity not to deconstruct itself but in a *conservative mode*, to create new romantic myths about the cinema even as it exposes others to ridicule. With Dunye’s film, on the other hand, we can see that the creating of cinematic myths can operate in a radical mode as well.
 22. For instance, some of the descriptions provided of black-cast cinema history and the archival footage of old Philadelphia are historically accurate.
 23. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists the film’s genre as both documentary and drama, which could be written off as a

telling mistake or as an interpretation of the film's ambiguous status and validity as a kind of documentary. "*The Watermelon Woman* (1996)," IMDb, www.imdb.com/title/tt0118125 (accessed 1 March 2007).

24. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-cinema," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 214.
25. Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 265.
26. Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 223.
27. Janice R. Welsch, "Bakhtin, Language, and Women's Documentaries," in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 165.
28. This point is beautifully made by Alexandra Juhasz, whose thoughts I discuss further below, in her essay "'They Said We Were to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video': The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary," *Screen* 35 (1994): 171–90.
29. Nichols, "Voice of Documentary," 264.
30. Juhasz, "They Said We Were to Show Reality," 172–73.
31. Juhasz, not at all coincidentally I think, also suggests that the critique of realist aesthetics within feminist theory was related to the simultaneous translation of French theoretical models of poststructuralism. This corresponds to my argument about the way reflexivity has been privileged as the cinematic discourse most concerned with discourse itself. Therefore it is not surprising that Godard has been considered the pinnacle of this kind of theoretico-cinematic production. Godard's formal and thematic reflexivity is, I would suggest, considered in the same light as the French theory of the same era.
32. Valerie Smith, *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 90.
33. And, as pointed out by Ann Pellegrini, there has been a "startling frequency" in the portrayal of interracial relationships in lesbian film, beginning with Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be*

Seeing Things (US) in 1987 (also, incidentally, a reflexive film), and including *Bar Girls* (dir. Marita Giovanni, US, 1994), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (dir. Maria Maggenti, US, 1995), and *When Night Is Falling* (dir. Patricia Rozema, Canada, 1995). Ann Pellegrini, “Women on Top, Boys on the Side, but Some of Us Are Brave: Blackness, Lesbianism, and the Visible,” *College Literature* 24 (1997): 88. Since all of these films include an interracial romance without particularly focusing on the issues raised by it, I think it is worthwhile to see Dunye’s film as a commentary on these films instead of a simple continuation of the trend.

34. As Winokur discusses in more detail, Diana is the daughter of a diplomat. Winokur points out that her identifications with black culture are tied to a colonial model (“Body and Soul,” 239).
35. Moore’s famous formulation in “Poetry” speaks of poems as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman (New York: Penguin, 2003), 135.
36. Reid-Pharr, “Makes Me Feel Mighty Real,” 133.
37. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 131.
38. Juhasz and Lerner, introduction to *F Is for Phony*, 18.

Catherine Zimmer is an assistant professor of English and film and screen studies at Pace University. She has published work on film in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* and in the anthology *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Film*, and has recently served as a guest editor for *Film Quarterly*. Her current research explores how reflexive cinema has focalized around the issue of surveillance.

caption to come

