

The Cave, Lorraine O'Grady on Black Women Film Directors

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Written during a tentative "break-through" year for black women film directors, the article was a search for answers to the question, "Why are there so few even now?" It found the situation for black women to be an exaggeration of that for women in general.

The invisibility of black women has been much on my mind of late. Asked recently to speak on the topic "Can women artists take back the nude from a voyeuristic male gaze as a site to represent their own subjectivity?" I have to discard the premise: from mass culture to high culture, white women may have been objects of the fetishizing gaze, but black women have had only the blank stare. In fact we feel lucky when we get to take our clothes off. Manet's *Olympia*, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, 1973-78, are landmarks in our unseeing erasure by both the multi-colored male and the white female. I believe in the mathematics of myth, which is why I'm always asking, How many black women in this anthology? in this exhibit? in this picture? What are they made to signify? Of the 39 places at Chicago's dinner table, 35 are set with plates painted with vaginas that glow miraculously. Sojourner Truth, the only black guest, must make it without a pussy. She alone has a face, and not one but three: one screaming, one smiling, and one weeping a clichéd tear.¹ And Manet's Laura, fully dressed behind the nude and oh so white Olympia is two-in-one: she is Jezebel united with Mammy, the whore combined with the female eunuch, who can only escape from an undialectical fate by disappearing into the background drapery.

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This kind of bookkeeping does wear me down, and over the years I've had to defend against it. For instance, I've learned to keep my news at one or two removes: I read the *Sunday Times* instead of the daily, *The Nation* instead of watching TV. There's something consoling, when it finally lands on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, about having my festering intuition assume myth's sharp impermeable shape. Last July a *Times Magazine* cover appeared with a mountain of black film directors, from the bottom to the top of the frame. Eight, with a missing figure. I can't help myself. I start bookkeeping again. In a story that I count at 60 paragraphs, seven black women directors are barely listed in the second paragraph from the end.²

I tell myself not to get into this, since I don't see how I can be philosophical. But: who made the decision, the writer or the editor, not to discuss Euzhan Palcy, whose *Sugar Cane Alley*, 1983, and *Dry White Season*, were not only brilliant but profitable? And what about fully treating Julie Dash—the buzz for her forthcoming *Daughters of the Dust* is sounding more like a ring-shout. The trouble with being erased for so long is that you come to think of your erasure as natural—until the moment when something, a novel by Toni Morrison, an essay by Hortense Spillers, an artwork by Adrian Piper, pierces your invisibility to yourself and becomes real. Palcy's *Sugar Cane Alley*, from France by way of Martinique, was my first glimpse of even of a portion of my own peculiar African-Antillean-European-American sensibility on screen. Her negation in the *Times Magazine* article makes me mad.

I set out to discover how the official and the real reasons for black women's erasure differ. For a Hollywood take on "Why there are no great black women directors" I talk to Candace Allen, who is a founder and board member of Reel Black Women, a forward-looking organization of professional black women behind the camera. Allen guides me through the standard litany: in an industry run by 50-year-old white men to appeal to a core audience of 17-year-old boys, 25 percent of whom are black, sexism looms larger than racism. In fact the violence of inner-city movies is a turn-on for big boys who still getting off with guns, bitches, and hard music. Is it true there are more black men directors in Hollywood than there are white women

directors? Probably. Women, who may have gentler stories to tell, are best off being wives and/or daughters of Hollywood insiders, in the tradition of industry nepotism, or performers who have already made money for them. The only black woman who comes close to this profile is *Fame* TV director/performer Debbie Allen. And with not one black man or white woman currently in a position to greenlight a project for motion pictures, the barrier isn't getting easier to break. An October *Time* cover story on women directors, featuring Jodie Foster, implicitly confirms the sex/race double bind.³ Fifteen women are treated, and not a single black.

Black women have done better in TV, where federal licensing enforces affirmative-action guidelines, and the recognition of a 25 percent black audience has produced several shows with black casts. But in the film industry there is no accountability—the only rule is the bottom line. And in a town where money is not just money but reputation and sex appeal, the line is not subtly inflected. “The attitude here is, If you can make money for us, we’re on your side, for as long as you make it. We don’t know who you are, don’t care who you are, if you do this,” says Allen. “But there’s a narrow consciousness on what can make money, and until a black woman’s story breaks through, the men here won’t believe it. Maybe John Singleton will pave the way with *Poetic Justice*,” she adds, resigned to the irony that the industry’s one upcoming film about a black woman, a young rapper, is the project of *Boyz n The Hood*’s boy-wonder writer/director.

Allen is undeterred by the glitch between her pragmatic vision and her ambitions. Working in Hollywood since getting out of Harvard and N.Y.U. Film School, she’s been a 1st A.D., saving the asses of more directors than she cares to number. Now she hopes to push “above the line” with her screenplay *How High the Moon*, an interracial love triangle set in Harlem in the 40s. It covers all the bases, with a professional lindy-hopper at the Savoy, a leftist journalist, and a young woman writer who doubles as a pick-up dancer at the Apollo. And, she says, it can be done for under \$3 mil.

Nor is Allen alone in being sanguine: on the East Coast, Jacqueline Shearer, a producer/director whose credits include segments for PBS's *The American Experience* and *Eyes on the Prize II*, is confident the breakthrough will happen "within a year." Ada Griffin, executive director of Third World Newsreel, insists that "a climate of acceptance can be *created* for black women's film, just as it has for other 'difficult' products, like rap music. All it takes is critics getting behind it, and the right kind of marketing."

Yet Palcy has gone back to France to work on a film, and is deflecting, for now, the calls that continue to come from Hollywood. "I know in my heart," she has said, "that if I was African-American they would never call me."⁴ It's the same: other people's blacks are acceptable—if you're in Italy, don't be Ethiopian; if you're in France, don't be French West Indian; and if you're in the United States, don't be African-American. Says Palcy: "Maybe they are scared of opening the door to black Americans because of the subjects they would explore." And now we're down to it. Just what stories would "she" tell? Would "everybody's Other" give away all the secrets, including her own? If, as in Barbara Johnson's famous quote, "the black woman is both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their won ends," why would any of "them" risk hearing from her?⁵

Certainly if our subjugated knowledges were to become primary, we would change the world. Imagine what would happen if we were to refuse banishment to the unnameable chaos that defines what woman is not. If we were to claim our stereotypes and make Jezebel the sign of our acceptance of our own bodies, Mammy the symbol of our ability to nurture, and Sapphire the signifier of our resilience and strength. If we could share and build on what we've learned about ourselves and the others from an exploitative work world. At the very least we would, as Spillers suggests, write a radically new text for female empowerment.⁶ But even more dismaying to "them" might be our self-involvement, the discovery that *we* and not *they* are the center of our universes. Perhaps it is because many black women novelists have made a strategic choice to describe a world without white people that so few of their works have been

translated to film, despite their publishing successes. And perhaps this is also why in the two exceptions, *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, the books have been tamed by directors who are not black women.

Everyone I talk to can name from 50 to 60 black women awaiting their verb, but outside the anonymous world of TV and Palcy's two theatrical releases, most of the work has not been seen. Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, before airing on PBS's *American Playhouse*, was previewed at private screenings in Hollywood in August.. The biggies who were invited did not attend, and Dash came away without a Hollywood agent or distributor.

I borrow a video of *Daughters* from Kino International, the art-house distributor that has since negotiated rights to the film, and watch it with my studio assistant, a 23-year-old white male from the Midwest. I have been warned that *Daughters*, about a family planning to migrate north from the Sea Islands off South Carolina in 1902 and filmed in the Gullah dialect, may be hard to follow. Two hours later, we are still riveted. The film, told in African-griot style and photographed with more long shots than I remember in a single movie, to embed its characters firmly in nature, has the remarkable authority of a work that creates its own syntax. And Robert seems to have got everything, even points I missed, though Gullah and the Jamaican patois I was raised with are almost identical.

Despite *Daughters*' \$1 million PBS budget and Allen's dreams of "\$3 mil," most black women spend years trying to raise less than \$100,000. A bit luckier than some has been Martina Attille of Sankofa, black British film collective that has received modest government sponsorship. Attille's half-hour film *Dreaming Rivers*, 1988, is the story of a West Indian woman who follows her lover to England and then commits suicide. Her three British children must lay her down ritually before they can take on a complex postcolonial identity.⁷ *Rivers* has a touch of film school about it, but beyond its artiness and slow pace, a mesmerizing sensibility stretches the bounds of realism by combining theoretical issues with images of haunting beauty.

In the short course I have taken on black women in film, I've discovered that the dramatic feature is not everyone's goal. Camille Billops and her husband James Hatch are happy with the documentary and with the audience they've found through Third World Newsreel. Their one-hour *Finding Christa*, 1991, which has been selected for both the Sundance and the Rotterdam festival this month, may be the most artistically interesting of the films I've seen. A personal movie on Billops' encounter with the daughter she gave up for adoption, it expands the concept of the documentary into something for which I still can't find a name. It was shot in the stops and starts of erratic funding, and Billops, an accomplished ceramic sculptor but untrained as a filmmaker, has used this lurching quality to advantage. She's produced an amazing home movie that seems to define the revolutionary potential in what Richard Rorty calls "abnormal discourse," the new thing that can happen when one is either unaware of or sets aside the rules.⁸

There are still too few films to define a "black women's aesthetic," and more than likely our experience is too diverse for anything so uniform to emerge (isn't that the happiest evidence of the Anita Hill hearings?). But I am more convinced than ever that the culture needs our voice, though I can't bring myself to believe that it will be heard.

At my local supermarket, the cover of the November *Elle* arrests me: a black and a white model stare out together, a first for magazine publishing, I think. Is this the new dispensation? I buy the issue, but as soon as I get it home, I start bookkeeping. Of the 89 ad models I count, there are two women of color one for "ivory" and one for "mahogany" in an ad for All Skin Prescriptives. In the fashion editorials, except for two Latinas (both with straight auburn hair), even beige, which two or three years ago threatened to become normative, seems to have disappeared.

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- ¹ See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979, and Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Carole S. Vance, ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. p. 77.
 - ² Karen Grigsby Bates, "They've Gotta Have Us: Hollywood's Black Directors," *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 July 1991. p. 10 ff.
 - ³ Richard Schickel, "Hollywood's New Directions," *Time*, 14 October 1991. pp. 68-78.
 - ⁴ Euzhan Palcy, quoted in Nina J. Easton, "Calendar: The Invisible Woman," *The Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 1991. p. 54.
 - ⁵ Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in Henry Louis Gates, ed., *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, New York: Methuen, 1984. p. 216.
 - ⁶ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 no. 2, Summer 1987, p. 80.
 - ⁷ See the interview with Martina Attile in Coco Fusco, *Young, British and Black: The Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective*, Buffalo: Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Center, 1988, p. 39, and Manthia Diawara, "The Nature of Mother in *Dreaming Rivers*," *Black American Literature Forum* 25 no. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 283-298, an issue on black film guest-edited by Valerie Smith, Camille Billops, and Ada Griffin.
 - ⁸ Discussed in Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique* no. 7, Fall 1987, p. 198.