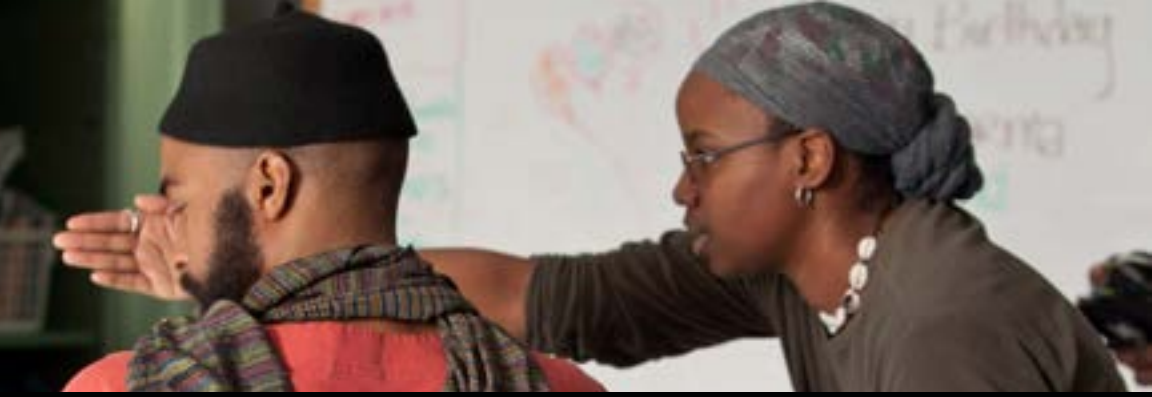

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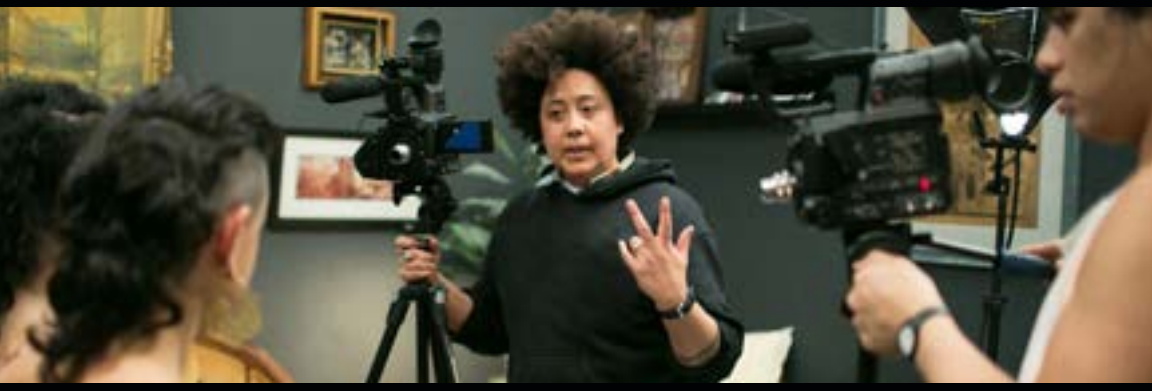
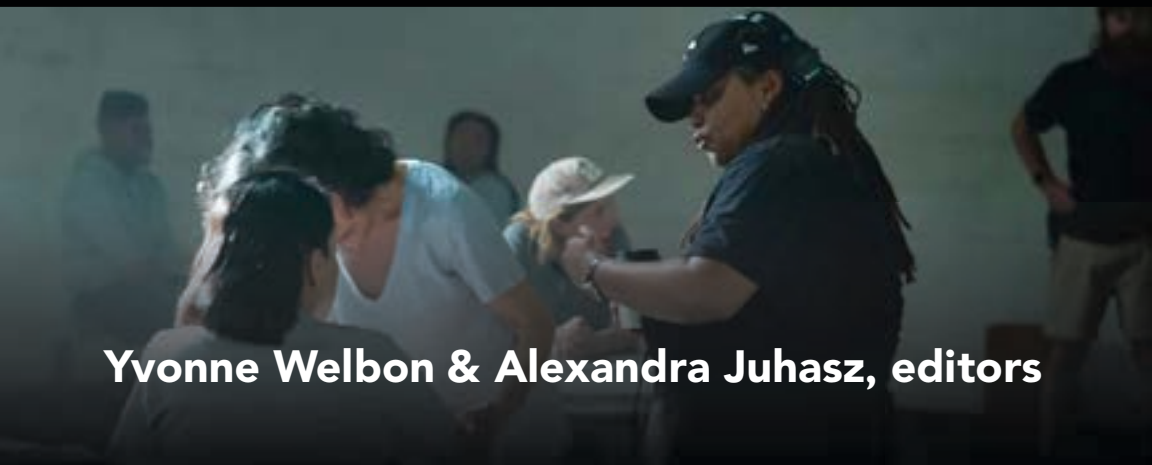


IN THE LIFE

A HISTORY OF OUT AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN MEDIA-MAKING



Yvonne Welbon & Alexandra Juhasz, editors

SISTERS IN THE LIFE

A Camera Obscura book

SISTERS IN THE LIFE

A HISTORY OF OUT AFRICAN AMERICAN LESBIAN MEDIA-MAKING

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Duke University Press • Durham and London • 2018

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Heather Hensley
Typeset in Minion Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Welbon, Yvonne, [date] editor. | Juhasz, Alexandra, editor.
Title: Sisters in the life : a history of out African American lesbian media-making / Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, Editors.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2018. | Series: A camera obscura book | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017040717 (print)
LCCN 2018000303 (ebook)
ISBN 9780822371854 (ebook)
ISBN 9780822370710 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9780822370864 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: African American lesbians in motion pictures. | Lesbianism in motion pictures. | Lesbian motion picture producers and directors—United States. | Lesbians, Black—In motion pictures.
Classification: LCC PN1995.9.L48 (ebook) | LCC PN1995.9.L48 S57 2018 (print) | DDC 791.43/653—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017040717

Cover art: (*from top*) Dee Rees directing *Pariah* (photo by Jenny Baptiste, © Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection); Shine Louise Houston directing *Crash Pad Series* (photo by Tristan Crane for CrashPadSeries.com); Tina Mabry on the set of *Queen of the South* (photo by John Brawley).

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ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let the conversations begin!

Notes

1 Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet et al., "Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora," in *XII Black International Cinema Anthology* (Berlin, 1997), 136.

2 Please see www.sistersinthelife.com for more resources, information, objects, and writing from the Sisters in the Life project.

YVONNE WELBON

Introduction

The Sisters in the Life Archive Project

Since the 1922 theatrical release of Tressie Souders's *A Woman's Error*, approximately one hundred feature films have been directed by African American women.[1] Almost one-third of those films were directed by black lesbians. Statistically about 4 percent of the adult American population is likely to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, but over 30 percent of the feature films have been directed by this minority population.[2]

While production budgets and audience reach vary widely, the black women who have directed the most feature films are almost all black lesbians. Coquie Hughes has directed eight features. Cheryl Dunye has directed six feature films. Shine Louise Houston has directed five feature films. Tied for fourth place with four features each are their straight counterparts Kasi Lemmons and Ava DuVernay. Black lesbian directors have also eclipsed their straight counterparts in other areas of filmmaking. In 1974 Michelle Parkerson became the first African American woman to win a student Academy Award for *Sojourn* (1973), a film she codirected with Jimi Lyons Jr., a fellow Temple University student. The first black woman to be nominated for a nonstudent Academy Award for directing is also a black lesbian. Dianne Houston was nominated for her short film *Tuesday Morning Ride*, starring Ruby Dee and Bill Cobb, in 1996. The highest grossing Hollywood studio film directed by a black woman was directed by a black lesbian. Angela Robinson's Disney film *Herbie Fully Loaded* (2005), starring Lindsay Lohan, grossed over $144 million worldwide. At the time Robinson had also directed the film with the largest Hollywood studio budget: $50 million for the same film.[3] In 2017, out lesbian Lena Waite made Emmy history as the first black woman to win for writing for a comedy series—*Master of None*.

Why are black lesbians having a markedly different experience in the film industry than their straight sisters? Why are films directed by African American lesbians disproportionately represented? While there may be a simple answer or multiple answers, it remains difficult to say at this time. African American women directors in general and black lesbian directors in particular are an understudied group of artists. It is the goal of the Sisters in the Life (SITL) transmedia project to begin a discourse and increase the knowledge base about this little-known and overlooked group of directors by providing a wide range of primary and secondary resources. SITL is part of a larger project called Sisters in Cinema that seeks to promote all African American women media makers.[4] The components of the SITL project include this book of essays and interviews written by media scholars; a feature-length documentary film; a resource-rich evolving website with filmmaker and scholar interviews, clips of films, historical timelines, and bibliographic data (www.sistersinthelife.com); and an archive of media and ephemera that may be housed at the UCLA Film and Television Archive's Outfest Legacy Project and also made accessible, in part, online and through a select number of public libraries. The SITL project will provide resources to a public interested in learning more about black women filmmakers.

Project Origins

I can trace the roots of this project back to my undergraduate days at Vassar College. In 1983 I registered for a class called Women in Latin American History. As a child of an immigrant tracing my roots to Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, I was excited to finally have an opportunity to learn about my family history in an academic setting.

On the first day of class we reviewed the syllabus. My family wasn't there. I learned that we would basically spend the semester studying Mexican nuns of European descent. "Where are the black women?" I asked. My professor explained that there was little material on black women in Latin America that could be incorporated into our course. She said she was aware of the absence and had included *Child of the Dark*, the diary of an Afro-Brazilian woman, in our readings even though Brazil wasn't part of Spanish-speaking Latin America as we were studying it.

Throughout the semester I searched for scholarly proof of our existence. My professor was right. I found little that could be incorporated into a college course. If I had not been in the class, would the other students have learned there was a history of black women in Latin America that we were not study-

ing? The experience demonstrated on so many levels how what is taught has tremendous power to shape historical scholarship and our understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in. It also drove home the point that without materials to teach, entire populations would continue to be understudied, or possibly not studied at all, inadvertently rendering them invisible.

Almost a decade later, while working on my MFA in film and video and later on my doctoral dissertation focused on the history of African American women feature filmmakers, I found myself in a similar place. Once again I was trying to learn about a history in academia and discovering that it was not being taught there. While there were definitely texts in print about African American film in general, the book-length texts usually mentioned black women's involvement in cinema in front of the camera, not behind. In those pre-Internet days, I began to spend a lot of time in libraries searching through texts and journals and microfilm to find black women media makers. Slowly I began to find articles about African American women's media production, and I began to build a database of the filmmakers and their films.

In order to develop my research for this project I had to first find the work of black lesbian artists. To this end I became a board member of Women in the Director's Chair (WIDC) and served for over three years (1991–94). During that time the WIDC Film and Video Festival received between three hundred and six hundred submissions of new works by women annually. I also joined the film and video committee of the Chicago-based African American Women in the Arts (AAWA) Conference and served for three years (1991–93). At that time AAWA held the only African American women's film competition in the country and had received close to one hundred submissions. As an advisory board member (1992–93) and a volunteer (1995) for the Chicago International Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival, I found another excellent resource for uncovering black lesbian work.

Excited by what I was seeing, I began to independently curate programs for Chicago Filmmakers, a nonprofit media arts center. I also began to write articles on black women media makers for the *Independent* and on lesbian film and video for the *Windy City Times*, a Chicago-based gay and lesbian news weekly. All of these actions gave me "official" reasons to see most of the new work being made by black women filmmakers at the time and created opportunities for me to meet many of the media makers both in person and on the phone.

As a filmmaker I was able to meet my peers at conferences and festivals. The first organized panel of black gay and lesbian video artists I attended

convened at the Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference at Rutgers University in 1991. The lesbians on the panel included Michelle Parkerson, Cheryl Dunye, Dawn Suggs, and me. In attendance were Jacqueline Woodson and Jocelyn Taylor. "Sistah Said What?," a panel discussion among lesbian film and video makers of color, took place at the 1993 San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. The black lesbian panelists included Aarin Burch, Shari Frilot, Dawn Suggs, and me. The independent curator Margaret R. Daniel, founder of the Women of Color Film Festival, and the filmmaker H. Lenn Keller, both black lesbians, were also in attendance. Other festivals, conferences, and university gatherings brought us together. The largest gathering of black lesbian media artists met at the Black Nations/Queer Nations conference in New York in 1995.

Through these events we were all able to establish friendships and working relationships. As a result the black lesbian community of film and video artists became a tight-knit network between 1986 and 1995. We stayed in touch via letters, postcards, phone, fax, and email. I was able to explore the personal media archives of my new friends. We worked on each other's projects, read each other's scripts, screened each other's rough cuts, and sometimes even cried on each other's shoulders. My curiosity sent me on a journey that has now spanned over twenty years—a search for my sisters in cinema.[5]

What began as a simple database became three distinct and interconnected projects: a website, a feature documentary, and my doctoral dissertation. All three projects share the name *Sisters in Cinema*. In doing the work and through my new and growing friendships with my peers, I amassed what is perhaps one of the largest archives of African American women's media production in the country. Stored in boxes and on a wide range of digital storage devices, the archive includes over one hundred hours of videotaped interviews and transcripts; over one hundred films, videotapes, and DVDs directed by African American women; and over one hundred boxes of related artifacts that include correspondence, posters, photos, rough cuts, festival programs, box office reports, trailers, journal articles, buttons, T-shirts, and a wide range of other ephemera and memorabilia. The Sisters in the Life archive has become a fourth interconnected project and is one component of the larger Sisters in Cinema archive project.

According to the historian Mary Ritter Beard, "Without knowledge of women in history as actual history, dead women are sheer ghosts to living women and to men."[6] With her goal of including women in what is understood as history, Beard stressed the importance of the archive as a repository

of the documents that could do just that.[7] The Sisters in the Life archive gathers essays, video and print interviews, films and multimedia, posters, scripts, buttons, postcards—a treasure trove of proof of the existence of black lesbian media makers and our work—and organizes it in a range of accessible ways. In building the archive I have saved everything. And I have searched for more, filling box after box. I have worked with others to gather and to create primary and secondary sources. What I've learned on this journey that began in my class at Vassar is that without documents there is no history. And without a documented history it is as if some people don't exist—and that goes for both the living and the dead.

All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Invisible

According to the French historian Pierre Nora, we live in a time when it is imperative "to keep everything, to preserve every indicator of memory . . . to produce archives." He believes the responsibility of "remembering" has been delegated to the archive and "requires every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history."[8] This process makes "everyone his own historian" and privileges memory, which for Nora is already history. But what I learned in working on the archive project is that it doesn't matter what I think is important. I learned that my desire to produce any kind of archive, be it a website or a documentary or my doctoral dissertation, to remember our history is not enough alone to make sure that black women are included in cinema history—especially when we are socially, and as a result culturally, invisible.

In 2010 two researchers, Amanda Sesko and Monica Biernat, concluded that, based on their studies, black women were indeed socially invisible. The researchers did "not mean to suggest Black women literally go unnoticed and unheard, that their presence is undetectable. Rather, they are treated as interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other, and in this sense are less 'visible' compared to other groups." In addition they found that black women were not being correctly credited for their contributions. Rather their contributions were attributed to white women or black men. Why? They found that gender is usually associated with white women and race is usually associated with black men. Black women are left in between and therefore experience "a qualitatively different form of discrimination in which their non-prototypicality contributes to their not being recognized or correctly credited for their contributions."[9]

The researchers reference bell hooks's introduction to *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*: "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women." States hooks, "We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group 'women' in this culture. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women."[10] Parallels can be drawn in studies of women filmmakers focused on white women and African American filmmaking centered on black men.[11]

Sisters in the Life, the Book

I, like so many others, have chosen this moment in time to remember a period that began in the mid-1980s that has been termed New Queer Cinema. This period has been marked by the creation of a number of archival documents. In 2013 B. Ruby Rich marked the history of the term she coined with the publication of her book, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. The Winter 2014 issue of *Cinema Journal: The Journal of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies* looked at this recent history of queer cinema. And a number of films were released commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of ACT UP. The archival footage used extensively within the films was made possible, in part, by queer media makers documenting our lives with new media technologies that put the power of media production into the hands of ordinary people. While these are just a few examples of how New Queer Cinema has been recently archived, what is consistent is the demonstration of the power of the archive to privilege certain histories and marginalize others.

In the ACT UP films our activist history is remembered as largely white and male. In the publications the diversity emphasis has shifted to "global versus American and multicultural." While Rich does offer a short essay on Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and discusses the work of Dee Rees, Angela Robinson, and Michelle Parkerson, the space devoted to the works of black lesbian media makers totals only a few pages of the 322-page volume.

When studying New Queer Cinema, there is little indication that over thirty feature films and over two hundred shorts and multimedia works were directed by over one hundred out black lesbian media makers.[12] Given that there were only a handful of films directed by out black lesbians in the 1980s and the notable experiences of black lesbian media makers described at the beginning of this essay, it seemed appropriate to also look back at this period

with a focus on this work and to create a media archive project that attempts to document a phenomenon in media representation.

So, to begin to write black lesbian women into media history, why not begin with a book? And, remembering my experience at Vassar, an academic peer-reviewed anthology to boot. I enlisted the assistance of a number of scholars to write essays for the book and Alexandra Juhasz, a film scholar and media maker, to serve as my coeditor. I provided the scholars with a list of filmmakers and subjects to choose from, and they decided on the shape their essays would take. I provided a list of the 130-plus media titles in my database at the time and enlisted their assistance in further developing the list.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section covers the period from 1986 to 1995. The 1986 video *Women in Love: Bonding Strategies of Black Lesbians* by Sylvia Rhue is described by Jenni Olson, author of the *Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, as the first film by an out black lesbian about black lesbians.[13] The film was screened at the 1987 Los Angeles International Gay and Lesbian Film/Video Festival and marks the beginning of what this survey considers the history of out black lesbian media-making.[14] The works created during this time were experimental films, short narratives, documentaries, computer-generated media, and installation pieces. There were approximately twenty-five artists working during this period, together producing over seventy-five media productions. In this section the focus is on five of the twenty-five artists.

The second period covers from 1996 to 2016. The division is marked by the theatrical release of the first feature film directed by an out African American lesbian, Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*. A feature film is a dramatic narrative that is about seventy minutes or longer. Through a combination of theatrical and ancillary distribution, feature films generally tend to reach a larger audience than short films and documentaries. The marketing and publicity generated by the theatrical release of a feature film often bring the director into the public spotlight, creating name recognition and situating the film and filmmaker within popular culture. The first narrative feature with a theatrical release marked a new phase in out black lesbian media-making, creating the possibility for our work to reach a national and international stage.

Sisters in the Life is the first book of its kind to offer a comprehensive overview of an understudied history of out black lesbian media-making. To be clear, there are a few books that reference some of the makers included in this volume.[15] Media makers such as Dunye and I have chapters dedicated to our

work in a few texts. Other filmmakers, such as Rees, Shine Louise Houston, Robinson, and Tina Mabry, are sometimes mentioned in collective thematic paragraphs or have small sections dedicated to them in overviews. Most of the media makers included in this book have been the subject of essays and journal articles.

History Is Not Absolute Truth

"Archives—as records—wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups and societies."[16] It is the archive that solidifies our history and determines in our present what will be known about our past. Who decides what to record, preserve, and, as a consequence, privilege? While historically marginalized or minority groups may desire an archive, it is ultimately the archivists, those who control the archive, who determine what will be considered worthy of preservation.

In 1996 queer media makers Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet and Thomas Allen Harris created an archive project called "Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora."[17] The dialogue was published in *XII Black International Cinema Anthology* in Berlin in 1997 and provides a rich history of a community of media makers who were also curators and writers and collaborators. The project asks the contributors to remember a history that was still undocumented within queer cinema history and African diaspora film history. For Ferrera-Balanquet, documenting our own history played an important role in filling the gaps. "I have seen how 'queer cinema' has become so commercialized, and also how the white queer media makers have capitalized the audience and watered down the real issues affecting us. The two books about queer cinema don't say anything about our works, our critical writings, our friendships and all the history we have gone through together." The media maker Jocelyn Taylor says, "History is not absolute truth, it's merely a documentation of selective memories and events. Even straightforward testimony has gaps and is misleading and irresponsible at times in relationship to truth." So this current telling of our history is in line with Taylor's concerns. It is selective at best and offers a particular perspective.

In "Narrating Our History," the only curation was the initial set of questions asked. Each media maker was able to respond without any editing, mediation, or censoring. In *Sisters in the Life*, with the exception of two selections from my own interviews with filmmakers, the media makers are written about

by film scholars. In some cases the writers interviewed the filmmakers, but for the most part the reader will have little access to the primary data the filmmakers provided the writer for her essay. To lessen this "power over the documentary record, and by extension over the collective memory" of this underrepresented group of media makers "and indeed over their representation and integration into the metanarratives of history," the SITL archive project extends beyond this book of scholarly essays.[18]

With the Sisters in the Life archive project, the revitalization of our history is fraught with challenges I did not foresee. The fact that I am asking some media makers to recall what happened decades ago is problematic. In some cases the media makers simply don't remember the details. Questions about where their film screened or how it was received are documented more easily with festival catalogues and film reviews. In some cases the filmmakers were not involved with the distribution of their films, and the results of my research were sometimes news to them. The most surprising outcome was the number of women who did not understand why I would want to interview them or include them in the archive project. They did not see the value of their contributions to our collective history. For Nora the responsibility of remembering has been delegated to the archive: "The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs. . . . Even as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal of history."[19] If this is indeed the case, I want to have my hand, and my community's, in the archive's construction and dissemination.

In Jamika Ajalon's 1997 short experimental film *Memory Tracks*, a young woman chases a past represented by a 1960s woman activist who comes to her "as a reflection." As she quickly moves through city streets to a rhythmic beat ("Where the revolution at? Where the revolution at?"), she spots her reflection looking at her through the lens of a Super-8 film camera. They both run. But instead of catching the revolutionary, she finds the camera. When the young woman looks through the camera lens she is able to travel down "memory tracks" and connect with her revolutionary past. The film ends with the two doing a sort of mirror dance, facing each other, slowly following each other's moves. Then they both turn and stare directly at us, breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging our presence as spectators. In

Intro.1 *Memory Tracks*, directed by Jamika Ajalon, 1997.

that moment they see us, and we, no longer enmeshed in the fiction, see them. In that moment they are not invisible. In that moment it is clear "where the revolution at."

Notes

1 "Film Company Expanding," *Billboard*, January 28, 1922, 104.

2 Experien Simmons, "The 2012 LGBT Report: Demographic Spotlight," accessed August 24, 2017, http://www.experian.com/assets/simmons-research/white-papers/simmons-2012-lgbt-demographic-report.pdf.

3 DuVernay's 2018 release, *A Wrinkle in Time*, budgeted at $100 million, is now the largest budgeted film directed by an African American woman.

4 In the 1986 black gay anthology *In the Life*, the editor, Joseph Beam, defines *in the life* as a term that describes "the gay life." I am using this phrase in this essay with the term *sisters* to describe African American homosexual, lesbian, queer, bisexual, same-gender-loving women. While many of the women self-identified as lesbians and out at the time their work was created and originally distributed, today some artists no longer identify themselves with any of these terms.

The Sisters in the Life archive project has received support from two Mellon Fellowships: the Future of Minority Studies Postdoctoral Mentoring Fellowship, under the guidance of William A. "Sandy" Darity Jr. at Duke University, and the Humanities Writ Large Visiting Faculty Fellowship at Duke University. In addition, support was provided by Bennett College for Women. The project requires additional funding and support to be fully realized.

5 For an overview of the research process and methodology, see the introduction in Yvonne Welbon, "Sisters in Cinema: Case Studies of Three First-Time Achieve-

ments Made by African American Women Feature Film Directors in the 1990s," PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2001.

6 Mary Ritter Beard, "The Historical Approach to Learning about Women," speech given at Radcliffe College, May 22, 1944, Mary Ritter Beard Papers, A-9, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

7 Anke Voss-Hubbard, "'No Document—No History': Mary Ritter Beard and the Early History of Women's Archives," *American Archivist* 58.1 (1995): 16–30.

8 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire [1984]," *Representations* 26 (1989): 14–15. The title of this section is a reference to the collection of essays edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, CT: Feminist Press, 1981), which calls for an inclusion of black women in both women's studies and black studies.

9 A. K. Sesko and M. Biernat, "Prototypes of Race and Gender: The Invisibility of Black Women," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010): 360.

10 Sesko and Biernat, "Prototypes of Race and Gender," 360.

11 Examples include, but are not limited to, Mary G. Hurd, *Women Directors and Their Films* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017); Jan Lisa Huttner, *Penny's Picks: 50 Movies by Women Filmmakers 2002–2011* (New York: FF2 Media, 2011); Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wexman, eds., *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); James Quinn, *This Much Is True: 14 Directors on Documentary Filmmaking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Jeremy Geltzer, *A Separate Cinema: 50 Years of Independent African American Filmmaking* (Burbank, CA: The Hollywood Press, 2014).

12 Works produced as part of the San Francisco–based Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP) are not included in these figures. While there are an additional seventy-five titles that were produced through the workshops by over eighty-five black lesbian media makers between 2006 and 2013, only the films produced as part of QWOCMAP that have been programmed and screened outside of QWOCMAP festivals have been included in these figures.

13 Jenni Olson, personal interview, June 29, 2009.

14 The 1973 student Academy Award–winning short, *Sojourn* by Michelle Parkerson (and Jimi Lyons), is thought to be the first film directed by an out black lesbian filmmaker. In the 1980s Parkerson directed . . . *But Then, She's Betty Carter* (1980) and produced *Gotta Make This Journey* (1983), about the a cappella women's group Sweet Honey and the Rock. In her early films Parkerson did not focus her lens specifically on black lesbians.

15 These titles include JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones, eds., *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010); Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (Visible Evidence; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005);

Michele Aaron, ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Visible Evidence; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Alison Darren, *Lesbian Film Guide* (Sexual Politics; London: Cassell, 2000); Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler, eds., *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Judith M. Redding and Victoria A. Brownworth, *Film Fatales: Independent Women Directors* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1997); Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997); Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, eds., *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary* (Visible Evidence; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jacqueline Bobo, ed., *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (AFI Film Readers; New York: Routledge, 1998).

16 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 2.

17 Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet et al., "Narrating Our History: A Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora," in *XII Black International Cinema Anthology* (Berlin, 1997).

18 Schwartz and Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power," 17.

19 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 13–14.