

Welbon, Yvonne, and Alexandra Juhasz, editors. *Sisters in the Life. A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*. Duke University Press, 2018. 276 Pages.

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In *Sisters in the Life. A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*, editors Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz have compiled a thorough collection of critical thought on US out Black lesbian media-making. Despite its value, this field of knowledge and creativity has been largely unheeded by mainstream cinema historians and cultural critics, a lacuna that the impressive contributions of this collection address. Through a wide variety of essays, interviews, and conversations, *Sisters in the Life* gives a broad insight into African American lesbian cinema and video making from its emergence in 1986, beginning with Sylvia Rhue's video *Women in Love: Bonding Strategies of Black Lesbians* "as the first film by an out black lesbian about black lesbians" (16) and moving on to current training projects like Queer Women of Color Media Arts as one example of "the robust future of Black lesbian filmmaking as a transformative community-building practice" (249).

By bringing to the forefront the disruptive voices and ground-breaking gazes of this unacknowledged "tightly knit" (ix) community of Black lesbian filmmakers, this unprecedented anthology firmly contributes to raising awareness of a cinematic movement that changed, and still keeps on transforming, the course of film history. From the exquisite preface to inspiring interviews and accurate essays, this noteworthy collection offers exhaustive approaches to US Black lesbian media-making, its contexts, networks, main artists and works, also underscoring their further influence and advancing critical views on Black lesbian legacies and queer film futures. Divided into two well-differentiated parts, the volume embodies an open invitation to both the general public that have missed out on a relevant side of American film history and a more versed audience eager to gain access to materials that were originally delivered in a difficult-to-access format, like Thomas Allen Harris and Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet's "Narrating Our History," a comprehensive dialogue among LGBT media-makers.

The collection opens with a preface by co-editor Alexandra Juhasz that foretells the circular structure of the volume. Juhasz's prologue begins with scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs's words on Black lesbian filmmaking as a "tangible practice for representing and creating the world" (251), a quotation from Gumbs's chapter "Creating the World Anew: Black Lesbian Legacies and Queer Film Futures", which closes the compilation. With this forceful statement of intent, Juhasz foretells what the reader is about to plunge into: a rhizomatic collection of directions and connections that seek public recognition of an understudied group of artists committed to "nonlinear or non-traditional arrangements for time and place, media and human connection" (ix), a community of creators, distributors, producers and curators characterized by "care, protest and possibility" (ix). The general introduction that follows, written by co-editor Yvonne Welbon, is also revealing. In "Sisters in the Life Archive Project", Welbon offers a further explanation about the transmedia project that she leads called *Sisters in Cinema* "that seeks to promote all African American women media makers" (2). This larger archival project includes a documentary film, a website, a media archive, as well as the book reviewed here.

Part I of the collection covers the period 1986–1995, framing the first years of out African American lesbian media-making from its earliest contacts to the year of production of the valuable film documentary *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1995) by Michelle Parkerson and Ada Gay Griffin. This "seed of a trend toward full-length documentary and dramatic productions concerning black lesbian life and history" (25) honours the celebrated Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde while fostering cooperation and kinship among "a large community of lesbians of colour filmmakers" (37). The first three chapters are reprints of earlier inspiring publications and are preceded by a comprehensive introductory section written by Yvonne Welbon that contextualizes this period. "Birth of a Notion: Toward Black, Gay and Lesbian Imagery in Film and Video" was originally printed in *The Advocate* 570 in 1991. Written by pioneering filmmaker Michelle Parkerson, the essay promotes "using media to reverse decades of misrepresentation, replacing negative myths with whole and humane depictions" (21). By introducing the names of a younger generation of lesbian and gay

filmmakers whose short films managed to reach “the screen in the face of tremendous odds” (25), Parkerson highlights the importance of making films “that are lesbian-specific but, just as important, race-conscious” (25) as a powerful way to extend the manifold experiences and broad imagery of the LGBT community “beyond the celluloid closet” (25). Chapter 2 by Thomas Allen Harris further contextualises the collaborative process that favoured one of the first recorded creative dialogues among queer media artists from the African diaspora. Transcribed in chapter 3, Thomas Allen Harris and Raúl Ferrera-Balanquet’s “Narrating our History” is a reprinted version of a collection of thoughts and remembrances shared in the early 1990’s by a group of ground-breaking queer filmmakers such as Jocelyn Taylor, Yvonne Welbon, Dawn Suggs, and Shari Frilot, whose career paths are substantially analysed through various chapters in this collection. This unusual conversation, built in a reflective tone, offers a glimpse of the birth of Black queer media-making and was originally published in Germany in 1997 as part of the *XII Black International Cinema Anthology 1993-1997*.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 consider creator Pamela Jennings and her devotion to experimental computational media as a mechanism to entangle art and knowledge with living beings and technology. Readers plunge into Jennings’s multi-dimensional world through “Construction of Computation and Desire,” an introductory essay by scholar Kara Keeling that guarantees a solid base on which to build further knowledge about this unconventional Black lesbian artist. Making use of specific terminology that draws attention to Jennings’s scientifically experimental spirit, Keeling’s introduction invites the reader to enter a realm of multimedia creativity and speculation, delving into the “low-tech pixel vision”, “kinetic sculptures” and “new technocultural formations” as formulations that are part of a volume where the contributors may “complicate received notions of that body of work by creating new concepts through it” (49). Chapter 5, “Ruins and Desire,” offers an in-depth consideration of Pamela Jennings’s career through a personal interview with the artist led by Yvonne Welbon, who opts to edit the conversation and omit her questions, thus resulting in a fluidity that accompanies the artist when narrating her career path. Conclusively, Chapter 6 submits a third angle on this experimental artist since Jennings’s herself offers

unpublished documentation on the creative process of her interactive mechatronic sculpture *the book of ruins and desire* (1996). This multimedia work goes beyond the screen-based projects and explores the interactive book in the form of sculpture as a medium to challenge the constructed categories of blackness, gender and sexuality since they are “caught within the transformations wrought by computational interactivity” (48).

Rounding out Part I, Chapters 7 and 8 are noteworthy contributions on two outstanding figures in Black lesbian filmmaking. In “A Cosmic Demonstration of Shari Frilot’s Curatorial Practice,” Roya Rastegar presents an overview of Shari Frilot, early curator and experimental filmmaker, who has proved to be a key piece within the network of queer artists of colour. Besides analysing her experimental creativity in *Cosmic Demonstration of Sexuality* (1992), Rastegar’s essay places her focus on Shari Frilot as a disruptive film festival curator committed to programming rooms that foreground queerness and experimentation in works by filmmakers of colour, making them accessible to broader audiences and “demonstrating the value of diversity” (82) and “refiguring racial, sexual, and gendered subjectivities beyond fixed categories of identity” (86). To conclude Part I, Devorah Heitner’s essay on Yvonne Welbon’s film *Remembering Wei-Yi Fang, Remembering Myself: An Autobiography* (1995) explores how this thirty-minute performative documentary, which blends 16mm, Super-8 and video footage, is constructed as an alternative narrative that draws the audience’s attention to American discourses of racism and homophobia. In “Identity and Performance,” Heitner analyses Welbon’s film as a self-reflexive tool that presents “conceptions about the meanings and possibilities of Black histories that transcend nationality” (94), a cinematic piece fully concerned “with race, the challenge of hybridity, and straddling multiple identities” (104).

Part II offers an insight into the years 1995–2016, also preceded by a contextual introduction where co-editor Yvonne Welbon foretells significant differences in the processes of production, creation and distribution about a period when “black lesbian media-makers began to reach larger audiences” (115). Chapter 9, “Producing Black Lesbian Media,” opens a large window to those spaces behind the scenes that are inhabited by African American lesbian producers, filmmakers,

exhibitors and distributors who work untiringly to support media creation through both mainstream and alternative channels. Tina Mabry, Cheryl Dunye, Effie T. Brown, Debra Wilson and Angela Robinson are among the Black lesbian media innovators connected by “a sense of shared responsibility for the identity representations” (141) whose varied works, challenges, and achievements are the primary issues in following chapters.

Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) is at the centre of Karin D. Wimbley’s essay in Chapter 10. Profoundly engaged with unmasking the Mammy stereotype, filmmaker Cheryl Dunye manages to subvert this monolithic vision of black women’s identity “to produce a fertile site where African American womanhood can be recovered, (re)constructed, and (re)interrogated” (144). Wimbley points to the exquisite parody and masterful use of hybrid aesthetics that characterise *The Watermelon Woman*, where the “mockumentary frame creates and archives the construction of black lesbian subjectivity” (147).

Referred to as “urban lesbian filmmaker,” Coquie Hughes has the leading role in Chapters 11 and 12. As a stunning introduction to Yvonne Welbon’s conversation with the filmmaker, Jennifer Devere Brody’s essay points out the cinematic genius of Hughes as well as her “entrepreneurial spirit and passion for filmmaking” (161). As a continuation on Coquie Hughe’s journey into becoming an impressive filmmaker, “Stepping Out of Faith” gives space for Coqui Hughes’s own words to flow and draw the many lines that compose her splendid artistic trajectory. Thus, Chapter 12 brings the reader closer to an amazing human being full of passions and anxieties, a media creator that invites other Black lesbian filmmakers to tell their own stories “regardless of the funding or regardless of what the powers that be say what constitutes your film being a legitimate film” (174).

Standing at the threshold of Hollywood, film writer, director and TV producer Angela Robinson is the next African American lesbian artist to be outlined in Chapter 13, “Invite Me In!” As an executive and consulting producer for HBO, Robinson is “one of the still-small number of African American women to direct a studio feature” (177) with *D.E.B.S* (2004), financed by Screen Gems (a division of Sony Pictures Motion Picture Group), and *Herbie: Fully loaded* (2005), her

first contract with Walt Disney Pictures. This essay by Patricia White invites readers to follow Robinson's cinematic career to date as a "strong example of tapping into the power of the culture industry" (177).

Last, but not least, three fascinating careers full of different strategies of resistance and empowerment are revealed in Chapters 14, 15 and 16. "Shine Louise Houston: An Interstice of Her Own Making" is the title of L.H. Stallings's essay on director and producer Shine Louise Houston, whose work has been popularly tagged as "revolutionary lesbian porn" (192). As Stallings brilliantly shows, Houston's films explore many questions that early Black lesbian filmmaking left aside, such as the "representations of interracial desire and intimacy, black butch and trans expressions" (192). By analysing Houston's porn mockumentary *In Search of the Wild Kingdom* (2007), Stallings reveals the filmmaker's strategies to "dismantle legitimate genres of filmmaking that represent sex on screen, specifically lesbian sex on screen, as well as other discursive mechanisms that produce sexual myths and misrepresentation" (197). In Chapter 15, scholar Marlon Rachqel Moore examines Tina Mabry's feature film *Mississippi Damned* (2012) from a comparative perspective, as a cinematic response from rage to resignation to the civil rights anthem *Mississippi Goddam* (1964) by Nina Simone. While the latter has been analysed as a representative song for African American self-determination and social justice, Mabry's film is seen as "a message from the movement's beneficiaries that overwhelmingly conveys disappointment and frustration with promises unfulfilled" (213). Finally, Dee Rees's feature-length film *Pariah* (2012) about a black lesbian teenager coming into her own is the focus of Chapter 16, "The Circuitous Route of Presenting Black Butch," by Jennifer DeClue. Originally conceived as a short film released in 2007, *Pariah's* full-length version offers an insight into the protagonist's first lesbian encounter with a schoolmate and her tense relationship with her conservative mother, showing the impact of both religion and homophobia on her family. "The culture of dissemblance and the politics of silence" (234) are pivotal concepts analysed in DeClue's essay, considering *Pariah* as "the cinematic journey of a black lesbian teenager who embraces herself without mollifying her contradictions or apologising for her sexuality" (242).

Finally, Chapter 17, “Creating a World Anew: Black Lesbian Legacies and Queer Film Futures,” works as the closure for both Part II and the entire volume. As a way to encourage Black lesbian creative spirits to continue on with the productive legacies of their predecessors presented so far, Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s essay offers an overview of current training programs as artistic promoters of Black lesbian and queer filmmaking “as a holistically transformative experience” (256).

In *Sisters in the Life* the editors and contributors have overwhelmingly proved that African American lesbian media-makers have taken up a range of resources to tell their own stories of self-determination thus creating a volume that undoubtedly marks a substantial insight into the history of these compelling artists. An invaluable resource for academics and *herstorians* alike, *Sisters in the Life* offers an in-depth look at some of the most influential US Black lesbian media-makers of recent decades. As the authors of the volume demonstrate, the women considered here go beyond mere representation, engaging with parody, technological empowerment, a variety of film genres and industry discourses, to dismantle fake dichotomies and create cinematic gazes of resistance, and show the diversity of voices and practices that make up the community of out African American lesbian filmmakers.

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