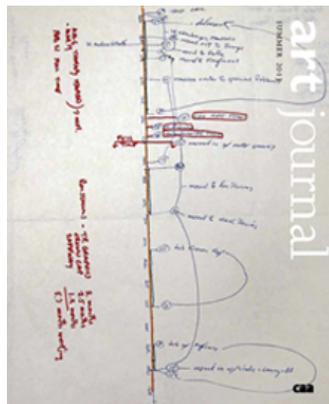


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Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue

Julia Bryan-Wilson & Cheryl Dunye

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Zoe Leonard, details of *The Fae Richards*

Photo Archive, 1993–96, gelatin silver prints and chromogenic prints, (left) sheet $4\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{16}$ in. (11.4 x 6.8 cm); (right) sheet $7\frac{3}{16} \times 4\frac{7}{8}$ in. (18.6 x 12.6 cm), created for Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman*, 1996. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee and the Photography Committee 97.51adddd (artwork © Zoe Leonard; digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art, NY)

As there are many kinds of queer histories, so too are there many types of queer archives: banal ones, tender ones, bureaucratic ones. But perhaps the queerest things about archives are their silences—their telling blanks and perversely willful holes. The filmmaker Cheryl Dunye has consistently explored the affective potency that lies within historical records—and the gaps in those records—to explore how fictional archives might be necessary for queer lives in the present as well as for imagined futures.

Since the early 1990s, when she released short videos such as *Janine* (1990) and *She Don't*

Julia Bryan-Wilson and Cheryl Dunye

Imaginary Archives: A Dialogue

Fade (1991), Dunye has both mined documents in libraries and created stories to portray the complex lives of African American lesbians. Her feature-length narratives and experimental documentaries—she calls them “dunye-mentaries”—have been widely influential, as she has bent the conventional rules of genre to forge her own singular style.

—Julia Bryan-Wilson

Julia Bryan-Wilson: You've been at the forefront of thinking about queer archives since you premiered your feature-length movie *The Watermelon Woman* in 1996. The narrative revolves around a search for a 1930s black lesbian film star named Fae Richards, and includes photographs, taken by Zoe Leonard, that stage photographs from Richards's life and appear to be actual historical documents, including everything from her promotional headshots to casual snapshots of her with friends, family, and lovers.¹ Leonard's images are poignant re-creations of a life we have scant evidence of. How did you come to the idea of an imaginary archive, that is, decide on the necessity of invented pasts?

Cheryl Dunye: The idea to create an imaginary archive for *The Watermelon Woman* was part necessity and part invention. After completing the script, I began to search for archival material to use in the film at the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. While the Lesbian Herstory Archive was filled with juicy material from African American lesbian life, including the Ira Jeffries archive (she appears in the film), it had no material on African American women in Hollywood. The Library of Congress, on the other hand, had some material from African American women in Hollywood, but none on African American lesbians. And as those resources were beyond my budget at the time, I decided to stage and construct the specific photos that I needed for the film, and did that in collaboration with Zoe. The creation of the seventy-eight prints also allowed us to fundraise prior to the production in a limited-edition show/sale at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York City.

Bryan-Wilson: Since then, the *Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993–96, has also entered history in an institutional sense; Zoe's series has been acquired by the Whitney Museum of America Art. How do these images look to you at this point, with some distance? Now, some fifteen years later, they have come to constitute a quite palpable archive of your life at that moment, and include figures like friends and lovers close to you then. The fictional patina they had in relation to the film has been overlaid with different, lived history—your own. How have these photos aged in your mind—how do they continue to shift meanings for you?

Dunye: The photos have definitely become part of my personal archive. Many were restaged from family photos. One of them features my mother, who passed away in 2004. I like how my creative projects are inspired by and overlap with my

This dialogue was conducted as a series of e-mails and phone calls during winter and spring 2013. It is a follow-up to a live discussion held as part of the panel “Conversations on Affect and Archives,” chaired by Tirza True Latimer and Virginia Solomon, at the 2012 College Art Association annual conference, Los Angeles.

1. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* consists of seventy-eight gelatin silver prints, four chromogenic prints, and a notebook containing seven pages of typescript.



Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993–96, gelatin silver prints and chromogenic prints, partial installation view, 1997 *Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee and the Photography Committee 97.51adddd (artwork © Zoe Leonard; digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art)

personal life. This is what the “dunyementary” is all about. It is a mixture of the truth and fictions in my life and how they coexist.

Bryan-Wilson: Your research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives was in some ways about recognizing a lacuna or rift in the archive around African American women. You turned to a different kind of excavation of historical records in a subsequent project, the movie *Stranger Inside*, from 2001, which was based on four years of research into the history of women and imprisonment in the United States. Here you turned to “actual” archives to inflect your storytelling. Photographs of prisoners have been at the forefront of many theoretical understandings of the disciplinary force of image-making, as in Allan Sekula’s now-classic article “The Body and the Archive.”² What was the process of excavating these records like for you, and did it change your notion of the possibilities of fiction as a kind of political strategy?

Dunye: The making of *Stranger Inside* changed my understanding of narrativity and archive. For this project, my fictive story had to line up with the real experience and lives of women inmates. But instead of starting my research in a visual archive, I delved into a variety of textual material including statistical data on women in prison and biographical and autobiographical documents on their lives. Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, proved most

2. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.



Catherine Opie, *Mugshot #1 (Stranger Inside)*, 2001, Polaroid, 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (6 x 6 cm)
(artwork © Catherine Opie; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

important to me. It revealed the intertwined layers of longing, secrets, and pride inherent in a mother-daughter relationship, which I use in my movie.

Bryan-Wilson: How do you negotiate turning text and data like statistics into narrative, into story?

Dunye: It takes about a year of research for me to get to the heart of a real text or event. I find that hardcore research at libraries and archives mixed with a whole lot of pontification about my topic or subject generally creates a solid groundwork to develop a narrative-fiction.

Bryan-Wilson: You frequently collaborate with others—Zoe Leonard, whom we just mentioned, but also Catherine Opie, who took mug shots of people involved in the production of *Stranger Inside*. You had a residency at the Walker Art Center while you were developing the screenplay; this residency was documented in a video in which Opie's shots were interspersed with mug shots from the Minnesota State Archives of women's prisoners. How did you envision this forceful interpenetration of the past and the present? What resonances were you hoping would emerge with this juxtaposition?

Dunye: The Walker residency that led up to the production was a process of research, as well as a series of workshops with women inmates in the area that



Still from *The OWLS*, dir. Cheryl Dunye, 2010, written by Sarah Schulman, color digital video, 75 min. (video still © Cheryl Dunye/Parliament Production)

helped me envision the characters in *Stranger Inside*. It was also, then, a collaboration with the women inmates of that community. My goal in mixing past and present photos was to promote a collective image of incarcerated women. Instead of identifying with individual characters I wanted viewers to identify with the oppressive social circumstance of all women, past, present, and future. Because of various pressures I faced from HBO, which produced the film, Opie's mug shots appear only briefly in *Stranger Inside*; this is an example of the ongoing friction between art and commerce.

Bryan-Wilson: In a more recent movie, *The OWLS* (which stands for “older wiser lesbians”), you have said that you were in part driven to make it out of your irritation with the negative portrayal of lesbian characters. How was *The OWLS* an attempt to create a counter-archive?

Dunye: At the end of the day, *The OWLS*, for me, was a catch-22 in a way. Sometimes you get what you fought for politically and creatively in making your mark on lesbian cinema, as I did with *The Watermelon Woman*, and then it leaves you buried under the lesbian culture that you helped create.

Bryan-Wilson: The theorist Sarah Ahmed, in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, defines affect as “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connections between ideas, values, and objects.”³ For instance, she describes the affect of happiness as “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and what I call ‘the drama of contingency,’ how we are touched by what comes near.”⁴ Another way to put this is that if emotion is internal or individual, affect

3. Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 230.

4. *Ibid.*, 22.



Still from *Mommy Is Coming*, dir. Cheryl Dunye, 2012, written by Sarah Schulman and Cheryl Dunye, color digital video, 75 min. (photograph © Emilie Jouvett/Mommy Is Coming Productions)

has a different, more relational structure, and is about collective energies and how they touch things. How do you think affect works in terms of independent video and film production? Can you comment on this in terms of the collaborative process you utilize in making *The OWLS*, for instance?

Dunye: As a filmmaker I felt the best way to express this was to gather up the important faces in lesbian film, past and present, form a collective, and create a “dunyementary” about it.

Bryan-Wilson: A lot of your recent work has been based on pleasure, including your porn movie *Mommy Is Coming*, which premiered in 2012. Much work within queer studies on affect has focused on negativity, shame, regret, difficulty, depression, grief, mourning, loss, failure—I’m thinking here of Heather Love, J. Jack Halberstam, and Ann Cvetkovich.⁵ At the same time, José Esteban Muñoz writes about hope and utopia to speculate about the role of performance in manifesting queer futures;⁶ I’m interested in how there are many queer affects, not just one, just as there are many queer archives. These things always need to be seen as multiple. Could you speak to how *Mommy Is Coming* is a queer restaging of several genres, including bedroom farces?

Dunye: *Mommy Is Coming* is my homage to all things possible and I guess all things queer. It began as a dare by the infamous Annie Sprinkle, who challenged me to bring adult movie consumption off-line and back into theaters. But somehow this got mixed in with my lust for creating some over-the-top comedic romp like the one in my all-time favorite Barbra Streisand/Ryan O’Neal film, *What’s Up, Doc?* Far

5. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).



Production still, making a Fae Richards movie, *The Watermelon Woman*, 1996, written and dir. Cheryl Dunye, 16mm color film, 90 min. (still © Watermelon Woman Productions)

from any restaging, *Mommy Is Coming* fabulates on queers of color, sex, desire, and humor.

Bryan-Wilson: Have you been surprised at the reception of *Mommy Is Coming*? You commented to me once that your films had sort of fallen out of the scope of the art world, but with this latest work, suddenly you're hailed as an "artist" again. Do these labels have any meaning for you?

Dunye: Labels in the film-art world send signals to audiences and critics that the maker has somehow been deemed worthy of commercial success and visibility. But if that artist continues to create work that challenges commercial sensibilities or challenges what is normative in story or content they generally end up broke. So yes, labels mean a lot.

Bryan-Wilson: Recently, *The Watermelon Woman* has been chosen for the Outfest Legacy Project at UCLA to restore and preserve queer cinema, in recognition that much of this film and video history has suffered neglect or has been lost due to deterioration. Film and video can be so fragile, so comparatively obsolescent, so

easily damaged. This preservation will ensure that scholars well into the future can continue to study it; this interview, too, will join an ever-expanding pool of material generated out of and around your work. This brings up questions of how we are all in the process of entering archives and how that archiving might be fraught with complications both ideological and practical. How do we document ourselves in ways that feel affectively charged, in order to keep the potency alive?

Dunye: As an artist who continually muses on Audre Lorde's much-cited statement, "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house," I am constantly engaged in filmmaking as a political and social justice practice which purposefully complicates and blurs categories and boundaries. I encourage others to push these boundaries in their creative practices. Only then will archives reflect a bit of truthfulness in their content.

Julia Bryan-Wilson is associate professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (University of California Press, 2009) and editor of *October Files: Robert Morris* (MIT Press, 2013). A widely published critic and art historian, she has written on queer and feminist subjects such as the Cockettes, Harmony Hammond, and Sharon Hayes. Her article "Invisible Products" received the 2013 *Art Journal* Award.

Cheryl Dunye is a director, screenwriter, and filmmaker whose work in the media arts has received national and international honors, including the Teddy Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival and Best Feature at LA's Outfest. Dunye has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Frameline, and she was the recipient of an Anonymous was a Woman Award. She is currently an associate professor at the California College of the Arts.