

QUEER BLACK WOMEN IN FILM: ALTERNATIVE HISTORICAL FORMATIONS

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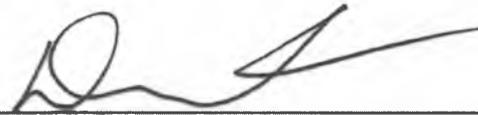
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Queer Black Women in Film: Alternative Historical Formations* by Lexus Treasure Killingsworth, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



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A queer black female presence in cinema is a recent phenomenon in the United States. I employ a historical and film analysis of how anti-black racism in the U.S. and social movements have shaped the formation of queer black women's cinema. Through an understanding of queer black female-centered cinema's history, this thesis explores representations of intimacy between queer black women in the films *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* through the frameworks of black feminist theory and quare theory. My research questions are 1) How has queer black female-centered cinema confronted white supremacist stereotypes about black women? How have these films directed by and featuring queer black women countered heterosexist and racist constructions of U.S. history that deny the presence of queer black women? Because I employ quare and feminist methods that foreground the relationship between theory and praxis, I have also curated an online exhibition that showcases queer black female-centered cinema from 1985-2005 as well as queer black female directors through these years. The online exhibition is located at www.queerblackwomenincinema.com.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

05/27/2016
Date

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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“...Black women are inherently valuable...”

-Combahee River Collective, 1979

The simple, yet immeasurably powerful words above not only inform the basis of this project, but also inform all that I wish to accomplish in my life. Indeed, the quote might garner an “of course black women are valuable.” But as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1979) further states, American society makes it very clear that black women are not valued. The Combahee River Collective was an organization of black, lesbian feminists who articulated the multiple interlocking oppressions that black women face and fought for a more inclusive and radical politics (Combahee River Collective, 1979; Gumbs, 2014). “Whether they cite the Combahee River Collective or not, contemporary discussions of intersectionality draw from the visionary audacity of the women of the Combahee River Collective to imagine that they could play a role in ending all the systems of oppression that affected them and everyone else,” (Gumbs, 2014). In this project, I chose to highlight one of those contemporary discussions on intersectionality: representations of queer African American women in film. According to Stuart Hall (1997), a seminal scholar in cultural studies, representation is an active process in which presented images should be interrogated, and not taken for face value. Mainstream visual representations of black women include “mammy, jezebel, matriarch, and welfare queen,” to name a few (Griffin, 2014). These mainstream visual representations of black women are derived from white supremacist ideology and have been situated in the “American mindset” for hundreds of years. Visual stereotypes of black women such as “mammy, jezebel, matriarch, and welfare queen” strip women of their autonomy and complexity by consistently using singular, negative narratives in representations.

For instance, the jezebel trope, meaning someone who is sexually promiscuous, has been used to provide a narrative of black women that relegates them as having a deviant sexuality--someone who will and wants to sleep with any man given the opportunity (West, 1995; Jewel, 1993). In a tangible sense, this trope has been used as a means of defending rape and other forms of sexual violence against black women. In the South, where slavery was prominent, black women were raped an abominable amount of times. Indeed, as Estelle B. Freedman (2011) describes, ““...no Southern white male was convicted of raping or attempting to rape a black woman” between Emancipation and the 1960s...” Even in 2016, this is an issue. Black women are less likely to be believed if they report a rape (Freedman, 2011). This trope is also harmful in that it reproduces a politics of respectability. For black women who self-identify as enjoying a lot of sex, they are labeled as whores for exploring and enjoying their sexuality. In addition to being situated in a white supremacist gaze, these representations are also situated in a heterosexist, patriarchal gaze (hooks, 1992; Griffin, 2014; Gumbs, 2014; Combahee River Collective, 1979). In doing so, they inherently dismiss black queer sexualities. As access to films continually increases, such as through the internet, interrogating and deconstructing harmful images is imperative.

One way in which these harmful stereotypes are being deconstructed is through queer black female-centered cinema. According to current scholarship in Cinema and Media Studies, this recent phenomenon in cinematic history in the United States (Juhasz, 2001) is characterized by its ability to refute negative stereotypes represented in mainstream visual representations of black women as well as create more inclusive archives of black history. Queer black female-

centered cinema is characterized by media *featuring* queer black women as well as media made by queer black women (Richardson, 2005).

Extending current Cinema and Media Studies scholarship, I analyze and compare scenes that present an intimate relationship between two black women in the films *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) through the frameworks of Black Feminist Thought and Queer Theory in order to interrogate the image presented. I do so to expose the white supremacist gaze located even in radical politics. I explore how these images are affected by not only race, but the sexuality of their producers as well. I also consider whether *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) should even be labeled as seminal queer black female-centered films. I see this project, then, as a form of activism, and my goals for it as political. My goal is to continue writing an alternative black history by adding the cinematic stories of queer black women and refuting mainstream ideology about black women by deconstructing stereotypical images and exploring alternative narratives for black women. Therefore, in addition to this work, I have curated an online exhibition that lists queer black female-centered cinema from 1985-2005 as well as queer black female directors through these years. I chose 1985-2005 because of the amount of queer black work produced during this time. In a roundtable discussion, Yvonne Welton, (2015) a prominent black lesbian filmmaker and scholar states, "There were only a handful of films directed by out black lesbians in the 1980s. From 1991 to 1996, the number of films, videos, and interactive media created by out black lesbians increased to about 70 works. There were four artists working in the 1980s and about twenty-five artists working in the early 1990s. I consider that five-year period (1991–96) the golden age of out black lesbian media making because of the amazing diversity of the work

being produced in both form and content by such a large group of women" (Keeling, DeClue, Welbon, Stewart & Rastegar, 2015). While the 1980s is not technically the "beginning" of queer black female centered cinema, "...the history of African American lesbian cinema does not become *visible* until the '80s" (Juhasz, 2001). What historical events led to the emergence of such a genre? To completely understand how queer black cinema could exist, its necessity, and what it hopes to accomplish, the following section situates the late twentieth century emergence of queer black female-centered cinema within the racial history of the United States.

BRIEF HISTORY

A characteristic of queer black female-centered cinema is refuting negative stereotypes of African American women created by mainstream media. As such, the beginning of this genre has roots in the inception of the motion picture business where inimical constructions of blackness in cinema first appear. In her seminal text *Sisters in Cinema: Case Studies of Three First-Time Achievements Made by African American Women Feature Film Directors in the 1990s*, Welbon (2001) provides the cinematic history of black independent filmmaking, which a direct influence in queer black female-centered cinema. Starting in 1896, Thomas Edison showcased the Vitascope, an instrument that could project film to a mass audience, which led to the establishment of the motion picture business (Welbon, 2001). Initially, all production and distribution of motion pictures was controlled by whites and, as such, black Americans were first introduced to film as spectators. bell hooks (1992) describes the history of looking, or gazing, as a form of resistance among black people who historically have never been allowed to look a white person in the eye--it was disrespectful, an act of defiance. hooks (1992) further mentions

that when black people did decide to look, or have an oppositional gaze, they declared, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality." As spectators of film from the very beginning, black audiences initiated a radical cinematic politics. In 1886, the same year that Edison invented the Vitascope, black audiences were contending with dehumanizing "separate, but equal" laws. These laws legally kept whites and blacks separate in public spaces (i.e., movie theaters). As atrocious as they were, these laws helped to birth black cinema since segregation necessitated the development of black film production and distribution companies (Stewart, 2005).

Black Americans chose to enter the motion picture business for many reasons; however, the main reasons include: economic opportunity and opposing inimical constructions of blackness (Welbon, 2001). New technologies of the motion picture business provided black Americans with a new way to make money (Welbon, 2001; Williams, 2011). Black Americans sought jobs in new and fast growing fields because they often provided better working conditions and better pay. During the early twentieth century, better working conditions and better pay were highly sought after because many African Americans lived in the south where the living conditions and pay were worse. These social conditions were only exacerbated by high racial tensions (Williams, 2011; Gregory, 2005). Black people during the early twentieth century were not protected from getting killed, raped or lynched through "separate, but equal" laws. Therefore, many black southerners believed moving North might provide a slightly better living situation because such atrocities happened less frequently (Gregory, 2005).

Black people also entered the motion picture industry to oppose racist representations of African Americans in cinema, and to potentially change the way African Americans were treated during the early 20th century (Welbon, 2001). D.W. Griffith's film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), starred white men donning blackface, and portrayed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as saviors of white women. The film represented black men as ignorant, beastly, and as perpetual rapists. The film portrayed black women as angry, abusive, and as perpetual mammies (Welbon, 2001; Neale & Hall, 2010). Black people were arguably more exasperated with these racist, harmful and stereotypical images of themselves (Welbon, 2001). Beyond racist representations of black people in white-directed films, black producers and distributors also faced discrimination by white-owned production and distribution companies that would not screen black-cast, black *directed* films, run advertisements from black *owned* companies, or review films from *black producers*, (Welbon, 2001).

The debut of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), exclusion from motion picture industry practices and resistance to racist imagery ignited a commitment from black producers in particular and black community in general to creating images that fostered positive images of black people. In doing so, "the birth of a separate industry for all-Black cast films" was formed, and, in 1916, the first film to oppose the stereotypical images produced by white companies was *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* by the founders of the first black film company in Los Angeles, George and Noble Johnson (Welbon, 2001).

Black women were also involved in the motion picture business. Tressie Souders (1922) and Maria P. Williams (1923) are considered the first black women to direct feature films (Curry,

2009; Welbon, 2001). Of the race movies created by black Americans in the early 20th century, black women created only a few of them. Perhaps this can be attributed to that the fact that blackest women were at the bottom of the American hierarchy during this time. Sexism, coupled with racism, played a part in the amount of films produced by black women. While black men had some rights, black women had even less. If a black woman was going to produce a film, she needed to have control over all aspects of the filmmaking process. More commonly, African American women in the motion picture business owned theaters, financed the production of films, or they worked as writers or casting directors. This is not to say that African American women did not produce footage--far from it. Black women mostly shot documentary style films not intended for a mass audience. These films were not shown in black movie theaters and sometimes they were not shown at all; therefore, black women's filmmaking practices are not considered part of the tradition of race movies. The content of black women's films is as equally important as their production, however. Different from the mainstream portrayals of black women as mammies, films produced by black women in the early twentieth century introduced new roles for black women on screen that were not stereotypical. In the film, *The Flames of Wrath* (1923), Maria P. Williams depicts black women as lawyers or detectives, roles typically reserved for men (Welbon, 2001; Curry, 2009). Even though black women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they experienced a level of creative freedom in film that black men or even white women did not (Welbon, 2001).

Black women were able to experience this freedom because they financed their films independently. If black women did not finance the films themselves, other black women helped to fund these projects. While the sexuality of the first black female filmmakers is

undocumented, queer black female directors of the 80s and 90s are similar as they also procured funds independently. However, queer black female filmmakers of the late twentieth century might have had an easier time than their foremothers. "The Black lesbian media artist," according to Welbon (2001), "emerged simultaneously with the growth and expansion of the gay/lesbian film festival industry.... Black lesbian film and video makers, positioned within a gay community that is extremely supportive of its artists, have benefited." Even still, most have had to raise funds for their films themselves either from a grant, fundraising events or backing after film festival exposure (Welbon, 2001). While financing an independent film is difficult, artists pursue independent funding because, unlike Hollywood productions that are more focused on profits, financing from independent backers does not come with strict stipulations about what can or cannot be created (Welbon, 2001; Francis, 2007). This creative freedom is imperative not only for producing representations of queer black women in cinema, but also for producing representations of queer black women that refute mainstream media ideologies.

While the motion picture business took off in the last few years of the 19th century/early years of the 20th century for white Americans, film production and directing for African Americans did not start to flourish until approximately 15 or 20 years into the new century. The blossoming of film production for black Americans can be attributed to the social conditions during that time. As previously stated, black Americans primarily lived in the South. Confronted with "separate, but equal," or Jim Crow laws, poor working conditions, underpaying jobs and the constant physical violence enacted on black bodies, black Americans living in the South faced multiple and pervasive challenges (Arnesen, 2003).

In 1917-1918, black people embarked on a mass migration from the rural South to the urban North that was key in helping to diminish these challenges. Called the Great Migration, black Americans were able to leave the horrendous social conditions of the South due to two major factors: the boll weevil and wartime opportunities (Arnesen, 2003). Infesting and ruining the cotton fields where many African Americans made their living, the boll weevil, a small insect, successfully put many African Americans out of work. The second factor was the beginning of World War I a few years earlier. Work was rumored to be abundant in the Northern industrial cities as United States prepared to enter war. Not only was work rumored to be abundant, but the North was also said to pay better and provide blacks opportunities for remedial education. Coupled with the daily indignities impressed upon them by white Americans, black people had a multitude of reasons to leave the South (Arnesen, 2003; Williams, 2010).

The United States entered World War I in 1917. Although many black Americans were skeptical about joining the war because they would be fighting for democracy, a freedom not yet realized for African Americans in the United States, they joined nonetheless in hopes that their participation in the war might spark a change within their home country (Williams, 2011). As black Americans returned home at the end of the World War I in 1917 and realized that a more inclusive nation was not emerging, a new sense of racial pride and a willingness to fight for their rights formed (Williams, 2011). A cultural shift manifested among African Americans. Black people who lived in the North prior the Great Migration were often considered black intellectuals and/or a part of a black middle class. This can be attributed to the fact that black people in the North were more likely to attend college, be writers or creative artists. Because they were treated with more respect than their southern counterparts, lived in a less

physically violent area, and had more access to better paying jobs, black northerners had more time and money to entertain hobbies or invest entrepreneurially. Southern African Americans, however, were mostly poor sharecroppers who did not have access to formal education (Williams, 2010).

As these two cultures dovetailed in 1917, black Americans experienced “a cultural, social and artistic explosion” spurring from Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, known as the Harlem Renaissance. This crucial time in black history can be characterized by a racial pride that sought to not only uplift the race, but re-envision the race without the accompaniment of white stereotypes “that had influenced black peoples’ relationship to their heritage and to each other” (Hutchinson, 2016). Furthermore, this artistic explosion sought to challenge and remove “Victorian moral values and bourgeois shame about aspects of their lives that might, as seen by whites, reinforce racist beliefs” (Hutchinson, 2016). These characteristics abounded in the black artistic world of music, theatre, visual arts and especially literature, making the Harlem Renaissance a movement for a transformation of ethos.

The transformative mindset of black Americans during the Harlem Renaissance was crucial to not only the early days of black American film production and distribution, but consequently, queer black female-centered cinema of the 80s and 90s. Actively exploring new ideas and creating art, black women and men produced similar amounts of content (Hutchinson, 2016). However, black women also explored topics such as sexuality. Discussion of sexuality occurred through two main narratives: literature and music. The literature produced by black women often contained implicit discussions of sexuality typically enmeshed within the

rural/urban dichotomy. Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Fauset were both popular writers during the Harlem Renaissance whose works explored sexuality implicitly. Another popular writer, Nella Larsen, also focused on the rural/urban dichotomy but chose to write about sexuality more explicitly, making her novel, *Quicksand* (1928), the first novel to contain an “explicitly sexual black heroine in black women’s fiction” (Carby, 1987). Through these literary explorations of sexuality, black women were able to start conversations that centered on *their* needs and desires.

Groundbreaking in their exploration of black female sexuality as they were, the outcome of the novels still evoked a sense of denial in regards to black female sexuality. According to Hazel Carby (1987), “These writers faced a very real contradiction for they felt that they would publicly compromise themselves if they acknowledged their sexuality and sensuality within a racist sexual discourse, thus providing evidence that indeed they were primitive and exotic creatures.” I do not see the denial of sexuality given to fictional black women by their creators as pervasively harmful. Rather, I believe these black female writers were able to successfully establish a dialogue about the specific oppressions they face as black women. This dialogue would be needed for future black feminist organizations, and by association, queer black female-centered cinema, to come into fruition.

Sexual desire as well as an expression of sexual desire in black women was denied through white supremacist ideology but articulated by black female writers. As such, this denial is also tied to the formation of respectability politics surrounding black female sexuality (Carby, 1987; Williams, 2010). Characterized by a willingness to subdue, change or completely forgo

certain aspects of their culture or lives so that they align more neatly with mainstream values, marginalized peoples employ respectability politics as a means of survival. Respectability politics are another characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance. However, not all artists followed that mantra. Female Blues singers often outright denied politics that encouraged them to hide their emotions and sexual identities. Their music explored sexuality in a way that boasted sensuality and sexuality finding both pleasure and pain in both. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters, popular Blues singers, sung about being left by their men, waiting for their men and even giving up on their men. They also sung about sexuality more explicitly such as Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues," in which she expresses her sexual desirability or Ida Cox's "One Hour Mama" in which she discusses wanting a man who does not rush during sex (Carby, 1987).

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were also known for singing about lesbian sexuality. "Prove It On Me Blues" by Ma Rainey was "an assertion and affirmation of lesbianism" (Carby, 1987). Often missing from histories of this period in time is its relationship with black gays and lesbians. Hutchinson (2016) states, "According to some critics, the renaissance was as gay as it was Negro." As sexual orientations (i.e., gay, lesbian) began to form in the United States during the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century, the birth of policing those identities began during these times as well (Katz, 1995). As such, almost all black artists and writers who identified as gay or lesbian or engaged in sexual behavior associated with those identities kept such information to themselves (Hutchinson, 2016).

These are the conditions in which black Americans entered and began to flourish in the motion picture business--amidst high racial tensions, mass migration, catastrophic war, racial

pride, political activism, an artistic and cultural explosion and emerging sexual identities. The black produced films during this pertinent time in black history tended to reflect those conditions, such as *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*. Knowing this historical background helps to inform how a genre such as queer black female-centered cinema could have flourished in the middle 1980s.

As the Harlem Renaissance began to decline the mid-1930s, black Americans had firmly established authority over “the representation of black culture and experience” (Welbon, 2001). Correspondingly, race movies started to decline as well. The Great Depression is main reason for each decline. Starting with the plummet of the Stock Market in October of 1929, the Great Depression encompassed a 10-year period of unemployment and debt that were at an all-time high. African Americans were disproportionately affected because of continual racial tension (Trotter, 2016). If black people of the time did have a job they were able to keep, their salaries were the first to be cut. Often-times, however, they were simply “last hired, first fired.” At all times, white employers let African Americans go first so that if anybody in America was going to have a job and a stable income, it was going to be white Americans. Self-finance was especially important for the continuation of race movies. It meant that black filmmakers and theatre owners could produce, distribute and exhibit what they wanted. The need to feed and shelter families outweighed self-financed film production. Oftentimes, black theaters were bought by white companies (Welbon, 2001). These buyouts especially heralded the end of race movies-- while black owners kept their theaters updated, raised prices of tickets in order to help independent filmmakers make money and played mostly black produced films, the new white owners took none of these steps to ensure the survival of their new theater (Welbon, 2001).

With the decline of race movies during the Great Depression, the United States would never see a time in cinematic history where black people were producing, distributing, acting in, writing for and exhibiting films as black Americans like they did in the early 20th century (Welbon, 2001). Black people received some work in Hollywood films, but the roles were racist and stereotypical. Such representations in mainstream films can be seen in *Gone With the Wind* (1940), where Hattie McDaniel played the role of an uppity Mammy, or with the onstage persona of Stepin Fetchit created by Lincoln Perry, the first black film star in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. Perry's performance of Stepin Fetchit reflected stereotypical representations of African Americans because the character never completed his tasks and was billed as "the laziest man in the world" (Watkins, 2005). As one might expect, black audiences were typically upset by these racist portrayals of black experience by white Americans. Many organizations, which had formed a few years before the Harlem Renaissance, objected to these portrayals of black Americans and sought to bring about civil justice for people of color. One of the most influential organizations among those objecting to racist portrayal of African Americans was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP, which formed in 1909, vigorously fought against stereotypical cinematic representations of black people. In the case of the Stepin Fetchit persona, the NAACP stated that Stepin Fetchit "was keeping white America from viewing black as capable of joining the mainstream" (Watkins, 2005).

As black men and women made their way back to the United States in 1945 at the end of World War II, they were tired--physically and mentally. Black Americans expected that racial violence would not change this time around, but that does not mean that they did not still

desire a change. Davarian L. Baldwin (2011) states racial violence was justified by “myths of inferior black character and intelligence, reproduced in films, books, radio programs and magazine ads.” However, civil rights organizations such as the NAACP were able to help African American citizens fight against stereotypical and harmful media representations as well as with legal situations, such as court cases involving the infringement of African American civil rights (Baldwin, 2011). The NAACP staged nonviolent protests, wrote letters to the President, and even acted as consultants to African Americans who would seek their help. Civil rights organizations, over the course of many years, slowly changed the laws that threatened the daily lives of African Americans with the help and resistance of other black Americans. In 1954, the NAACP joined the battle initiated by black students in Virginia protesting “separate, but equal” laws. The NAACP eventually took this battle to the Supreme Court, and it was decided that segregating public schools was unconstitutional. Often, this decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education* is considered the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Characterized by nonviolent protests and civil disobedience that produced active discussions between activists and the government, the Civil Rights Movement sought to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. By the end of the movement in 1968, segregation had legally ended and voting, housing, and job discrimination eased, allowing some African Americans to live a more comfortable life (Baldwin, 2011).

While the Civil Rights Movement was fundamental in helping to ease racial violence and discrimination against African Americans, it did not end it. Some civil rights groups felt as though progress for African American people was not happening fast enough. These activists wanted to take more direct action as opposed to indirect action, such as marching, which took time and

did not always produce the desired results. The Black Power Movement emerged to counter the “slow and steady” pace of mainstream civil rights organizations. The Black Power Movement can be characterized as “...a sustained and radical attempt to rearticulate the black community’s relationship with the white society.... It is the story of men and women across America who attempted to create spaces for people of the African Diaspora in all spheres of social life” (Rojas, 2007). To the Black Power Movement, creating space for African people was the progress they sought. And they were successful. One such attempt to create space occurred in the academy. Across universities in the United States, Black Studies programs began to form (West, 2012) in hopes that scholars, inspired by Black Power ideologies, might ““uncover and review neglected or unknown data on the Afro-American experience, create through their research, writing, and performances new knowledge and works, and disseminate these materials...”” (Harding, et al., 1968; White, 2012). The formation of such programs in universities in a time where an increasing number of African Americans attended college catalyzed an ongoing funded exploration of the history of African Americans.

As the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, the second wave feminist movement was beginning to form. Popular discourse on the feminist movement of the later 20th century centers around the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a publication that describes how (white) housewives were extremely unhappy with their lives (Hewitt, 2010). However, the 1960s were a volatile decade for the United States: routines, laws and attitudes that had remained relatively constant were changing (Taylor, 2013). Women were tired of their presence being diminished or ignored and their priorities made last in organizations. Inspired by protests and struggles of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movements of the late

1960s and early 1970s aimed to bring about a change for women in the United States (Taylor, 2013).

Feminist movements articulated ideas such as gender privilege, equal pay for equal work, “the personal is the political,” and intersectionality (Biklen, Marshall & Pollard, 2008). The impact of such ideas and concepts was felt by “women in the mines to women in academe.” Unfortunately, albeit not unexpectedly, as the years passed, issues that mostly concerned white women became the face of the movement. Popular discourse on second-wave feminism would suggest that women of color grew their own feminisms *as a result of* the lack of inclusiveness among white feminists (Biklen, Marshall & Pollard, 2008). This is untrue, for women of color and white women began to organize for the rights of women such as themselves around the same time. Organizations such as Hijas de Cuauhtemoc in 1971, a Chicana group; Asian Sisters in 1971, an Asian group; Women of All Red Nations in 1970s, a Native American group; and the Third World Women’s Alliance in 1968, an African American group provide evidence that women of color made their emergence into feminism at the same time as white women (Hewitt, 2010). And yet, “...second-wave feminism forced many women to choose between their racial and gendered identities...and ignored the fact that some women had benefitted from slavery, colonialism, had waged wars, and were not necessarily or naturally oriented toward change that would support women from all class, ethnic, racial locations, and sexual orientations” (Biklen, Marshall & Pollard, 2008).

Many feminist organizations formed under black women. The aforementioned Third World Women’s Alliance branched from an East Coast chapter of the Black Power movement

and focused on racism, sexism and imperialism (Hewitt, 2010). The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement are fundamental in the advancement of civil rights for African Americans in general. However, black rights movements were mostly unconcerned with the ways in which gender also factored into the civil rights of black women or how their lived experiences were different from black men in the United States. Even with the emergence of Black Studies programs or national black caucuses, experiences and research focused on black men, ultimately providing a narrative of black history that was decidedly male (Harding et al., 1968). However, Black feminist thought was among the first schools of thought to articulate the need to center intersecting lived experiences.

Black feminism focused on the lived experiences and needs of black women, and in so doing created a different narrative of black history. One of the most dynamic organizations of the early Black Feminist movement was the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). NBFO focused on an array of black women's issues, including stereotypical media representation, workplace discrimination, black female beauty, self-esteem and "...myths about Black women as matriarchs" (Hewitt, 2010). While the NBFO did not live long nationally (1973-1974), it did help to inspire other pivotal organizations that sought to focus on the needs of black women. One such organization was the Combahee River Collective, founded in 1974 (Hewitt, 2010). According to the Combahee River Collective Statement (1979), the Combahee River Collective is a group of black feminists who were "...actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see

Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face....” Eloquently stated, the Combahee River Collective believed that their experiences and identities were not singular, and to fight for the rights of only one facet of themselves--something the Civil Rights Movement and mainstream feminist movement accomplished--was unhelpful. Perhaps the most salient and sobering thoughts from the collective described their rationale behind forming their organization stating, “Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that *Black women are inherently valuable*, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1979; emphasis added).

During the late 1970s, the Combahee River Collective statement was one of the first articulations of the importance of understanding intersectionality (a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991), the ways in which interlocking systems of oppression exist to create lived realities. Initially, the Collective focused on anti-racist and anti-sexist politics (Combahee River Collective, 1979). However, as they matured in consciousness, the Collective expanded their politics to include anti-heterosexism. Because several of the group’s members were self-identified black lesbians, this move was imperative to their foundational belief of intersectionality. Perhaps the move to include an anti-heterosexist rhetoric stemmed from the evolving Gay Rights Liberation of the 1960s. Billed as the start of the Gay Liberation Movement, the Stonewall Riots of 1969 initiated when gay men constantly raided by New York police grew tired of the perpetual and dehumanizing harassment and, literally, fought back. According to

John D'Emilio (1992) in his seminal text *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, the Stonewall Riots inspired "a nationwide grass-roots liberation movement of gay and lesbians" whose organizational model influenced by the Black Power Movement. This grass-roots liberation movement was mostly inspired by the way the Black Power movement actively rejected white supremacist ideology, or assimilationist tactics, while completely transforming their oppression into "a source of pride and strength." As such, "coming out," or publicly articulating that one's sexual orientation was not straight, became a useful strategy for Gay Liberation Movement. This strategy became almost instantly successful with "tens of thousands" of gay men and lesbians coming out. By the mid-1970s, multiple organizations had formed that held marches, created publications that helped to spread the goals of the movement (D'Emilio, 1992).

Yet, while lesbians were active in the joining Gay Liberation organizations and dissemination of its information, their voices remained silenced. Continually experiencing sexism in the mainstream Gay Liberation movement coupled with the emergence of the second wave feminism, feminist lesbians began their own organizations in order to become visible and fight for their rights. Even after women entered the movement, the spaces for African Americans in the movement remained limited (D'Emilio, 1992). Certainly, black men and women joined the Gay Liberation Movement, but as the Combahee River Collective Statement stated, black women needed movements that not only recognized their multiple, interlocking oppressions, but that also worked to provide relief from each of those oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1979).

Black women, influenced by the intersectional political analysis of black feminism, engaged this framework in queer black female-centered cinema. Aside from its mere existence, queer black female-centered cinema explicitly works to make queer black women the focal point in a way that does not engage stereotypes, but rather explores endless possibilities of existence for black women. This articulation of endless possibilities, or freedom, for queer black women through queer black female-centered cinema is made possible because of the various social conditions affecting black Americans in the United States and the social movements that stemmed from them. The filmmakers of the early twentieth century lived during a time when the motion picture business was just beginning and racial tensions prompted radical self-love and appreciation. As times changed and the growth of radical self-love among black people blossomed, the queer black female filmmakers of the 80s and 90s were raised during a time where knowing and believing in your worth as a human being was paramount was imperative. Engaging in activism and seeking freedom was the norm. This is the history that has inspired and necessitated radical queer black female-centered cultural productions, that provided young black girls born in the 1960s the space and possibility to not only be a queer black woman but also create queer black female-centered cinema in the mid-1980s and 1990s (Welbon, 2001).

FRAMEWORKS

With such a dynamic introduction to the world, it should go without saying that queer black female-centered cinema stands at the intersection of several disciplines. However, as I situate my work within existing scholarship, I am informed by two theoretical frameworks: Black Feminist Thought and Quare Theory. Scholarly discourse in Cinema and Media Studies has

focused on how queer black female-centered cinema created by queer black women produces less stereotypical and non-stagnant depictions of black women, creates alternative identity formations, and queers black history (Richardson, 2005). The discourse presented in Cinema and Media Studies has roots many in Black Feminist Thought. Ula Taylor (1998) states, "...the historical evolution of Black feminism in the United States not only developed out of Black women's antagonistic and dialectical engagement with White women but also out of their own need to ameliorate conditions for empowerment on their own terms." According to Patricia Hill Collins, a pioneer in the scholarly articulation of Black Feminist thought, there are six distinguishing features of Black Feminism: 1) Black women in the United States engage in discussions about the relationship between their oppression and activism; 2) Diversity among the experiences of black women and ideology of Black Feminist thought adds strength and resilience; 3) "Connections between U.S. Black women's experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint;" 4) The contributions of Black Feminist intellectuals are important; 5) "The significance of change;" and 6) Commitment to other social justice issues (Collins, 2002). Black feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, coined the term "intersectionality." In her pivotal essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Crenshaw (1991) discusses how women of color experience acts of violence such as rape, domestic abuse or remedial reform differently from that of white women. Crenshaw (1991) observed different cases of women who had been victims of sexual violence or battery by a male perpetrator, noticing that support services were often only helpful to middle-class white women. For instance, poor women of color were less

able to reach out to a friend for temporary shelter because they were more likely to have friends and relatives that were people of color who also were struggling in the economy.

Black Feminist Thought is a useful framework for analyzing queer black female-centered cinema because it centered on the diverse experiences of black women. Black Feminist Thought predates queer black female-centered cinema as one of its first articulations can be found in the Combahee River Collective Statement. As queer black female-centered cinema aims to create an alternative black history, it employs Hill Collins' (2002) second tenet, diversity, and fifth tenet, "significance of change," by adding the narrative of queer black women in a narrative of black history that is patriarchal. Similarly, in refuting mainstream constructions of black women, queer black female-centered cinema employs Hill Collins' (2002) fourth tenet, the contributions of black intellectuals is important. Black feminist film also engages the sixth tenet, commitment to social justice issues, by maintaining Black Feminist Thought in its genre and by focusing on multiple oppressions rather than one. In using Black Feminist Thought to analyze the films, 'The Color Purple' and 'Daughters of the Dust', I center black women as the focal point of my analysis.

My methodology also reflects Hill Collins' tenets of black feminist thought. To more succinctly summarize and reiterate the works of both Collins and Crenshaw, Black Feminist thought/Black Feminism articulates, responds to, and stems from the *intersectional* identities of black women while *actively deconstructing systems of oppression* (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2002). Methodologically, adhering to this definition can be difficult. Tendencies to research and analyze data additively (e.g. Black + lesbian + woman) rather than intersectionality (e.g. black

lesbian woman) can arise when researchers are not grounded in theories that place an emphasis on intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008). Researching additively seems to inherently lead to the invisibility of some bodies. For instance, Bowleg (2008) states,

In 1994, the National Institutes of Health released guidelines requiring researchers to describe their plans for the “Inclusion of Women and Minorities.” The rationale for the guidelines were sound but the continued declaration of “women and minorities” as if these were two mutually exclusive groups signaled an entrenched misunderstanding of how women’s experiences as women also intersect with their experiences as members of ethnic minority groups, as well as other historically oppressed social groups.

If asking someone to choose between their identities is absurd, researching and analyzing with the same mindset is implausible.

Quare theory, the other framework in which I analyze queer black female-centered cinema, helps to center queer people of color. According to E. Patrick Johnson (2005) in ““Quare” Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother, ““Quare” ...not only speaks across identities, it *articulates* identities as well. “Quare” offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledge.... Quare studies is a theory of and for gays and lesbians of color.” In other words, quare theory can “privilege[s] the cultural history and experience of black queer folk” (Johnson, 2015). Quare theory, influenced by black feminist thought and intersectionality, is a direct response to queer theory, an understanding of sexuality that promotes the

deconstruction of stable categories and “political practices structured around binary conceptions of sexuality” (Cohen, 1997). While the politics of queer theory are radical, it has failed, much like other movements, to be inclusive of people of color. As such, quare theory was created so that queer theory could move beyond a “single oppression” framework (Cohen, 1997). It also helps inform my analysis similarly. As I provide a close reading of intimate scenes within *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*, I aim to put queer black women as my focal point as well as reject stable categories in which they are placed in order to deepen their inclusivity.

Quare theory builds upon and extends queer theory by not only being more inclusive and articulating silenced bodies, but it delves deeper by demanding that theory and activism remain well-balanced. As Johnson (2005) states, “If social change is to occur, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color cannot afford to be armchair theorists. Some [of] us need to be in the streets, in the trenches, enacting the quare theories that we construct in the “safety” of the academy. While keeping in mind that political theory and political action are not necessarily mutually exclusive, quare theorists must make theory work for its constituency.” Quare theory frames not only the theoretical aspects of this project but also the activist aspects. Curating an online exhibition featuring queer black female-centered cinema provides an opportunity to not only archive alternative black history by making the making the works of queer black female directors and queer black female-centered cinema more accessible in a digital age, but it also provides a space for other queer black women to partake in articulating alternative black histories. My online exhibition is located at www.queerblackwomenincinema.com.

CHAPTER 1

Intimacy in Queer Black Female Representations

The existence of a genre that establishes queer black women as the focal point is radical because queer black female-centered cinema deconstructs harmful and pervasive images of black women rooted in white supremacist ideology that has tangible effects on the lives of black women. Queer black female-centered cinema refutes white supremacist ideology by creating more complex depictions of race, gender, and sexuality. However, as Stuart Hall (1997) posits, *all* images should be interrogated and not taken for face value. As such, my intervention in current discourse on visual representations of queer black women interrogates two films, *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), often considered seminal works in the queer black female-centered genre. I focus specifically on the representation of intimacy in these films. Exploring visual representations of intimacy for queer black women helps to shape an alternative black history that allows black women the opportunity to be complex individuals with subjectivity. Strategies for creating complex narratives sometimes invoke stereotypes or tropes, such as jezebel, in order to transform them. Both *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) invoke and transform negative stereotypes of black women, and I discuss later, these films help to deconstruct white supremacist and heteropatriarchal ideologies about black female sexuality. I intend to provide a more nuanced understanding of visual representations of

queer black women by exploring intimacy, queer black female subjectivity and sexual agency as they are represented in scenes of intimacy between black women in *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*.

The Color Purple (a novel written by Alice Walker) is the story of Celie Harris, a young queer black woman in the rural south during the 1930s, who navigates her way through the multiple acts of violence enacted upon her by forming relationships with other black women. Through these relationship formations, Celie finds her own subjectivity and sexual agency. Upon its release, Walker's novel gained widespread popularity, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1983, as well as the National Book Award. Adaptations of the novel span multiple art forms, including theatre, and the novel's influence continues into the present day. In late 2015, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, who starred in the film adaptation of the novel, adapted *The Color Purple* for Broadway. As a novel that not only shares the story of a black woman's life, but also her blossoming intimate relationship with another black woman, *The Color Purple* was surprisingly popular in the United States during its debut. "The novel's popularity and critical acclaim," according to Christopher Lewis (2012), "suggested that black female same-sex desire as an object of literary representation could be regarded with seriousness and sensitivity by a widespread audience." *The Color Purple* was so well received that it was later made into a film produced by Steven Spielberg, helping to further catapult the story's notoriety (Walker, 2015). The impact and legacy of *The Color Purple* is evident in the large appreciation and support the film received from black women (Bobo, 1989). *The Color Purple* also proved that stories of queer black women could be successful nationally.

Daughters of the Dust by Julie Dash is another seminal work within queer black female-centered cinema, receiving critical acclaim upon its debut. As the first feature-length film by an African American woman to be produced by a major Hollywood Studio and therefore have a theatrical release (Welton, 2001), *Daughters of the Dust* chronicles, through intergenerational storytelling, the Peazant's, a family of black women living on an island of Georgia at the beginning of the twentieth century as they prepare to migrate North. The film's innovation lies in its storytelling. Dash invokes the African diasporic oral tradition through a slowly unraveling storyline. (Welton, 2001). According to Angeletta Gourdine (2004), *Daughters of the Dust* "...repositions African American cultural history from the margin to center," which helps in articulating a narrative about black experiences that does not privilege white supremacist ideology. Indeed, *Daughters of the Dust* is a socially conscious film. Dash explains her reasoning behind the social consciousness of the film in an interview, mentioning, "...my intention in making *Daughters of the Dust* was to redefine how we see ourselves and position ourselves in the world" (Taylor, 1993). In other words, Dash is concerned with the ways in which (all) *black people see themselves* in film (Martin & Dash, 2010); and, therefore, she created a film that centers a black aesthetic while simultaneously exploring topics--such as homosexuality--that have remained largely unaddressed within the black filmmaking realm (Taylor, 1993). As such, *Daughters of the Dust* produces a sense of empowerment for black people in general and black women in particular by creating a complex story of the black experience in the U.S.

Dash's politics of filmmaking were influenced by her time at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) as a member of the L.A. Rebellion. The L.A. Rebellion was a group of black student filmmakers who "...engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema,

screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people” from the late 1960s to late 1980s (Martin & Dash, 2010). Forming during the birth of the Civil Rights Movement and continuing through Second Wave Feminist, Black Power, Gay Rights and Black Feminist Movements, works produced by members of the L.A. Rebellion group typically reflected the multiple missions of these movements. According to Martin and Dash (2010), the first wave of the Rebellion aimed “to conceive and practice a film form appropriate to and in correspondence with the historical moment and their cultural and aesthetic concerns.” The Civil Rights Movement was the most influential movement during the 1960s, and was initiated when a group of students fought back against the “separate, but equal” laws which eventually led to the Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. Board of Education* in the mid-1950s that made segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement ignited when the future of black children was at stake (Baldwin, 2011). Considering this historical moment in which they were situated, the first wave of the Rebellion grappled with “the relationship of history to the structure of the family” (Martin & Dash, 2010). The second wave of the Rebellion, in which Dash was a member, engaged the familial theme as well “the southern rural black encounter with modernity” (Martin & Dash, 2010).

Both *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* are set in the rural south during the early part of the twentieth century and feature an element of contact with modernity (even though Alice Walker is not considered a member of the L.A. Rebellion). Both films take a significant historical moment in African American history and introduce themes of queerness. As such, *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* work to create an alternative history of black experiences too often situated in a heteropatriarchal past. As such, I interrogate

representations of intimacy between the black female protagonists in *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* to explore how these films 1) engaged stereotypes of black women and transformed them 2) employed the trope of intimacy to queer black history while cautious of the film's wider audience.

I begin my interrogation by providing a definition of intimacy. According to the Oxford Dictionary definition, intimacy is defined in several ways: 1) close familiarity or friendship; closeness; 1.1) a private cozy atmosphere; 1.3) an intimate act, especially sexual intercourse; and 1.4) closeness of observation or knowledge of a subject. This definition provides a clear example of the different types of intimacies presented in *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*. Both works present intimacy between queer black women that align with this definition. However, I believe this definition is insufficient unless physical proximity is added. Physical proximity does not have to be inherently sexual, but can be, as seen in *Daughters of the Dust*. Through close readings of select scenes, I explore three aspects of intimacy in *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*. First, I interrogate how sexual agency is formed and how this might influence black female subjectivity. Next, I interrogate what it means to be stripped of sexual agency through a mostly heteropatriarchal audience. Finally, I examine the differences in visual representations of queer black female intimacy by a straight, white male producer and a straight, black female producer.

The Color Purple (1985) is the story of Celie Harris, a black woman in the rural South whose experiences of constant physical and mental violence shaped her daily realities and sense of self-worth. In the beginning of the film, Celie is raped by her father as a young girl. This initial scene of violence sets the stage for how Celie is treated by the men throughout her life:

abusively. However, Celie finds solace in three women in her life--her sister Nettie, her good friend Sofia, and her husband's love interest, Shug Avery.

In the film, Shug provides Celie with the most intimate solace. One of the most intimate moments between Celie and Shug is the scene in which Shug dedicates a song to Celie entitled "Miss Celie's Blues." The lyrics are as follows:

Mmmmmmm...

Sister - you've been on my mind/And sister - we're two of a kind/So sister - I'm keepin' my eyes on you

I bet you think I don't know nothin' - but singin' the blues/Oh, and sister - have I got news for you/I'm somethin' - I hope you think that you're somethin' too

Oh and darlin'/I've had a low life lonesome road/And I've seen a lot of sun goin' down/So entrust me/No low life's gonna run me around

So let me tell you somethin' sister - remember your name/No twister - gonna steal your stuff away/My sister - we sho' ain't got a whole lot of time

Soooo shake you shimmy, sister/'Cause honey this Shug/Is feelin' fine

Woo-hoo! (*The Color Purple*, 1985)

In the beginning of the scene, we see Shug mention that she is dedicating her next song to Celie stating "because she scratches out my head when I'm ailin'." Shug takes a second to compose herself and smiles sweetly right before she starts. As Shug begins to sing, the audience can tell through Shug's demeanor that her next song will have a decidedly different tone as opposed to heavy sexual tones of her previous song. Typical of female blues singers during the day, Shug did not hide what she was feeling nor what she whom that feeling was for (Carby, 1987), singing directly to Celie as if Celie were the only person in the juke joint. Shug's dedication to Celie indexes a growing intimacy between two women. The lyrics provide an understanding of how deeply she cares for Celie. However, the queer undertones of her song are masked through her use of the term "sister" in reference to Celie. Masking the queerness of a relationship was also typical of female blues singers. Female blues singers would hide sexual behavior associated with

queerness because the policing of identities associated with queerness began to emerge during the early twentieth century (Hutchinson, 2016).

Furthermore, intimacy is initiated in the way in which Celie and Shug never break eye contact—producing a space where no one can interrupt their mutual appreciation for one another. Here, I believe the definition of intimacy referring to a close knowledge of a subject is most appropriate because only they are aware of the ways in which the other has influenced them. Similarly, the lyrics of Shug’s song offer another layer of intimacy through close knowledge of the subject, Celie. As Shug sings to Celie, she engages no one else. Shug’s body language is reminiscent of an intimacy defined by proximity, as well as through the creation of cozy atmosphere where she is relaxed because of the person physically close to her. The intimacy in the two minutes of this scene is practically palpable.

I focus on this scene because I believe formations of sexual agency for both Celie and Shug occur in this moment. Sexual agency, or the ability to make sexual choices of one’s own will without coercion (Pittard & Robertson, 2008), is formed for Celie as she allows herself to smile and express the happiness and excitement she feels as Shug recognizes and celebrates her presence through song. As for Shug, some might argue that her sexual agency was always present throughout the film. As Mister’s (Celie’s husband) mistress and a blues performer, Shug’s character employs the jezebel trope only to expose it as white supremacist and heteropatriarchal. By exploiting her positionality as mistress and blues singer to develop an intimate relationship with Celie, Shug refutes the negative claims associated with jezebel and reclaiming them as a source of black female and sexual empowerment. Here, then, is where I contend that Shug’s sexual agency transforms into a more conscious sexual agency because,

through her relationship with Celie--those intimate moments with Celie-- new formations of not only sexual agency, but also black female sexual subjectivity emerges. Similarly, seeing the visual representation of intimacy and sexual agency formation might have a positive effect on queer black women who are confronting stereotypes created by a white, heterosexist, patriarchal society.

The next intimate scene between Shug and Celie occurs after they have gotten home from the juke joint. Celie is trying on Shug's clothes, presumably at Shug's request. As they begin to laugh at the sight of Celie in such flashy clothing, Celie starts to cover her mouth in order to hide her smile. Shug tries to convince Celie to stop and succeeds by holding Celie's hands down. Celie falls in love with her own carefree reflection in this moment. Unfortunately, Shug must feel as if her work there is complete because she then states that she will be leaving soon. As the smile drops from Celie's face, she tells Shug, "he beat me for not bein you." Shug leads Celie to the bed and as they begin to talk about Mister, Shug asks Celie if she minds that her and Mister sleep together. Celie gives a resounding "no." Then Shug tells Celie that she is still a virgin because she has never had sex (she has only been raped), let alone pleasurable sex. Celie states that no one has ever loved her. Shug opposes this, stating that *she* loves her. She affectionately kisses Celie, and after Celie seems responsive, kisses her deeply.

This scene expresses a more explicitly sexual intimacy through kissing. The film's representation of Celie and Shug's desire for one another "critiques stable notions of identity" by challenging the heteropatriarchal frames of vision by enabling their "silenced bodies" (Johnson, 2005). Their intimacy becomes a mode of resistance against the multiple forms of

oppression black women face, helping to enlarge the scope of possibility for black female subjectivity.

Daughters of the Dust also presents visual representations of intimacy between queer black women. *Daughters of the Dust*, the story of three generations of Gullah women living on an island of Georgia explores the experiences of Peazant family as their family prepares to move to the mainland, provides a different presentation of intimacy. Yellow Mary, a daughter of the Peazant family, represents a story of the middle generation and has come back to the island in order to visit her family before they migrate North. She represents a point of contention within her family because she is a prostitute. When she returns to the island with her lover, Trula, also a prostitute, she finds that she still remains an outcast within the Peazant family. The intimacy portrayed between Yellow Mary and Trula does not help Yellow Mary's standing within the family; however, Yellow Mary seems more at ease with Trula by her side.

Their intimacy is presented in quick scenes of whispering quietly and laughing softly with one another. Expressed by proximity and a deep knowledge of the other, Yellow Mary and Trula's intimacy resembles that of Celie and Shug's initial intimate scenes--not particularly explicit. Their intimacy, too, evokes a mode of resistance from multiple forms of oppression. However, sexual agency seems to already be established within their relationship--they seem more comfortable being openly affectionate with one another, more so than Celie and Shug. By inferring that Yellow Mary and Trula are prostitutes, Dash confronts the stereotype of black women as lascivious and licentious. Yellow Mary's and Trula's love for one another shifts the gaze from a white supremacist and heteropatriarchal gaze, to a loving gaze conferred by another black woman. In so doing, it confers sexual agency by refiguring their prostitution not

as an inherent quality of black female sexuality, but as a means of economic mobility in a racist and sexist society. Moreover, these intimate scenes affirm black female agency by redirecting black female sexuality toward another black woman, challenging white supremacist and heteropatriarchal ideologies that have historically marked black female sexuality as defined by and always available to (white) men.

However, *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* are different in their reversal of gaining sexual agency and subjectivity and not having sexual agency and subjectivity. "The Color Purple" presents characters lacking a conscious sexual agency and subjectivity in the beginning, but by the end of the film have gained them. As for *Daughters of the Dust*, the opposite seems to occur. The queer characters are presented as having sexual agency and subjectivity--both women are prostitutes and lovers, even though this has marked Yellow as an outcast within her family. The sexual agency and subjectivity of Yellow Mary and Trula begins to change during a scene after the Peasant women are all together from just having had their portrait taken. Trula is off in the distance sitting under a tree while Yellow Mary is talking with her family. As the women start talking, the audience is able to see Yellow Mary declaring that she would actually like to stay on the island. When Trula hears Yellow Mary say as much, she looks confused and hurt--Trula is under the impression that she and Yellow Mary would depart the island together. Trula does not say anything, however, and continues to look on. Later we see Nana Peasant, the matriarch of the Peasant family, offering her strength and encouragement to her family. While she does this with Yellow Mary, Trula looks on from behind them. After Yellow Mary has accepted this blessing from her mother, Trula runs away. Yellow Mary has officially renounced their relationship by taking a blessing from her mother. The blessing given to Yellow Mary

reestablishes her standing within the family, but accepting this blessing means scapegoating Trula, the object of her same-sex desire. Here, I contend, is where sexual agency and subjectivity changes for Yellow Mary and Trula. Yellow Mary chooses her family, her *race*, and to do so she must sacrifice her relationship with Trula, and abandon her non-normative sexuality. Familial (as a symbol of racial) belonging limits both her sexual agency and subjectivity. Likewise, the intimacy invoked in this scene arrives from a close knowledge of the other person--being able to understand one another's actions without using spoken word. Though Trula intimate knowledge of Yellow Mary allows her to immediately comprehend the consequences of Yellow Mary's decision to stay on the island, that Trula runs away after Yellow Mary's decision signals an interruption of intimacy.

Black female sexual agency and subjectivity is not only negotiated through conflicts between characters, but also through the gaze of the audience. Bobo (1989) states that while *The Color Purple* was very successful, there was a heated debate about the impact of the film. Most notably, black male critics of the film believed, "Black people as a whole [in the film] were depicted as perverse, sexually wanton, and irresponsible," and further stating that these images were especially harmful to the "Black family" (Bobo, 1989). Black male critic's concern about how these films threatened "the black family," evidence their investments in heteropatriarchy. Their denouncement of the of these films aids in the erasure of queer black female experiences from black history and cultural memory. Film critics who do not address the queerness of these films participate in limiting black women's sexual agency. Acknowledging the queerness in these films, then, helps to shape what is possible for black female viewers as they construct their own subjectivities and limited sexual agency. As I watch these intimate scenes

involving queer black women, I think about how empowering it is to see this kind of representation--a representation that puts black women as the focal point, refutes negative stereotypes and creates alternative histories of black experience. Perhaps queer black women are able to gain or transform their own sexual agencies and subjectivities through watching *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* making their relationship with these films mimic the relationships between Shug and Celie and Yellow Mary and Trula.

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