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In/Visible Women: Transtemporal Black Lesbian Bodies in *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The Mark of Lilith* (1986)

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*This essay explores black lesbian visibility and transtemporality through *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The Mark of Lilith* (1986). Both films are self-reflexive meta-commentaries that centre black lesbian subjectivities, while also attempting to locate black lesbians in history (*The Watermelon Woman*) or in myth (*The Mark of Lilith*). I argue that the filmmakers resist the colonial gaze by employing self-reflexivity to represent themselves, engaging audiences intersubjectively in a radical act of witnessing. Further, they enter their physical bodies into myth, history, narrative present and among future audiences, rendering the black lesbian body radically visible across time. Addressing visibility from socio-political othering to the act of seeing in film phenomenology, I assert that the prevailing Eurocentric patriarchal culture constituted itself against the other by exorcising the other from visibility. As explored in spectatorship film theory, being made invisible created a critical separation between the black lesbian spectator and film narrative. That separation is also a space of radical possibility. Employing the deviant gaze theory, I argue that black lesbian spectators subvert dominant film narratives by inscribing themselves into film worlds via misreadings of film texts. This informs black lesbian filmmakers, who further radical representation through self-reflexivity and self-insertion. Close examination of the films highlights how self-reflexivity enables black lesbian film authorship. Finally, I trace how self-reflexivity engages audiences intersubjectively with the filmmakers through witnessing and testimony. The physical presence of the filmmakers fills the lacunas created by an erased queer history. Audiences bear witness to the embodied black lesbian experience.*

To be a visible black lesbian is an act of rebellion. In film, where the male-centred gaze still dominates the construction and depiction of women, the black lesbian body is further marginalised into obscurity. *The Mark of Lilith* (1986) and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) are radical examples of films that centre black lesbian subjectivities. Their landmark representations portray black women as complex and desirable, who proudly embrace their sexuality. These rebellious figures oppose the controlling images of black women so often stereotyped in film and the silence on sexuality that such images engender. Both films are

self-reflexive meta-commentaries, employing documentary-within-film aesthetics and direct-address commentary to locate queer representations in history. Existing scholarship on *The Watermelon Woman* contends that self-reflexivity acts as a cinematic mechanism, integrating the filmmaker and character, enabling authorship. However, I argue that self-reflexivity enables what I term transtemporal visibility; by collapsing the distance between filmmaker, character and subject, the filmmakers inscribe themselves into the historic and mythic lineages they recover, thus existing simultaneously in the past, filmic present and future. They prove that we, and they, have always been here.

By transtemporality, I mean existence across points in time, such as past, present and future, which I ground in Theodore Sider's theory of four-dimensionalism in metaphysics. He contends that an ordinary object, such as a human organism, persists across time as a whole object comprised of temporal parts (54-59). Those temporal parts may or may not look, behave or be identical to the whole, but they remain part of the whole (Sider 60). Jasper Lauderdale additionally references transtemporality while discussing the filmic black vampire, arguing that the black vampire collapses the past and future into an interminable present, a theory of transtemporality based in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (281). Adapting these theories as a framework, I argue that transtemporality connects the past, present and future through the filmmakers, whose identities as character and subject are temporal parts of the filmmaker's whole. Thus, the filmmaker persists across points in time.

Both films employ transtemporal visibility to recover black lesbian subjectivities erased from history and myth, radically spotlighting the taboo topics of black women's desire and sexuality. This taboo persists due to gendered racism and controlling images, such as the hypersexualised Jezebel, which reinforces the limits of acceptable behaviour as defined by the white heteropatriarchy (WHP) 'normal' while also limiting representations of black women as Other (Collins 70). These multitudinous oppressions create what Darlene Clark Hine termed a "culture of dissemblance", where black women shield their inner lives and sexuality from oppressors by silencing themselves on matters of sex and sexuality (912). Already marginalised by the WHP, black lesbians are further isolated from black heterosexual women as some black women react to any "so-called deviant individual behaviour" as "a threat to the race as a whole" (Hammonds 133). Black lesbian 'deviance'

exists within the already 'deviant' black women's sexuality, making visibility unacceptable in a pre-existing culture of silence.

This erasure doesn't negate existence; rather, it renders the black lesbian a "deviant ghostly bod[y]" (Brock and Edenborg 680). Patricia White references the 'spectral lesbian spectator' that haunts feminist film theory, disrupting the assimilated masculine perspective of female spectatorship (146). Though White's spectral lesbian spectator disrupts the assumption of maleness and heterosexuality, whiteness remains the 'normal' perspective that spectators must engage with intersubjectively. As theorised by Vivian Sobchack, intersubjectivity occurs when the viewer positions themselves within the film's world. In doing so, the viewer experiences the other's perception and experience and expresses their own perceptive experiences (142-143). However, Sobchack universalises the experience of intersubjectivity without considering how the intersectional oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality influence embodied engagement with film. Laura Mulvey directly refers to the masculinisation of the spectator regardless of the viewer's gender or orientation, which positions masculinity and whiteness as the 'normal' (29). The black lesbian spectator disrupts this positionality. While we can project ourselves into the film, we cannot communicate dialogically with it, as we cannot express our own experiences. Any intersubjectivity with a film requires choosing between blackness, queerness, or womanhood. So, we remain silenced and disembodied in the experience.

Studies on black lesbian spectatorship, though limited, attempt to close the distance between self and film. This limitation of intersubjectivity creates a gap, a potential for radical reinterpretation, imagination and opposition for black lesbian representation. bell hooks argues that marginality is a site of resistance, offering "the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" ("Choosing the Margin" 20). It is not a space of lack; instead, it opposes oppression from outside its centre and as a vital part of the whole. For black people existing at the outer edges of marginality, this oppositional gaze to white oppressive structures informs the critical separation the black spectator draws between subject and self. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators", hooks notes that this was primarily focused on race and male spectatorship, given the historic repercussions of black looking as an act of violence. Through film, black men could "enter an imaginative space of phallogentric power that

mediated racial negation" (257). Black women spectators, however, did not identify with the constructions of white womanhood and the phallogentric gaze, and were able to look from a place that disrupted and deconstructed narratives. Though hooks leaves the question of the black lesbian spectator open, this doesn't imply identification with the phallogentric gaze. The black lesbian spectator's gaze is inherently political, oppositional and radical as it dares to look through the lens of female desire, imagining possibilities of lesbian intimacies beyond the objectification of the phallogentric gaze.

The black lesbian filmmaker is first a spectator. Living in the margins as black, queer and woman, we view cinema from the WHP with a critical eye, implying our existence rather than seeing representation. Imagination catalyses what Z. Isiling Nataf calls the 'deviant gaze', a theory of black lesbian spectatorship. Although inherently oppositional and critical, it also identifies with elements of the film by "radically misreading the text" (64) beyond the filmmaker's intentions. This transgressive reading offers a thrill in disrupting established norms, like the thrill horror spectators might get from viewing taboos. The black lesbian spectator, already a rebel, derives pleasure from and identifies with the rebellious or transgressive figure. They may not necessarily reflect their experience, but their transgressive behaviour suggests the possibility of queerness. Like a cult reading, the deviant gaze disrupts intentionality to engage black lesbian spectators imaginatively through these rebellious figures. The deviant gaze shrinks the distance between self and film created by the oppositional gaze by inscribing the self onto the film world that lacks it. Not only can we derive pleasure from interrogation, but also from imaginatively queering the text.

The Mark of Lilith and *The Watermelon Woman* advance Nataf's theory by foregrounding black lesbian subjectivities, shifting the deviant gaze to the pleasure derived from radical lesbian visibility. By interrupting the narrative flow, the filmmakers use self-reflexivity to insert their subjectivities into the film, engaging audiences intersubjectively with their lived experiences. They rebel against their erasure, the culture of dissemblance that silences black women's sexuality and the colonial gaze that stereotypes, objectifies and fetishises black women's bodies. Authorship enables their insertion into the historic and mythic queer lineages they trace in a radical act of transtemporal visibility.

Both films engage with transtemporality by utilising self-reflexivity and metacommentary within extra-temporal spaces. Existing outside of narrative time, the

filmmakers and characters converge within these spaces, directly addressing the audience with commentary on the film and its themes, which is then performed in the narrative. The direct connections made between the subjects and characters within the narrative reinforce the subject's existence as temporal parts of the filmmaker. For example, Cheryl's (Cheryl Dunye) life in *The Watermelon Woman* mirrors that of the film's subject, Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson). Similarly, in *The Mark of Lilith*, Zena (Pamela Lofton) forms a restorative relationship with the film's subject, Lilith/Lillia (Susan Franklyn). Here, 'temporal parts' doesn't mean these mythic figures or fictional characters are literal objects; rather, it describes how self-reflexivity enables their construction as temporal manifestations of the filmmaker's subjectivity. As the borders between the filmmaker, character and subject dissolve, so do the boundaries between time, reality and fiction. Thus, the filmmakers insert themselves and their subjectivities into the myth and history they trace in an act of transtemporal visibility. This doesn't require the filmmaker's physical presence within the film, only that their subjectivities are made apparent in the character. Zena, for example, is the confirmed avatar of filmmaker Zach Mack-Nataf.

***The Watermelon Woman* (1996)**

Transtemporality figures importantly in the historic elision of black lesbian subjectivities that Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* traces. Self-reflexivity produces a slippage between temporal time, disrupting narrative flow to foreground Dunye's multiple personalities as character, director, and a historic black lesbian figure. The film follows Cheryl (played by Dunye), an aspiring filmmaker who decides to make her first film on Fae Richards, the 'Watermelon Woman' mammy of the 1930s film *Plantation Memories*. In her attempt to reconstruct Fae's history, Cheryl discovers that Fae was a lesbian and romantically involved with the film's white butch director, Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz). The events of Fae's life begin to mirror Cheryl's when she enters a relationship with Diana (Guinevere Turner), a wealthy white woman who frequents the store.

Cheryl operates as Dunye's avatar and is Dunye herself, which blurs the lines between reality and fiction. Reality is further complicated by the documentary-within-documentary-within-film technique that Dunye calls the Dunyementary, which blends reality-based

material with autobiography, fiction, documentary and humour in her experimental style (Dunye 46). This self-reflexive technique enables her authorship and validates her construction of Fae (Zimmer 44). It also lends Dunye additional authority, which, as Linda L. Sullivan writes, audiences have been taught to view as evidence of expertise (458). Though Dunye deconstructs and satirises the documentary, she also “replicates it in a way that leads viewers not to question its verisimilitude” (Sullivan 455). Self-reflexivity foregrounds Dunye’s personal subjectivity, positioning her as both an expert and archivist on Fae and her own experience as a black lesbian, lending additional credibility to Fae’s constructed history. This lends Dunye “authorial voice”, permitting her to reference herself as “an auteur through the character of Cheryl while simultaneously revealing her own approaches and cinematic practices operative in the film” (Wimbley 146). Building on these theories, self-reflexivity allows Dunye to slip between these multiple personalities as the film progresses in an act of transtemporal visibility. By embodying all three, Dunye inscribes her physical body and subjectivity into the past so that she exists simultaneously across time.



Fig. 1, Cheryl addresses the audience, 1996.

Direct address signals a move into the documentary space that exists outside of narrative time. With no identifiable location or temporal marker, it therefore exists transtemporally. The set is dressed simply: post-it notes, articles and images adorn the walls signifying her academic research into the subject. Cheryl/Dunye has positioned the camera head-on in a medium shot before her chair, which resembles a director’s chair and interview seat from which she will address the audience. This presentation is reminiscent of reality television video diaries, a deconstruction of traditional narrative structure that blends

documentary with video diary. Here, Cheryl/Dunye are indistinguishable in this extra-temporal space and exist simultaneously in reality and fiction.

Mark Winokur argues that, in her attempt to excavate and reconstruct Fae's history, the dual roles Dunye plays function to reinscribe the lesbian body back into history. In identifying with Fae, "Dunye is attempting to integrate or reconstitute Cheryl/Dunye—an identity split by the traditional distinction between actor and director—as Cheryl Dunye" (235). The distance between director and actor collapses. She establishes both historical black lesbian subjectivity and private lesbian subjectivity through the presentation of her own body (Winokur 235). However, Winokur fails to consider that Fae is yet another construction of Dunye's identity, albeit representative rather than another replication of Dunye herself. I argue that Fae functions as a temporal part of Cheryl that exists in the past, as evidenced by the connections made between them in the film. Not only do Cheryl/Fae share similar body types, but Cheryl's life also mirrors Fae's. Additionally, the reclamation of black lesbian history through Fae is also Cheryl/Dunye's induction into history as a black lesbian filmmaker depicting black lesbian subjectivities. Karin D. Wimbley illustrates this point in discussing Fae's partner, June Walker (Cheryl Clarke). June legitimises Cheryl's quest to become a black lesbian filmmaker by asking her to make black lesbian history before it's gone just as Cheryl/Dunye does in documenting her own history (Wimbley 149).

In one scene, Cheryl/Dunye passionately recites Fae's line from *Plantation Memories* in front of the camera while wearing a green bandana tied on her head like Fae's bonnet. Laura Sullivan spotlights this scene as an important connection between Fae/Cheryl (450). I argue that Cheryl embodies Fae within this extra-temporal space. Cheryl/Dunye is positioned beside the television in the frame, an intimate position given the head-on close-up shot. However, only a fragment of the television is shown – the only indication that a scene is being played is Fae's voice – making Cheryl/Dunye's face the 'screen' on which we view the scene. Cheryl/Dunye embodies Fae right down to her presentation, visualising their temporal relationship. Transtemporal visibility places Cheryl Dunye in the past, the filmic present, and future simultaneously as mediated by the screen.



Fig. 2, Martha and Fae, 1996.

Wimbley and Winokur both argue that Cheryl's identification with Fae is as a lesbian ancestor and maternal figure. However, Cheryl emphasises her desire for Fae throughout the film, a sexuality denied by the Mammy stereotype. By reinscribing sex and sexuality into Fae, Dunye underscores her own erotic desire. Fae's desirability becomes Dunye's as Fae/Cheryl/Dunye become one, existing through Dunye as black lesbian representations of the past, present and future. Dunye inscribes herself and her sexuality into history, immortalising herself transtemporally. Erotic desire creates a further parallel between Cheryl/Diana and Fae/Martha Page. Both Diana and Martha Page mediate a level of access neither Fae nor Cheryl can attain on their own. That is, Cheryl's access to the Page family for an interview and Fae's access to film roles by a sexually exploitative Page. Access is granted for both through sexual relationships with these white women, who share a desire for the black body. Diana, who was born in Jamaica, reveals a preference for black partners. To Winokur, this historical critique of interracial desire reflects "a fascination with the notion of 'the black as other' that, even at its most benign, is an insufficient response to black lesbian privateness, given that Dunye's enterprise is to 'normalize' the black lesbian, to evade the consequences of racial otherness" (239). In consistently questioning interracial desire, Dunye facilitates greater intersubjectivity with the film, inviting all audiences to reflect on the politics complicating black lesbian desire.



Fig. 3, Diana and Cheryl, 1996.

In a sex scene with Diana, Dunye depicts interracial lesbian sexuality as potentially exploitative while also valorising the black lesbian body. In the sequence, Diana initiates physical contact with Cheryl by leaning against her, kissing her, and pulling Cheryl closer. When Cheryl and Diana lean off-screen, the camera focuses on the race film playing on television, which shows Fae Richards slapping a mixed-race woman who wishes to distance herself from blackness to pass among whites. The scene transitions to Diana and Cheryl's sex scene, filled with close-up shots of their bodies entwined. Cheryl's skin is prominently featured, darkened by shadows so it appears stark against Diana's. The scene focuses on Diana touching, kissing, and licking Cheryl's body via close-ups of Diana's mouth and tongue. The tongue is an eroticised object of exploration, signifying lesbian desire and sexuality while also suggesting Diana's objectification of Cheryl's body.

Thus, lesbian sex is normalised, non-phallic, and without the objectification of the phallogentric gaze. Instead of privileging sexual acts, the scene focuses on touch and sensation via close-ups of mouths, hands and limbs, reflecting mutual passion and desire. The earlier scenes' focus on the race film suggests Cheryl's conflicting feelings on interracial desire as invalidating her blackness. The focus given to Diana's desire for her body reveals Cheryl's fear of objectification, which reinforces questions of Diana's fetishisation. Dunye presents herself as desirable to black and white queer women. By placing her body on screen, she normalises and validates her body as desirable, sexual and empowered, an open rebellion against dissemblance and the 'double silence' Hammonds speaks of (304). Dunye's body also serves as a metaphor for larger discussions on desirability, interracial desire, revealing how black lesbian sexuality is policed internally and externally.

The film also interrogates fetishisation through Cheryl and Tamara (Valarie Walker), prompting a discussion on the complexities surrounding black lesbian sexuality and the policing of desire we face. One single black subjectivity is not representative of black lesbian identity, an essentialism that Dunye resists, Sullivan notes (451). In including various lesbian subjectivities, Dunye rejects judgment on desire and interracial dating, opting instead to showcase the politics that mitigate desire. Tamara's accusation of Cheryl wanting to be white by dating Diana reveals "the ways in which Black lesbians face oppression based on race from both Black *and* white lesbians" (Allen 127). Dunye doesn't suggest that dating is the issue, but that power and racial dynamics mitigate these relationships (Allen 129). Tamara accentuates what Sullivan describes as the deconstruction of the "good" and "bad" identities to "reveal the way that oppressions and their internalisations are layered and intertwined" (452). Via Tamara, Dunye makes various black lesbian subjectivities and desires visible, further immortalising the black lesbian body.

The Mark of Lilith (1986)

Written and directed by Bruna Fionda, Polly Gladwin and Zachary Nataf, *The Mark of Lilith* follows Zena (Pamela Lofton), a black lesbian woman researching horror's depiction of the threatening other in monstrous women, and their links to goddesses in mythology. After a horror movie, she meets Lillia, a white bisexual vampire in an unhappy relationship with her controlling, misogynist vampire lover, Luke (Jeremy Peters). Romance with the bold Zena reminds Lillia of her inherent rebellious nature, inspiring her to embrace all aspects of herself. Lillia and Luke represent Lilith and Lucifer, connecting Zena to the historic erasure of queer subjectivities in mythology that she rebels against.

Zena's extra-diegetic narration, fourth wall breaks, and the use of an in-film clapper emphasise self-reflexivity. Further, filmmaker Zachary Nataf confirmed in an interview with *Foreground* that Zena is him before his transition (Jenkins and Ward 5:43, 8:17). These reflexive elements point directly to Zena as a character, a filmmaker making a film within the film, and an avatar of the filmmaker himself. Through her, the filmmakers address the audience directly, immersing the spectator in the film's construction, its fiction and their

shared reality. Participation in the narrative visualises black lesbian subjectivity and projects Nataf/Zena into Lilith's myth, radically altering its meaning transtemporally.



Fig. 4, Zena addresses the audience, 1986.

To signify Zena's transtemporality, the filmmakers place Zena out of narrative time. In a slow panning shot across a dark theatre, Zena's extra-diegetic voice appears before she does, situating her as narrator and character. The mise-en-scène features a nebulous black background and rows of red theatre seats peppered with masked spectators staring into a single-source light, presumably the screen. When Zena is shown, she is shot in a medium close-up, looking directly into the camera. The black background and single source light give the impression of a chiaroscuro, calling attention to the theatre, but relegating all else to background. As Wimbley noted, the double reflexivity of the documentary reinforces her authority as narrator. It also illuminates the identity split between Zena the character, the avatar and the filmmaker. Like Dunye, the theatre in which Zena conducts her direct address is out of narrative time and without location, and as such, can exist anywhere at any time. In this transtemporal moment, Zena's identities inhabit the same space across various points in time. Transtemporality is further reinforced by fourth wall breaks and a clapperboard shot of the film-within-film preceding a smash cut to Zena narrating. These breaks in the narrative flow destabilise time, collapsing the space between audience and film, past and present, fiction and reality.

Destabilisation allows Nataf/Zena the freedom to modify and subvert Lilith's myth. By embracing vampirism as a rebellion against the erasure of black lesbian visibility, Zena subverts the WHP's control of her image. Her vampirism subverts the monstrous feminine trope as it denies the WHP the ability to define itself against her image. Barbara Creed

describes the monstrous feminine as “abject in relation to her sexual and reproductive functions, a misogynistic fantasy ... a construct of patriarchal ideology, and male directors designed to enable the male viewer to explore his own deeply embedded fears about female sexuality” (4). To Creed, the embrace of monstrosity is emancipatory and oppositional in its revolt against ‘aggressive phallacy.’ However, Creed fails to consider how race impacts this theory. In Creed’s definition, monstrosity is defined by WHP. The black woman’s body has long been depicted as a site of abjection from which the WHP defines and reinforces itself. As evidenced in her direct address, Zena’s marginality positions her as oppositional to such definitions. She does not define herself or vampirism as monstrous; she hasn’t become monstrous or violent in her defiance of the WHP and is not made monstrous by her embrace of vampirism or her sexuality. Instead, Zena’s defiant visibility rejects WHP control entirely. She subverts the monstrous feminine by defining herself against the WHP’s monstrosity and projecting monstrosity back onto it.

Further, Zena’s vampirism resists the erasure of black lesbian sexuality and the silence that the culture of dissemblance creates. It grants an escape from the confines of sexual repression, where she can openly display lesbian desire. Tanya Krzywinska suggests that viewers derive pleasure from the lesbian vampire’s evasion of heterosexuality and masculinity, or that she was “built upon the precarious tension between the two” (108). The lesbian vampire is the transgressive figure Nataf describes, though instead of queering the text, the inclusion of Zena’s subjectivity centres black lesbian intersubjectivity.



Fig. 5, Lillia in the mirror, 1986.

In an act of further rebellion, lesbian desire is depicted as restorative and empowering. In one prominent scene, Luke lies in bed while Lillia sits at her vanity, staring into the mirror. Stark, low-key overhead lighting creates a dramatic chiaroscuro effect that highlights these

two spaces in a nebulous black background. This space exists beyond time and borders, symbolising the mythic occupied by Lilith, whom Lillia personifies. When the perspective shifts onto Lillia, the camera acts as a mirror. The lighting reveals more of her body in this shot, while in the dialogue, she asserts that she can see herself. Using chiaroscuro relegates Luke to the shadows and obscures half of Lillia's face. Like the trope, the film divorces Lillia/Lilith from the patriarchal motivations that demonised her. The isolation and highlighting used signify Lillia/Lilith's separation from WHP control via Luke/Lucifer. The shadows indicate that Lillia/Lilith is still confined within the patriarchy but emerging through her connection to Zena.

Reflections emphasise Lilith and Zena's connection as mutually restorative, which visualises Zena as a contemporary revision of Lilith's myth. Lilith, a goddess of Jewish origin transported to Britain, transforms into a rebellious feminist figure marginalised into monstrosity by the WHP. By inverting the life force she represents with the vampire mythos, she is sexualised and controlled by Lucifer/Luke, who represents the Christian WHP. Meeting Zena, who defiantly embraces otherness as a source of power, inspires Lillia to embrace herself as Lilith, thus restoring her reflection. Similarly, Zena's embrace of Lilith restores her own reflection. In a café scene, Zena discusses her research into goddesses with a waitress, noting that most goddesses are connected to blood, a symbol of life. The waitress turns to the large mirror and startles in surprise when she realises that Zena has no reflection. Like Lillia, Zena's lack of reflection in this scene references her disconnection from myth, given the erasure of queer figures by the WHP. In her attempt to trace the lineages of queer empowerment in myth, Zena connects with Lilith. Her restored reflection represents a fragmented identity and history made whole and ultimately visible through inscription into Lilith's myth.

This lack of reflection implies Zena's vampirism, which, when coupled with her identity as a black American, serves as commentary on England's colonial past. Cemented by blaxploitation films like *Blacula* (William Crain, 1972) and *Ganja & Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1973), the black vampire challenges revisionist myths that seek to minimise or erase colonisation and chattel enslavement. Dale Hudson, while discussing vampires and race in *Blacula*, states that the Black vampire speaks to "[enslavement] as a repressed moment in transnational U.S. history" (145). This extends to England's participation in and profit from chattel

enslavement. Zena's visibility refuses the nation's attempt to repress this memory, resisting control and erasure by colonial hegemonies. Conversely, Luke/Lucifer's predatory behaviour represents its ongoing violence, particularly directed at women.

The black lesbian vampire's body reflects human histories suppressed but made undeniably visible. Jasper Lauderdale discusses the radical alterity of the black vampire, a transmutation of the black (notably queer) body that can exist with and beyond the past, present and future (276). The vampire mythos "augments the black body, so consistently deprived of life throughout history and art, with immortality and a timeless point of view" (Lauderdale 277). Though challenging and subverting hegemonic ideologies, the black lesbian vampire remains problematically connected to white anxieties of sexual deviance and promiscuity, which reinforce black women's bodies as a site of abjection and fascination. However, the black lesbian vampire successfully supplants the whiteness and masculinity in the vampire mythos with radical alterity (Lauderdale 289). Blood, sexual desire and violence converge with the adaptability of black women, who have developed strong survival mechanisms existing at the margins of society. The black lesbian vampire is valorous and eternal, occupying the present while transmitting, transmuting and transcending the past.

Radical alterity is also represented in the intimacy between Zena and Lillia. After meeting at the theatre, Zena and Lillia lie in Zena's bed beneath the blankets. The scene is shot at an angle behind Lillia, assuming her perspective on Zena as they kiss. Like *The Watermelon Woman*, this scene centres Zena's body as desirable and Zena herself as sexual. Further, lesbian intimacy is depicted as gentle and slow via kisses along the skin, caressing, and Zena and Lillia embracing each other, eliminating the phallogentric gaze by privileging touch. Power dynamics are carefully negated as Lillia acknowledges Zena's embrace as restorative, while Zena acknowledges Lilith's myth as empowering. This stands in strong contrast to the power dynamics in Cheryl and Diana's relationship. In subsequent scenes, the pair attend a daytime carnival where they kiss in public. They enter the funhouse in which both their reflections are restored, representing the fulfilment they achieve through their relationship.

Lillia/Lilith and Zena's relationship is another subversion. The film portrays and valorises black women, their interracial lesbian relationship, lesbian desire and sex. Lesbian desire and intimacy are normalised, non-phallic, and non-exploitative. Here, black women

are gentle, educated, feminine, and desirable without fetishisation. Like Cheryl, the presence of Zena's physical body inscribes the black lesbian into the mythic past, present and future. Just as Zena restores Lilith's myth, Lilith validates Zena as part of that myth. Thus, Zena/Nataf is made eternally visible, elevated to a goddess figure of resistance, sexuality and life. Rejecting the monstrous feminine, Zena and Lilith subvert the WHP by embracing their Otherness, thereby calling attention to the violence, racism, and misogyny it enforces.

Conclusion

The need for black lesbian visibility in film is not necessarily a demand for recognition. Rather, it is a demand for witnessing to which visibility is key. Kelly Oliver describes recognition as a pathology of oppression: "the internalisation of stereotypes of inferiority and superiority leave the oppressed with the sense that they are lacking something that only their superior dominators have or can give them" (78). Recognition also calls for the WHP to recognise itself in the black lesbian, thereby eliminating difference. As Anat Pick aptly puts it: what is the point of lesbian films if their depiction of desire is normalised like heterosexual desire (104)? Oliver proposes a form of witnessing that "has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and the religious or now political connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or *bearing witness*" (81).

The Watermelon Woman and *The Mark of Lilith* use self-reflexivity and authorship in a radical act of transtemporal visibility. Where Dunye recovers erased black lesbian visibility in the archival past, *The Mark of Lilith* recovers visibility in mythology. Both insert themselves into history and myth as enduring legacies, radically altering present meaning and future possibilities. The audience engages intersubjectively, not necessarily in recognition of themselves, but by bearing witness to a subjectivity undermined by marginalisation. Through it, the audience learns their history and significance, a context Oliver contends cannot be reduced to simple fact (84). For black lesbian spectators, this intersubjectivity renders the black lesbian body material and eternal, for as film survives across time, so does black lesbian subjectivity.

Black lesbian visibility is an act of rebellion, creativity, and radical expression. These films prove that our experiences, though diverse, are shared and our history is worth

constructing. Self-reflexivity thins the boundaries between the spectator and filmmaker, time and space, fiction and reality, inviting the audience into the joys and complexity of the black lesbian experience. We are encouraged by their presence to contribute our own histories, myths, and stories. They require us to bear witness to the black lesbian experience and question the institutions that marginalise. In witnessing, we assume responsibility to make it easier for such representations to exist.

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