

Creating Your Own History: Archival Themes in The Watermelon Woman

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Note: *This review contains some spoilers for the film The Watermelon Woman.*

The Core Values Statement of the Society of American Archivists says that archivists should expand access, respect diversity found in humanity, and advocate for archival collections that reflect humanity's complexity.¹ The reality is often different from that ideal in a field that is overwhelmingly White, as a recent article about Black archives pointed out.² This is evident in Cheryl Dunye's 1996 romantic comedy-drama film, *The Watermelon Woman*, which the Library of Congress added to the National Film Registry in December 2021 for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."³ The film follows the story of one Black woman's determined effort to create her own history and connect with the past. Although this eighty-six-minute mockumentary is over twenty-six years old, its themes of archival limits, power, silences, erasure, and fabrication continue to resonate today.

In the film, Cheryl Dunye plays a videographer (also named Cheryl Dunye) who works at a video rental store in Philadelphia with her friend Tamara (played by Valarie Walker). Cheryl watches a videocassette of an old 1930s film, *Plantation Memories*, and becomes interested in the character Elsie, a stereotypical 'mammy' character credited as "The Watermelon Woman." She then strives to learn more about the actress who played Elsie. One of the first places Cheryl looks is in the basement of her mother's house. Cheryl tells the audience that her mother, played by Cheryl's real-life mother, Irene Dunye, throws nothing away. She says that Irene's filing system needs updating. Her mother tells her about the films she watched

¹ "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

² Harmeet Kaur, "How Black Archives Are Highlighting Overlooked Parts of History and Culture," CNN, February 19, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/19/us/black-archivists-history-culture-cec/index.html>.

³ Nancy Tartaglione, "National Film Registry Adds 'Return Of The Jedi', 'Fellowship Of The Ring', 'Strangers On A Train', 'Sounder', 'WALL-E' & More," *Deadline Hollywood*, December 21, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/12/national-film-registry-2021-list-star-wars-return-of-the-jedi-fellowship-of-the-ring-sounder-nightmare-on-elm-street-wall-e-1234890666>. The film is available for rent on platforms such as Vimeo, Hulu, Apple TV, Prime Video, and BFI. I watched it, using my library card, [on Kanopy](#). It can be watched free of charge on [the Internet Archive](#).



An archivist speaks to the film's protagonist about having a "great system" to organize archival records within the community archives.

growing up in the 1930s and notes that she saw "Elsie" singing in some clubs.

Cheryl continues her dogged search by talking to a person with a collection of old Black films and then traveling to the local public library, likely the Free Library of Philadelphia. After perusing the stacks, she checks out as many books as she can and talks to the reference librarian, a White man who is played by David Rakoff. Wanting information about the Watermelon Woman, she encounters her first archival limit, which scholars Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, Frank Upward, Jocelyn Fenton Stitt, and Sarah Tyson define as barriers created when documents pass into the hands of archival institutions from those who created them, inhibiting attempts to use records to tell family stories and circumscribing efforts to reclaim records about enslaved people.⁴

⁴ Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward, *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier, 2005), 205; Jocelyn Fenton Stitt, *Dreams of Archives Unfolded: Absence and Caribbean Life Writing* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 42; Sarah Tyson, *Where Are the Women?: Why Expanding the Archive Makes Philosophy Better* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2018), 148.

The librarian dismissively tells Cheryl to check the “Black,” “film,” and “women” sections of reference books for information about the Watermelon Woman. With much prodding, he eventually searches his computer and identifies Martha Page as the film’s director, telling Cheryl that information about Page is on a reserve desk on another floor. Although reserve desks serve students and faculty with materials typically meant for university courses, Cheryl is given an exception and accesses the relevant information for her research. Yet, she is still unsuccessful because the materials she looks at don’t have exactly what she is looking for.

Following her setbacks in the library, Cheryl again goes through her mother’s files in the basement. Her mother’s friend, Shirley Hamilton (played by Ira Jeffries), reveals a key clue: the Watermelon Woman’s real name was Fae Richards, which Shirley knew because Fae sang under her real name. Cheryl also learns that, like her, Fae is a “sapphic sister”—a Black lesbian woman—and was in a relationship with Martha Page, the White female director of *Plantation Memories* and other 1930s films.

Through her research, Cheryl learns the lesson that Alta Jett, coordinator for the community-focused *Black Woman in the Middle West* archives project, pointed out in 1986: “if you want the history of a white man, you go to the library. If you want the history of black women, you go to the attics, the closets, and the basements.”⁵ Jolie Braun, a modern literary and manuscripts scholar, has argued that *The Watermelon Woman* highlights the power of archival limits, critiques how archives and libraries control access to records, and reveals power relations that undergird research in those spaces.⁶ John J. Kostka, a moving image specialist, described Cheryl’s contact with the librarian in her reference interview as “frustrating.” His description is accurate: the librarian does not initially listen to Cheryl and only offers assistance and takes her seriously after he realizes that she has done her research.⁷ If Cheryl had been a White woman, the librarian may have been more gracious and less hostile, instead of telling her to check the “film,” “women,” and “Black” sections in a derisive tone.⁸ The librarian, by redirecting her to look in those library sections, is representative of collections reinforcing cultural bias by marginalizing views that are not White, heteronormative, and male.

Although the librarian’s stance toward Cheryl hints that librarians are gatekeepers of information rather than information providers, Cheryl fully experiences the

⁵ Darlene Clark Hine and Patrick Kay Bidelman, “Introduction: The Black Women in the Middle West Project,” in *The Black Women in the Middle West Project: A Comprehensive Resource Guide Illinois and Indiana* (Purdue Research Foundation: Indianapolis, Indiana, 1986), 1.

⁶ Jolie Braun, “Review: Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist & Queer Activism in the 21st Century,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 14, no. 1 (2013): 49, <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.14.1.399>.

⁷ John J. Kostka, “Toward Transgression: The Changing Role(s) of the Postmodern Archivist,” *All Access Pass: Theory + Practice*, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190429001349/https://johnkostka.com/toward-transgression>.

⁸ Jean Bessette, “Composing Historical Activism: Anecdotes, Archives, and Multimodality in Rhetorics of Lesbian History” (PhD Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2013), 169.

power of the archives when she travels to the Center for Lesbian Information & Technology (C.L.I.T.) Archive. While at this collective feminist lesbian archives, a parody of the Lesbian Herstory Archive,⁹ she meets an archivist played by queer academic Sarah Schulman. While researching at C.L.I.T., Cheryl discovers documents and photographs of Fae, including one given to Fae's "special friend" June Walker. Later in the film, Cheryl talks to June, who angrily denies that Fae had a relationship with Page, a White woman.

At C.L.I.T., Cheryl faces pushback from the archivist, who explains that Black lesbian materials are segregated from the rest of the collection and that their donor wanted the materials to be used "exclusively" by Black lesbians. The archivist declares that she respects Black people by crossing out any White people in the collection's photographs. It is implied that this brazen act of record defacement was deemed "acceptable" by the collective running the archives but runs against the wishes of the donor. While the donor restricting access to Black lesbians would seem to reverse archives' typical power dynamics, this liberatory potential is squashed by the archivist who wants to maintain power over the records.

At the same time, the archivist treats the records dismissively, dumping a box of records on a table. As Alyx Vesey, founder of *Feminist Music Geek*, argues, the archivist appears to care little about the fragility of audiovisual materials even as she defends the lack of filing and indexing, saying that volunteers run the archives.¹⁰ This may suggest that there is little interest in the materials and that the volunteers who work at the archives privilege material that they believe others will be interested in or that will be more heavily used. Although the archivist tells Cheryl about lesbian history in the 1930s and lets Cheryl look at the materials, she talks about the former in racially charged language.

Even worse, the archivist says the records are "confidential" and demands that Cheryl leave after Cheryl's White female friend, Annie, films specific records; the archivist declares that researchers can't do so in the so-called "safe space" without the consensus of the entire collective. Cheryl and her friend do not let these impediments stop them from subverting the archives itself. Cheryl predictably bucks these rules and her friend surreptitiously films what Cheryl needs before they leave. Furthermore, the film suggests that there is not a "right" way to archive materials, as Kostka argues in his post about postmodern relativism and archivists.¹¹

⁹ Moira Donegan, "The Watermelon Woman Shows the Power of Gay History," *The New Republic*, July 5, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/143703/watermelon-woman-shows-power-gay-history>; Bessette, "Composing Historical Activism," 184; Rebecka Taves Sheffield, "The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture," *Radical History Review*, no. 120 (2014): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2703751>.

¹⁰ Alyx Vesey, "Bechdel Test Canon: The Watermelon Woman," *Bitch Media*, December 12, 2011, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/bechdel-test-canon-the-watermelon-woman-feminist-film-review>.

¹¹ Kostka, "Toward Transgression."

The disorganization of the C.L.I.T. archives and the barriers Cheryl must overcome to access the materials demonstrate the power that archives hold over information. The archivist uses her power to select and control what records researchers can use; because of this, *AfterEllen*, a feminist pop culture site, called the archivist “humorless” and a “borderline fascist.”¹² The records on Black lesbians are excluded from the main collection of materials, resulting in those with privilege and power, particularly White individuals, comprising the primary cultural memory of the archives. This creates a “void in the collective memory” and contributes to archival silences.¹³

As archival scholar Rodney G. S. Carter has written, silences are often manifestations of those with power to deny “marginal access to archives,” which significantly harms efforts by marginalized people to form their own histories and social identities.¹⁴ *The Watermelon Woman* asserts that archives can be challenged even though they are “spaces of power” haunted by silences. Although Cheryl is not physically denied entry into the archives, the archivist exerts power over her by enforcing institutional rules. She ensures that Cheryl, and her Black female friend Tamara, are marginalized within the C.L.I.T. archive, even though both are lesbians.

Archival erasure and fabrication are major themes in the film. For one, Cheryl makes a living off videos that either exclude or misrepresent those who share her identity, while she simultaneously exploits those videos to create counternarratives about Black women. She uses these films to supplant traditional images of Black women and articulate an alternate structure of Black lesbian relations grounded in “kin and multiracial queer community.”¹⁵ *The Watermelon Woman* uniquely interrogates and exposes the scarcity of Black lesbians in film history, illuminating how queer people suffer historical erasure when they are made invisible in the present. The film creates its own history, fabricating archival materials by staging photographs and creating faux footage. As various scholars and reviewers have pointed out, Cheryl exemplifies the process of creating her own history as she

¹² Shauna Swartz, “Review of *The Watermelon Woman*,” *AfterEllen*, March 15, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071008204613/http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/Movies/2006/3/watermelon2.html>.

¹³ Kostka, “Toward Transgression”; “The Great and Powerful...,” *LIS Theory*, October 23, 2014, <http://listtheory.prattsils.org/the-great-and-powerful/>; *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, s.v. “archival silence,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-silence.html>; Bessette, “Composing Historical Activism,” 183–4.

¹⁴ Rodney G. S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006): 215–221.

¹⁵ Frann Michel, “Eating the (M)Other: Cheryl Dunye's Feature Films and Black Matrilineage,” *Rhizomes*, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210506021330/http://www.rhizomes.net/issue14/michel/michel.html>.

continues her research and sees herself in the subject she is researching.¹⁶ The “invented archive” in the film is not unique; it is also present in Barbara Hammer’s 2000 experimental documentary film, *History Lessons*. The message of *The Watermelon Woman* is that Black queer stories are often ignored while any attempts to find those stories, as reviewers Monique Jones and Peter Keough argued, can be “excruciating.”¹⁷

The Watermelon Woman simultaneously calls archives into question for silencing and erasing queer people while appropriating archival authority. Furthermore, the film suggests that people sometimes need to create their own history. This is vital because other archival silences, such as those in collections focusing on “colonialist encounters” in the Americas,¹⁸ distort the past. *The Watermelon Woman* portrays the negative aspects of “traditional” historical research, libraries, and archives while questioning the community archives model. If the film was made today, it might even highlight digital black holes and information erasure in the digital age.¹⁹

The focus on Black history and Black (in)visibility, and the importance of preserving and sharing history, have been immortalized in the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry through the recent inclusion of *The Watermelon Woman*. The film will be “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” for years to come. Expanding access, respecting diversity, and advocating for archival collections that reflect humanity’s complexity, as the Core Values Statement of the Society of American Archivists states, are turned on their head by this film. The film’s inclusion comes at a time when archives continue to struggle for funding and often depend on external sources for digital access and storage.²⁰ As writers at *Lesbian News*, Colleen Kelsey

¹⁶ Jolie Braun, “Review of Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6 (2019): 2; Harmony Hammond, “Reframing History,” *Albuquerque Journal*, December 9, 2011, <https://www.abqjournal.com/74091/history.html>; Tuula Juvonen, “Don’t Throw It Away!” *SQS*, no. 1–2 (2012): 76; Bessette, “Composing Historical Activism,” 135, 163, 167, 168, 170–172; Anne Stockwell, “Cinema: Color-Corrected Film,” *The Advocate*, no. 728 (1997): 53.

¹⁷ Monique Jones, “11 Black Films That Keep Pride Alive,” *Shadow and Act*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.shadowandact.com/11-black-lgbt-films-that-keep-pride-alive>; Peter Keough, “Slice of Life: *The Watermelon Woman* Refreshes,” *Boston Phoenix*, May 1997, https://web.archive.org/web/20090604010613/https://bostonphoenix.com/alt1/archive/movies/reviews/05-08-97/THE_WATERMELON_WOMAN.html.

¹⁸ Christina Taylor Gibson, “Musical Passage,” *American Archivist Reviews Portal*, September 30, 2019, <https://reviews.americanarchivist.org/2019/09/30/musical-passage>.

¹⁹ Eira Tansey, “Institutional Silences and the Digital Dark Age,” *Issues & Advocacy*, May 23, 2016, <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2016/05/23/institutional-silences-and-the-digital-dark-age>.

²⁰ For instance, Lauren Harper, Director of Public Policy and Open Government Affairs for the National Security Archive, pointed out that the National Archives’ budget has been stagnant over the past thirty years even though the agency’s responsibilities have expanded due to the “explosion” of electronic records held during that time period. Lauren Harper, “U.S. National Archives’ (NARA) Budget: The 30-Year Flatline,” *National Security Archive*, March 11, 2022, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/foia-audit/foia/2022-03-11/us-national-archives-nara-budget-30-year-flatline>.

of *Interview Magazine*, and Black queer studies scholar Matt Richardson all note, the film emphasizes the importance of history-creation, especially in queer communities,²¹ which is as significant now as it was when it premiered.

²¹ Cheryl Dunye, "Cheryl Dunye's Alternative Histories," interview by Colleen Kelsey, *Interview Magazine*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/cheryl-dunye>; "Cheryl Dunye: Documenting Lesbian History," *Lesbian News*, October 21, 2018, <https://lesbiannews.com/cheryl-dunye-documenting-lesbian-history>; Matt Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in The Watermelon Woman," *Black Camera* 2, no. 2 (2011): 100–113.