

Queer Looks

Perspectives on Lesbian and
Gay Film and Video

Edited by
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Routledge
New York London

To Stuart Marshall

Published in 1993 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America on acid free paper

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Queer looks : perspectives on lesbian and gay film and video / editors
Martha Gever, John Greyson, Pratibha Parmar.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-415-90741-1. — ISBN 0-415-90742-X
I. Homosexuality in motion pictures. I. Gever, Martha, 1947—
II. Greyson, John, 1960— . III. Parmar, Pratibha.
PN1995.9.H55Q4 1993
791.43'653—dc20 93-9663
CIP

British Library cataloging in publication data also is available.

That Moment of Emergence

PRATIBHA PARMAR

To be a lesbian means engaging in a complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual regulation. . . . Being a lesbian tests the meanings of sexual identity in ways that evoke intense, sometimes violent, social disapproval, while being straight is taken for granted as a neutral position from which gay folks deviate.

—Martha Gevers¹

For me being a lesbian is not only a fight against homophobia and the kind of homophobia we face everyday, but it's also a fight against the system that creates that . . . a class system as well as a system that is imperialist. It's a system that's responsible for the incidences of racism that all of my family and all of the people I know of Asian and African descent have had to go through in all of the Western countries, and I think it's critical that we come together and bring all these experiences together and actually reach beyond ourselves. . . .

—Punam Khosla²

To be an artist, a lesbian and a woman of color engaged in ^{spatially} mapping out our visual imaginations is both exciting and exhausting. The creative upsurge in black women and women of color's cultural production in Britain has not been given the spotlight and visibility that it deserves. Women of color have been organizing and creating communities which have inspired a new sense of collective identity, and it is only through our own efforts that we have ensured against our erasure as artists and cultural producers.

acceptance of the term

I don't think that this is because of a mere oversight or even deliberate conspiracy. I think it is much more to do with the persistence of a fantasy of what constitutes an authentic national culture, a fantasy which posits what and who is English. The dominance of the ideology of English ethnicity, although deeply ingrained in the cultural canons of British society and arts institutions, is and has been challenged by black artists and cultural producers through our work. We have been changing the very heart of what constitutes Englishness by recoding it with our diasporan sensibilities. Our ancestral as well as personal experiences of migration, dispersal, and dislocation give us an acute sense of the limitations of national identities. Some of us claim an English as well as a British identity, and in so doing transform the very terrain of Englishness and expose the ruptures in the discourses of

authenticity - just as it is posited what is Indian

what are these?



June Jordan (left) and Angela Davis in *A Place of Rage*, Pratibha Parmar

white supremacy. The fact that British national culture is heterogeneous and ethnically differentiated is something that still needs hammering home to those who are persistent in their view that to be black and British is an anachronism. Our visual outpourings are our referents for our "imagined communities" and utopian visions, which we seek to articulate and live and work towards.

By reflecting on my own working practices as a filmmaker and video artist, and in unfolding my personal and historical context, I hope to be able to contribute to the ongoing development of a general theoretical framework for discussing the cultural and political significance of black arts in postcolonial Britain.¹ It is a framework which differs from previous forms of cultural critiques because of the ways in which it seeks to centralize the black subjectivity and our experiences of difference. The more we assert our own identities as historically marginalized groups, the more we expose the tyranny of a so-called center.

I came into making videos and films from a background in political activism and cultural practice, and not from film school or art school. As an Asian woman I have never considered myself as somebody's "other," nor have I seen myself as "marginal" to an ubiquitous, unchanging, monolithic "center." But since my arrival in England in the mid-sixties, it has been a

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"other" is
a leap

constant challenge and struggle to defy those institutions and cultural canons which seek repeatedly to make me believe that because of my visible difference as an Asian woman I am an "other" and therefore "marginal."

There is a particular history that informs the thematic concerns of my work as much as my aesthetic sensibilities. That history is about a forced migration to an England that is intensely xenophobic and insular, an England that is so infused with outdated notions of itself as the Mother Country for its ex-colonial subjects that it refuses to look at the ashes of its own images as a decaying nation, let alone a long-dead empire.

When my family, like many other Indian families, arrived in Britain in the mid-sixties, anti-black feelings were running high and "Paki-bashing" was a popular sport amongst white youths. It was in the school playground that I first encountered myself as an undesirable alien, objectified in the frame of "otherness." All those of us perceived as "marginal," "peripheral," and the "other" know what it is like to be defined by someone else's reality and often someone else's psychosis.

We can read ourselves against another people's pattern, but since it is not ours . . . we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in their discourse.

—Edward Said⁴

I do not speak from a position of marginalization but more crucially from the resistance to that marginalization. As a filmmaker, it is important for me to reflect upon the process through which I constantly negotiate the borderlines between shifting territories . . . between the margin and the center . . . between inclusion and exclusion . . . between visibility and invisibility. For example, as lesbians and gays of color, we have had to constantly negotiate and challenge the racism of the white gay community, and at the same time confront the homophobia of communities of color.

What we have been seeing in recent years is the development of a new politics of difference which states that we are not interested in defining ourselves in relation to someone else or something else, nor are we simply articulating our cultural and sexual differences. This is not a unique position, but one that is shared by many cultural activists and critics on both sides of the Atlantic. We are creating a sense of ourselves and our place within different and sometimes contradictory communities, not simply in relation to . . . (not in opposition to) . . . nor in reversal to . . . nor as a corrective to racism and homophobia, we locate ourselves not within any one community but in the spaces between these different communities.

Toni Morrison was once asked why she wrote the books that she did, and she replied that these were the books she wanted to read. In some ways, the

how
is this
possible?

INTERSTITIALITY

Race & exotics - desiring the other
 Kamala Das' heterosexuality & lesbianism in Nayyoshi

isn't this adopted
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 tradition

reason why I make the films and videos that I do is also because they are the kinds of films and videos I would like to see: films and videos that engage with the creation of images of ourselves as women, as people of color and as lesbians and gays; images that evoke passionate stirrings and that enable us to construct ourselves in our complexities. I am also interested in making work that documents our stories and celebrates and validates our existence to ourselves and our communities. As a lesbian I have searched in vain for images of lesbians of color on the screen but I very quickly realized that they exist only in my own imagination, so one of my aims as a filmmaker is to begin to compile that repertoire of images of ourselves. The joy, the passion and desire embodied in our lives is as important to highlight and nourish as are the struggles against racism and homophobia. Desire for me is expressed sexually, but also in a need to recreate communities which are affirming and strengthening.

Experiences of migration and displacement, and the need to make organic links between race and sexuality, guide my desire to create works that throw up the contradictions of being "queer" and Asian. Images of Asian women in the British media have their root in the heyday of the British empire. The commonsense racist ideas about Asian women's sexuality have been determined by racist patriarchal ideologies. On the one hand we are seen as sexually erotic and exotic creatures full of oriental promise, and on the other as sari-clad women who are dominated by their men, as oppressed wives or mothers breeding prolifically and colorizing the British landscape.

The idea that many of us have our own self-defined sexuality is seen as subversive and threatening by the dominant white society in which we live, as well as by the majority of the Asian community. Within our communities our existence as lesbians and gays continues to be denied or is dismissed as a by-product of corrupting Western influences. In fact many of us are internal exiles within our own communities. This is despite the fact that there is an ancient history of homosexuality in India predating the Western history of homosexuality. This history is only now being uncovered by Indian lesbian and gay historians.

Unique to the British context has been the use of the word "black," which was mobilized as a political definition for peoples of African, Asian, and Afro-Caribbean descent. As different ethnic groups use "people of color" in North America, so in Britain a political alliance was formed using the word black. This united us in a fragile alliance against racism, since we experienced British institutional racism in very similar ways. However, in recent years this strategic use has lost its currency as questions of ethnic difference and national identities begin to take primacy.

The mid-1980s have seen a new generation of video artists and filmmakers emerging from the different black communities in Britain. This growth of

Film as text

independent film and video cultures has shown that there are many of us working not only to challenge harmful images but also to construct a whole new language of visual representation. Instead of allowing our marginality to impose a silence on us, we are actively engaged in making videos and films that have begun to redefine and recast notions of "mainstream," "difference," and "otherness."

bicous

It is important to create and proclaim assertive and empowering images which question and unsettle the dominant discourses of representation of people who are not white, male, and heterosexual, but it is equally important to move beyond the merely oppositional. Interrupting the discourses of dominant media with a strong counterdiscourse or corrective is sometimes necessary and has been an effective strategy used by some black filmmakers in Britain, particularly in the early 1970s. But one of the dangers with this has been the way in which perceptions of the black communities as a homogeneous group have been reinforced. Differences of class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender became subjugated, and the black communities were represented as an undifferentiated mass. Diversity, the multiplicity of our histories, experiences, and identities were reduced to "typical" and "representative" stereotypes.

lumped
 "other"
 to
 white

My personal and political history of involvement in the antiracist movement in the mid-seventies, in feminism, and in lesbian and gay initiatives has given me the grounding for my work in film and video in many fundamental ways.

The development of cultural studies in the mid-eighties has been an important theoretical influence on my work as a filmmaker, and on the work of many other black filmmakers. As a postgraduate student at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the early eighties, I was involved with a group of students in writing and publishing the book, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*.⁵ Our project was to examine the everyday lived experiences of black British people as culture. We developed critiques of the paradigms of race relations which had consistently pathologized black cultures and communities. We also critiqued white feminist theory and practice which did not acknowledge or grapple with the power dynamics around race and class. We rejected their Eurocentric bias and put forward our own analysis. We were the new generation that saw ourselves as both black and British, and, unlike the dominant communities, we did not see a contradiction between these two terms. Our alternative discourse around issues of race, gender, national identity, sexual identity, and culture marked a turning point. We, the children of postcolonial migrant citizens, were indeed striking back with no punches pulled.

As one of the founding members of the first black lesbian group in Britain

in 1984, it was invigorating finally to find a community of lesbians of color where we could talk about our common experiences of racism and isolation within the white lesbian and feminist community, as well as share cultural similarities and a sense of integration. The collective empowerment that came as a result of this coming together was also crucial for our political visibility. The key point here was that my experiences as a woman, as a lesbian, and as an Asian person were not compartmentalized or seen as mutually exclusive; instead it was the ways in which I/we located ourselves within and between these differing subjectivities that gave us a sense of integration. This was against the duality that was constantly being either self-imposed or externally imposed upon us, so that the much-asked question of whether we were going to prioritize our race over our sexuality was made redundant. This claim to an integrated identity was a strategic claim inasmuch as many of us found political empowerment in a collective group identity and a heightening of our consciousness. Of course, in due course many of us also realized that "there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of color, and the (writer or the artist or the lesbian). There are, instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity."⁶

It was only in the late eighties that a rigorous critique of an "identity politics" was initiated, attempting to prioritize or create hierarchies of oppression. This revealed some extremely useful and positive insights, namely, that it is the constant negotiating between these identities that provides the framework for our cultural and political practice. Secondly, identities are not fixed in time and space, but what is valuable is the multiplicity of our experiences as lesbians of color, as women and as black people. June Jordan, the black American poet, writer, and political activist, has said, "We should try to measure each other on the basis of what we do for each other rather than on the basis of who we are."⁷

Indeed, some of the insights about the fluctuating nature of identities and a critique of identity politics have been pioneered and initiated by black feminists and feminists of color, and subsequently incorporated into writings on black cultural production.⁸

The choices I have made about what themes or issues to highlight in my work have also been about timing, funding, and how particular political moments have thrown up urgent issues. For example, I made the video *ReFraming AIDS* in the summer of 1987, when there were concerted and massive attacks both at the local and national level against lesbian and gay rights in Britain. This was at a time when the first government media campaign on AIDS fuelled existing antigay prejudices by representing AIDS as a gay plague. The antigay backlash was vehement, and through the video

I wanted to create a space where different lesbians and gays could talk about the content of that backlash, for instance showing how black lesbians and gay men were being affected specifically around immigration and policing, and how AIDS was being used to further restrict the entry of black people into the country. By intercutting the government media ads with images and voices from the lesbian and gay communities, I also attempted to subvert the dominant images of the disease by linking ideas about racial difference, social difference, and sexuality in an historical context. The filmmaker Stuart Marshall was instrumental in allowing me to make these historical connections within the video.

One of the responses to my making *ReFraming AIDS* was that of surprise. What was I, an Asian lesbian, doing making a video about AIDS that did not have just black women's voices, but also the voices of black and white men? Why had I dared to cross the boundaries of race and gender? Underlying this criticism was the idea that, as an Asian lesbian filmmaker, my territory should be proscribed and limited to my very specific identities, and to my "own" communities.

It is such experiences that have reinforced my criticism of an essentialist identity politics as being divisive, exclusionary, and retrogressive. I would assert that our territories should be as broad as we choose. Without doubt we still need categories of self-enunciation, but we need them in a political and theoretical discourse on identity which gives us the space for the diversity of our imaginations and visions.

While it is crucial to acknowledge Stuart Hall's valuable insight that "it is important to recognize that we all speak from a particular place, out of particular experiences, histories and cultures," for me it is equally important that we are not constrained and contained by those positions . . . by fixed identity tags . . . that we do not get caught up in an essentialist "bantustan" that decrees that you do not cross boundaries of your experiences. Such prescriptive thinking can be both creatively and politically stultifying.

One of my concerns as a filmmaker is to challenge the normalizing and universalizing tendencies within the predominantly white lesbian and gay communities—to assert the diversity of cultural and racial identities within the umbrella category of gay and lesbian. There is a need also to redefine "community," and just as there isn't a homogeneous black community, similarly there isn't a monolithic lesbian and gay community.

In my video *Memory Pictures*, and my films *Flesh and Paper* and *Khush*, I interrogate Asian gay and lesbian identities in ways which point to the complexities that we occupy as lesbians and gays of color. I explore our histories of diaspora, the memories of migration and upheaval, the search for an integration of our many selves, and the celebration of "us," our differences, and our eroticisms.

space
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identity
as fluid

appro -
-printer
(then why
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wishes be
allowed
to do so
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It is a condition of these postmodernist times that we all live heterogeneous realities, constructing our sense of selves through the hybridity of cultural practices, and this is inevitably reflected in the aesthetic form employed in my work. The form itself needs to be interrogated as much as the content, and by using a combination of styles and narratives—for instance, documentary realism, poetry, dramatic reconstructions, experimental, autobiographical—I attempt to enunciate the nuances of our subjectivities in my work. Furthermore, the influences of the mass media and popular culture inevitably find their way into the work in a self-conscious way. The four-minute video, *Bhangra Jig*, commissioned by Channel Four as a “television intervention” piece to celebrate Glasgow as the cultural capital of Europe for 1991, borrows unashamedly from advertising codes and pop promos.

In the film *Khush*, which I made for Channel Four’s lesbian and gay series *Out on Tuesday*, one of my strategies was to use a diverse range of visual modes. So, for instance, my reworking of a classical dance sequence from an old Indian popular film utilizes the strategy of disrupting the given heterosexual codes. In the original film, the female dancer’s act is intercut with a male gaze, but for *Khush* I reedited this sequence and took out the male gaze. I reused this sequence with scenarios of two Asian women watching and enjoying this dance. The gaze and the spectator became inverted. Clearly, postmodernist interest in reworking available material gives us an opportunity to use strategies of appropriation as an assault on racism, sexism, and homophobia. It is these politicized appropriations of dominant codes and signifying systems which give us powerful weapons in the struggle for empowerment.

This hybrid aesthetic, as it has come to be known, works with and against the “tools of the master” because these are tools which we, as cultural activists and artists, have appropriated and reformulated with our diasporic imaginations. In *Bhangra Jig* this was precisely my aim: to allude to Glasgow’s history as the second biggest city of the British empire, as reflected in the city’s architectural signs and symbols. At the same time I juxtapose against these memories of colonial carnage the vibrancy of our cultures of resistance: Bhangra music and dance as signifying practices of Asian youth culture, crossovers of reggae, soul, and traditional agrarian Indian music and dance. For *Bhangra Jig* to be shown several times within one week on British TV (known for its history of stereotyping and the invisibility of self-determined imagery of Asian people) not only disrupts dominant ideas of European culture but also offers new meanings of what constitute national cultures and identities.

Just as much as I distance myself from any notion of an essentialist lesbian or black aesthetic, so, too, do I reject the idea that I am forever relegated to the confines of an outsider looking in. Lesbians of color around the world

are asserting our visions through film and video, and our creative efforts can only but grow in the twenty-first century as the map continues to be redrawn with our imaginations.

Notes

1. Martha Gever, “The Names We Give Ourselves,” in Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge/New York: MIT Press and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 191.
2. Punam Khosla, speaking in the film *Khush*, by Pratibha Parmar, made for Channel Four’s lesbian and gay series *Out on Tuesday*, 1991.
3. See the writings of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, Lubaina Himid, and the journal *Third Text*.
4. Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
5. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).
6. “Woman, Native, Other: Pratibha Parmar Interviews Trinh T. Minh-ha,” *Feminist Review* no. 36 (Autumn, 1990) p. 73.
7. Pratibha Parmar, “Other Kinds of Dreams: An Interview with June Jordan,” *Feminist Review* no. 31 (Spring, 1989) p. 63.
8. See Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 4 no. 1 (1988); *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, S. Grewal et al., eds. (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1987); Pratibha Parmar, “Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation,” in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) pp. 101–126.
9. I thank Trinh T. Minh-ha for voicing this very apt analogy.