

IN-TERRACIAL CONVERSATION

Cheryl Dunye and Alexandra Juhasz

Author's Note: This is a loosely edited transcript of a personal conversation held on Skype in January 2016 between Cheryl Dunye, director, and Alexandra Juhasz, producer, of *The Watermelon Woman*. We consider how both the film, and its recent re-release twenty years after its 1996 debut, put forth productive models to see, think about and discuss interracial interaction, as painful, complicated, and taboo as these interactions and conversations may be. Given Trumpism, and its overt ties to racist, xenophobic logics of exclusion and violence, and given the role that many white women played in his election, we hope the film and our remarks about it can provide some reasoned examples of modes of inclusive interaction in these frightening, confusing and sometimes polarizing times. We originally offered this interracial dialogue—with all of its perils, problems, and promises—as one useful facet for a celebration of Black History Month, 2017, a time when our film was also being re-released and re-discussed and yet its interracial critique continued to remain largely absent. Now many months later, with Trump's consistent fanning of racial antagonism in the US and abroad occurring at a shocking, grueling, and violent public pitch, our offering feels different: quiet, humble, local, sad, hopeful and perhaps even more necessary.

Alex: Cheryl, can we have a hard conversation about a central theme of *The Watermelon Woman*: interracial interaction?

Cheryl: Yes, and thank you, Alex, for inviting us to drop back into that moment.

Alex: Okay. Here goes. As you know, in our film interracial relationships are mostly between Black and white Americans. Of course, there are many other interactions that the film also represents but the film is particularly oriented around Black-

white relations and that is what I also want us to focus on here. I've read a lot of recent writing about *The Watermelon Woman* by the press and by scholars. There has been a considerable re-focus on the film because it has been playing again on screens around the world as part of its 20th year re-release, and this month First Run Features is reissuing a newly remastered DVD in honor of Black History Month. But surprisingly, people rarely talk about that central interest of the film, or they do so in very cursory ways. Is this because attention to Black-white relations is still taboo? Is it that it still feels too dangerous? If so, then it seems to me that interracial introspection is one of the core interests of the film where there hasn't been a lot of movement, over these twenty years, in either representation or daily reality: not that Blacks and whites don't interact commonly, daily, definitively, but that we still don't openly represent, analyze, or evaluate these interactions. Meanwhile, *The Watermelon Woman*, in its narrative and formal concerns, centers itself on how and why Black-white relations, and even more so this very talking about them, are hard to do and often taboo. This is also the subject and action of our conversation now. Other conversation about the film skitters away from this, instead focusing on *The Watermelon Woman's* many other core interests like the relations between truth, history, access to (self) representation, and their relations to Black lesbian feminist identity and community.

Cheryl: I think that the 20th anniversary really did cross the film over into this Black-lesbian-legacy-filmmaking-indie-film moment. It's interesting to see who was in the audiences of the re-release, and definitely that the audiences were mixed. So that's really great. But if I remember correctly, when the film first came out to a community that called themselves "Black lesbians" (maybe not the "queer" community that's looking at it now), they were rejecting the film because they were up in arms about the inter-racial content. But somehow, the awards and the international reception at the time sort of kept the Black lesbian

attention to that problem from bubbling up to the top. What I really find interesting today is that America mostly talks about interracial relationships by looking backwards at them. We never really talk about them in the present, as a difficult thing to try to understand in our now. I agree with you on that completely. It's just too difficult, too close. People don't really want to look or talk about it, at least not in mixed company!

Alex: My memory of showing the film twenty years ago was that it was meaningful for many people active in Black cultural production in the United States as well as for Black people more generally, particularly "queer" Black people and Black lesbians. Whenever we had screenings there were a lot of Black people in the crowd. I remember the opening at Film Forum. It was really thrilling because it felt like a predominantly Black space and an important moment within American Black culture. Yes, there was some debate in predominantly Black spaces about why the major love interests in the movie are interracial, but this conversation was happening within a primarily Black context.

Cheryl: Right.

Alex: This time around, most of the screenings have been predominantly white: say at the MoMA or during our theatrical screening at New York's Metrograph. The only screenings where I've seen Black women or queers talk about the film in the 20th year retrospective, in a predominantly Black space, was at the conference which was held at Cal State, San Francisco, under the organizing hand of Dr. Darius Bost, Black/Feminist/Lesbian/Queer/Trans* Cultural Production: A Symposium Honoring the 20th Anniversary of Cheryl Dunye's "The Watermelon Woman. And so I think it is interesting to look at why, 20 years later, when the film is being understood and celebrated as "the first Black lesbian feature film," it is being watched in public primarily by white audiences.

These thoughts about audience crystallize some of the ongoing tensions or sore spots of interracial experience, and

more so overt conversation about it, both within the film and its reception. They begin to point to the problem at hand: it's really hard to talk about what Black and white people do with Black objects and with interracial objects and how those interact with or expose interpersonal experiences.

Cheryl: Time heals all wounds and I think being able to look at interracial tensions between communities is easier when you are looking back. For example, look at current docudrama and documentary trends; OJ is back. I think his situation is pretty far from our interracial dynamic, but there it is again: the backward look.

Alex: I think that *OJ: Made in America* (2016) is very much in the space of *The Watermelon Woman*! The Black-white relationships that structure both OJ films (also, *The People vs OJ Simpson*, 2016) are not so dissimilar from those in ours. He has an abusive, dominating, violent, sexualized relationship with white women. And then he has a fawning desire to be white, and he aligns himself with the white community again and again, and they fawn back. That is a central thematic of those films and OJ's story. And I think that the violence, the desire, the anger, the power that is inspired by his competing needs for connections, to both whites and Blacks, is live in our film as well.

Cheryl: And that flips to a desire to remain Black when you're in trouble, and how you de-white. The scene in the FX series that was so pivotal in OJ's internal race-crossing was when they took all the pictures of OJ with white people out of the house and they put up all these pictures of OJ with Black people. That's when it flipped ... again. I think this 20-year thing is another sort of flip, as our film becomes "Legacy," a sort of whitening occurs.

Another artwork that seems to focus on this dissection today is *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine's 2015 work, in which you finally hear the other side of that pain. But nobody wants to look at *The Watermelon Woman* that way. They want to be able to sweep those considerations under the rug and focus on other things.

Alex: I'm a friend of Claudia's, and part of her research was to ask her friends to describe for her an awkward, painful, troubling memory of an interracial encounter in our own past. Even though she's a close friend, and I fully understood the nature of her project and research, it felt shameful to expose to her my culpability, my role, my formative experiences as a white person participating in anti-Black racism in our racist culture.

Cheryl: I love Claudia's work. She really touches on the spirit of the uncomfortability of interracial interchanges. And like Claudia I too feel that now more than ever, we need dialogue, across race and class and most importantly intergenerationally. We've all been silent way too long. I think our film was made in a time during cultural production much like today, when it felt much more safe to forget, to not look, and certainly not to show our culpability within everyday racist interactions!

Alex: And it's funny, this definitive not looking, because that's one of the main things *The Watermelon Woman* tried to do! To look, show, see and then think and even talk about it: that culpability, the pain, the awareness when moments become uncomfortable, and also the visible and invisible structures that underlie such intense and formative interactions between Black and white people. Show it. Press at it. Make fun of it. You do realize, Cheryl, that every scene in the film ends up being about Black-white interaction, if you look with that in mind? Every scene! The movie is made of vignettes. Each vignette ends in a punchline. Then there's another vignette, then there's another. Every one of those vignettes, except for something like two, is about Black-white relationships or interactions or conflicts or misunderstandings or misalignments!

Cheryl: Yes ... my favorite scene, which I think is your least favorite, is when Diana (Guin Turner) comes to my place and has dinner with Tamara (Valerie Walker), Stacey (Jaguar Mary) and I. The set dressing, the dialogue ... everything is crafted to spotlight tensions between Black and white Americans.

Alex: Here's another example that make this perfectly clear, the opening two sequences of the film. The film opens on a black/Jewish ritzy wedding. The first joke of the film is that the guests are all uncomfortable, they don't mix, and even all the money spent can't make things okay. The camera focuses on people's unhappy, sweaty faces. The scene ends with Cheryl being pushed out of the way by a domineering male Jewish photographer, and then her reclaiming the photographic scene with her video camera. It encapsulates the idea that she will take control with her camera and that she'll need to engage forcefully with white (male) power to do so.

Next, Cheryl and Tamara interact, awkwardly, with a white woman, presumably the mother of the bride who is paying them for videotaping the wedding. The scene is also about class, and money, and ends with Tamara's punch line, addressed to Cheryl who is trying to keep things copacetic with their boss while also potentially pulling one over on Tamara by not paying her fully: "You're worse than white people in the bank!"

In our movie, you keep circling around the problems or issues of interracial interaction, many times and from many and different points of view. And importantly, every time this is from the Black woman's point of view and every time it is from the Black lesbian's point of view, but the Black lesbian is having those interactions in a variety of ways—both the Cheryl character in the present and the *Watermelon Woman*, Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson), in the past. Cheryl, your work has also engaged with Black on Black relations within the Black community, but there's always a white person present triangulating that space, right?

Cheryl: Yes, but aren't all these things truisms of how media and cultural representation work in America? It's all about simulacra and other academic issues but nobody really goes into the personal and political territory of it. I mean, to return to your earlier point, when people write about the film, they make an issue of the falsification of personal history through our invention of Fae

“The Watermelon Woman” Richards, but they discuss this outside the racial politics that were critical to me in that creation, so that as it is discussed by critics any artist can replace or fake history in any personal or political configuration. But when the Watermelon Woman (the character and the film) does this it is specifically Black, the film is thinking about access to history, power, representation, and memory from a Black lesbian perspective that engages with many other queers, women, men, lesbians, a good deal of whom are white. People have been intrigued by what I was looking at in narrative and in the deeper thematics of history and representation, but I guess the race part, and particularly the inter-race part, didn’t really matter.

Alex: And we’re here to address how it does really matter. You were brave enough to hunker down in that very territory to dissect how and why and when Black and white people interact in America. Sometimes that relationship is motivated by desire. In the movie there are Black people desiring white people and white people desiring Black people. Sometimes it’s power. In the movie there are white people who have power over Black people, and Black people who have power over white people and it’s even more complicated when sometimes that power is written into the desire. There’s anger, sometimes it’s disdain, sometimes humiliation. All of those, and probably more, made apparent by visualizing and dissecting Black-white interactions across a variety of interactions led by either Cheryl or Fae Richards.

Cheryl: It’s interesting to look at Raoul Peck’s film, I’m Not Your Negro, which also looks at the same difficulty with a backward lens, and finally talks about the pain that pushed at the conversation between race, class, gender, and sexuality in earlier moments in American history. If you look at Baldwin’s life in particular ... this killed him: the painfulness of life built around wanting acceptance from the white Intelligentsia, and the tension and contrast of who you are and how you’re treated as a Black person. This pain makes work, and I think that’s one way to look at what worked with *The Watermelon Woman* too.

Alex: It generates friction; it generates power.

Cheryl: It generates tension and power and we could ride on it. I wouldn’t say it’s trope-ish, but it is definitely authentic. So there is a true authenticity in those complex feelings that audiences tap into.

Alex: Right, but of course the movie is most famous for faking things as a path to authenticity. People who are reading this may know that when we made it, I was actually your producer and you were really the director. But also at the same time, we ourselves were in a Black-white interracial lesbian relationship that was organized around, what, all those words above: desire, power, anger, humiliation... And on top of all that, I played the white director from the past, Martha Page, and you played the Black woman in the present, “Cheryl.” So, true authenticity was live just as we were also faking lots of things.

Cheryl: But most people didn’t know this, as far as the film went.

Alex: Just the people who knew us, right? I played Martha Page, who produced films that Fae Richards, “the Watermelon Woman,” acted in, but then I also actually produced the film *The Watermelon Woman*. Martha Page is in many ways like me because of the cultural capital that she had, and class capital that she had, and white privilege that she had, and capital capital that she had, and the fact that she could move in spaces that Fae Richards couldn’t.

Cheryl: And you, as a producer, were able to do that too, as you were a professor at Swarthmore at that time and had that kind of intellectual capital that allows interracial musings more easily than the monetary capital that made Fae Richards into “The Watermelon Woman,” within the context of the film’s storytelling. I think that the film was made with those authentic feelings.

Alex: So, you’re saying my cultural capital or your cultural capital?

Cheryl: I guess the intersection of them. That’s a different level of intersectionality, a different way to think about that term that has been so useful in other ways.

Alex: That's what's exciting, that's what's captivating, that's what you desire in any relationship: intersections! In interracial relationships, for the characters in the movie, for human beings, for you and I, we bring different cultural capital to the table and interchange them. At that moment, I was a young professor, but I already knew a lot about academic stuff. You were becoming a "famous Black artist." You had cultural capital that I had no connection to at all, or only some, and I wanted more! We were both interested in what we didn't yet have. We were curious ... radically! Yes there's a lot of capital at play, but it's never just or only the white person's capital.

Cheryl: It's so interesting that you push this envelope here a little bit more. The film was able to ride into the space because of the intersectionality of interracial cultural capital. It showed meeting in that plane where both sides can communicate about the importance of it.

I also do think that when you look at those moments historically that really work in film it is because of those connections or conflicts. Thinking about *Moonlight* in these terms, here's a film that might be inaccessible to some Black audiences, content-wise, because it is made by a Black man/intellectual. And this Black man was made by just this intersection of intellectuality. The content of this film is all Black. There is not a white person in this film, which I think is quite interesting, given its authors, but access to the film's story seems as dependent on class, or cultural capital and education, as it does on race.

Alex: Interesting. All Black spaces do seem to figure in important ways right now, for Blacks and whites, and by this I think we mean both representationally and in terms of reception: so I mean what is seen and also who sees it in what contexts. Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) is another amazing intervention in this (almost) all-Black contemporary space we're describing. Every image in his astounding, shattering collage is of Black people. It was shown in a gallery in Harlem. When I was there

(with our two kids in tow, one who is Black and the other one who is white), the crowd was mixed. His film, and other current cultural expressions, allow us to see and ruminate upon how racism, and racial antagonism, violence, and lack of trust are all very very high right now for Black Americans and as experienced by Black Americans. As high as they've ever been in my memory. Given this understandable animosity, and fear, and distrust, people feel like maybe it's time to hunker down and just be with their own for awhile. Black people don't trust white people, and white people are even more afraid than usual. I don't mean afraid of violence per se, I mean afraid to say the wrong thing around Black people, especially in moments like this, where interracial dialogue, and understanding and misunderstanding, is the forum, the subject, and the haunting possibility behind every verbal move. So people are resistant to engage in harder conversations because they feel so dangerous and people are protecting themselves in different ways.

Cheryl: I do agree that distrust and fear are heightened now. And it's not just a Black and white thing. It's also very very global. So many Arab, Latino, Asian, Muslim, Christian, Jewish communities are freaking out right now. But for Black people I think we feel that this is a very familiar feeling. Historically speaking, we have always felt like this about white people.

Alex: Yes. And I understand why Black people are even more suspicious and angry and hostile towards white people today. I would be too. At the same time I have to say, this heightened, dominating mistrust is very sad for me, as a white American, in relationship to where we might have gone, where many of us were building towards, and where we are now. This is not a judgement of people at all but rather a sad accounting for where we are today.

Cheryl: *The Watermelon Woman* was my anger around interracial dynamics and the hard-licking of wounds and the wounds were very ...

Alex: Anger?!

Cheryl: In the sense of interracial stuff, and desire, one response. I was closer to the Heat

Alex: You were angry at me?

Cheryl: I wouldn't say I was angry at you, no, no. I'm talking more about socially, culturally, moving through the world, not you.

Alex: I know, but it gets played out as individual people (you and I), and as the characters (we play) in the film.

Cheryl: Let me finish my thread, and then I'll go back to the thing about angry at you ... I was hanging out with a friend last night, a Black academic, and he was on Facebook. I said that I want to start a new test for my white friendships on social media. When I look at their photos and postings, if they are "down with the cause" but none of these people's social media have any Black people in them, or other races, then I have to question those friendships. There is the sense of, "I'm down with you, I'm marching with you, I'm down with your cause," but then there's no interracial life. So, they need at least three pictures. That's my new little test.

Alex: I think that's totally fair. It's the Black-del test: how many pictures, how many scenes, do you have, if you're a white person, where a Black person has a speaking role on your feed?

Cheryl: I'm even talking about gatherings of people that you're hanging out with, weddings, social things ...

Alex: I understand what you're saying, but I want to nuance that in two ways. One, if you're a white person in America, I'm not speaking of myself—I'm speaking generically of "white people," I will speak about myself soon—it's scary to bring people of color into your world, onto your feed. First, white people are afraid that they're going to say something wrong, or do something wrong, and they're going to get called out on it. White people don't want to be perceived as being stupid or racist. And to be clear, I don't want to equate the fear of being called out to the chilling realities of systematic state, police, and other anti-Black violence. Of course the scales and meanings of these fears and

their ramifications are incommensurate. Secondly, if you're the generic white person, I think it may seem like there are obstacles in the way of socializing or otherwise engaging with people of color or their cultural production. Some Black people and other people of color are choosing to disengage with white America, to this best of their ability, because we live in such hostile times. Others are already segregated within our racist society, probably not by their choice. So making an ongoing daily life practice of creating a complexly mixed racialized life, organized by dialogue and meaningful generative interaction, is an increasingly hard project in America even as it becomes a more and more critical one. Imagine if you've never studied this, worked on it, committed to it—that is your role as a white person in inter-racial exchange—I imagine it's even harder still.

Cheryl: Even down to the child.

Alex: Yes, even down to that we have a Black child and a white child.

Cheryl: Birthing an interracial child myself was ...

Alex: Not easy to do! So to hold someone to task for their Facebook walls, you have to at least acknowledge it's not easy to do! To have a wall that passes the Black-del test, you have to make a commitment, you have to make it a daily life practice!

Cheryl: Have some drinks with a person of color! Take some pictures ...

Alex: This is one way that racism works! I would imagine if Black people want to do the opposite, "have some drinks with a white person," there are places to go, marking how dangerous this is to be sure in many of those "white" spaces: this is "the world," or perhaps we should say "the white world passing as 'the World.'" However, if and when white people want to do it, that is enter or even find the "Black world," that is a complex and often unmapped project to a place we may not even be invited to, and so we have to do it very carefully, very tenderly, very slowly, with respect, and humbleness and permission—person by person, project

by project—and you really end up having to make it a serious commitment because it has to be real, and persistent without being overbearing, and it's so easy to do it badly. You have to be willing to make and learn from mistakes, again and again, and that never really ends, that is the mistakes that keep coming since what it is to be white and Black in America changes. And, Black people don't work at it in the same way or for the same reasons. Yours is a different but related project with different fears, needs, consequences, and motivations. I can only learn what that feels like for Black people by talking with you, or engaging with your art and politics. Our fears are different, the consequences of our action are different, even if our impulses might be similar. But no one likes being called a racist. It's humiliating and scary.

Cheryl: But I do get called out for things around race! To use a line from the film "...I am black woman, black woman I am ..." What I get called out for is how I live my Blackness. Like there's supposed to be some universal way all Black people have to perform. My Blackness has never been that; it a completely expansive reality for me.

Alex: Wow. Whiteness often feels like a straight-jacket to me ... So were you drawn to me because you were curious about whiteness?

Cheryl: No, not at all, because I already had white lovers in my life.

Alex: But also you live in a white America so it's not as intriguing to you. You liked the fact that I was an intellectual and Jewish.

Cheryl: I went out with you because I thought you were cool, and maybe ... I'm trying to think if the whiteness did play into it ...

Alex: I wouldn't say that I went out with you because you were Black.

Cheryl: You have the kind of qualities I was looking for in a person all bundled into one. It wasn't like, "oh and she's white," but it definitely is hard, and I only talk about it in the sense of desire, to find people that can flow and cohabitate, people in your

inner circle who can flow through interracial desire, and a critique on race, while allowing and not allowing space, and know that at the bottom it's just about being human.

Alex: I agree. I didn't go out with you because I was looking to go out with a Black person. Or the reason I liked you wasn't because you were Black. Yes, you are absolutely right, it is a whole human being and one of the cool things about you happens to be that you're Black in a very unique way. As is your intelligence, your creativity, your humor, your talent, which are affected by your Blackness, too.

I think that the reasons for Black people to form Black only spaces are utterly valid, and necessary, especially right now; I'm not sure it is useful to have white only spaces but I could think about it. But I think it is a really bad moment if we're not also having other conversations together in purposeful interracial spaces. Such spaces are hard and they are scary because you don't want to sound like you're turning something complicated about somebody else into their most vulnerable or visible or even likable trait.

Cheryl: I'm allowed to change and I'm actually feeling like I'm comfortable in the inter-racial space and the space is a lifestyle. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid to hold those conversations in that space.

Alex: I'm not particularly afraid either, but I have been experiencing moments recently where the people in a room assume that all the white people there are uneducated, unthoughtful, uncommitted, and have a white Facebook page. That simplifies the more complex renderings that we've been pointing to and the possibility for white people to adapt and engage. There is some number of white Americans who have spent a good part of our lives reading, making art, engaging community, engaging conversations, engaging politics, teaching, and otherwise committed to better understanding our role in anti-Black racism as white people. If white people can't get educated, can't be part of the conversation, if we can't make it a life-commitment to

understand anti-Black racism and be committed to anti-racism, then where are we and where can we go, and I don't just mean we white people, I mean all of us? We are in a bad place. I feel like we are in that place right now.

Cheryl: A painful and more conscious place is a better way to describe it because "everybody" around the world is feeling the vibration of this turbulence. It's almost like the 21st century is finally kicking in with all its drama and we all are creating comfortable and safe bubbles to not deal with it. Have you watched the stand up called *Baby Dragon* by Ali Wong? There is one joke where she said she is Chinese and Vietnamese, and her husband is Filipino and Japanese. And since they are Asian, what you get to do is go home together and be racist ... to Koreans ... because they're not that race. So there's something about that comfort. There is a very strong feeling about keeping it in your own race, and sure you can have interracial friends but don't bring it home. That really does have to change.

Alex: In *The Watermelon Woman*, the Cheryl character doesn't feel that way—at home, or comfortable—in all Black communities or in any community, really. Blackness for that Cheryl, and also Cheryl the human being I think, sometimes feeds her and feels like home and sometimes feels deeply alienating and upsetting and hard, whereas some white or mixed gatherings can feel at least a little like home. That is one of the film's messages: Blackness is not your home anymore than queerness is your home any more than trans-ness is your home any more than middle-classness... They're all your homes and they are all also places of potential strife and aggression and feeling uncomfortable. Gender is another of these places that are not home for all, every time. Instead, we have to build these homes. We build them with like-minded people because of their ideas, because of their commitments, because of how they've lived their lives in or alongside that race, or gender, or sexuality, what art they've made, how they flow as human beings.

Cheryl: Actually, a lot of the Black people who have done the work that is most formative to me as an artist have been or are in interracial relationships. Which is funny ... Well it's probably not, it's probably offensive. It goes all the way back to my whole *Imitation of Life*, Zora Neale Hurston thing, you just find a place to be able to live and speak and bump into and be uncomfortable about these things in a living growing flowing way.

Alex: One of the things that happens if you're in an intimate relationship with someone who's not your own race is that you get to have these hard conversations at home. In a place that feels pretty safe, and you get to test it slowly. You get to make mistakes, and they're not in public. You work them through with your partner as best you can. I think in America where race and racism are arguably our fundamental and foundational trouble, it's really important that we do that somewhere: test out our own racism, as well our best attempts to learn past it. If we are not doing it in interracial relationships then we should be finding ways to do it at dinner or at bars, making art, while we're teaching, or through our activism. We have to find or make the places where we can have those conversations in home-like environments, otherwise to our peril. I feel like that is what *The Watermelon Woman* is about. This is a Black lesbian film that makes that courageous call for dialogue, no matter how messy, ugly, uncomfortable, funny or pleasurable. White people have to make a commitment to being in those dangerous places and building those dangerous places, too.