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JASON AND SHIRLEY (2015)

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In the '90s the only film about Black gay men in the canon was *Portrait of Jason*.
We aren't represented, we are angry.

– Stephen Winter (“*Chocolate Babies Q&A*” [May 2021])

Anger

“I’m angry,” playwright Jeremy O. Harris said in 2021, referring to Stephen Winter’s 1996 film *Chocolate Babies*, “that I was robbed of this film canonically” (“*Chocolate Babies Q&A*”). But who robbed Harris? Why was this gay Black 31-year-old wunderkind – whose *Slave Play* enjoyed a reprisal on Broadway after receiving a record-breaking 12 nominations for the 74th Tony Awards, and no wins! – angry? And why is Stephen Winter, a gay Black male filmmaker from a previous generation, also incensed? Is it how Black and gay Jason Holliday was misrepresented as the subject of a 1967 documentary portrait bearing his name (*Portrait of Jason*), in a first and now canonical role on screen? Or that *Chocolate Babies* (1996) and Winter’s homage to Holliday, *Jason and Shirley* (2015), are two of what is still too few? The answers are simple and also very hard, pointing to interlocked systems that create, perpetuate, or seek to change (or queer) taste, gates, and the canons that result.

A film being “in the canon,” one in a list of celebrated greats, allows for more: more viewings, writing, money, community, more chances to make more, and more opportunities for someone who needs it to not be robbed. But as Harris, Winter, and I will soon attest, queering the canon proves to be not just tricky ... but often infuriating.

Simply getting an independent film made is hard: you need an idea, and then a crew, equipment, and funding. Then you need to get it seen. Festivals, distributors, teachers, fans, funders, and scholars all play some part in creating visibility.



FIGURE 46.1 Jack Waters in *Jason and Shirley* (Photo by Ricardo Nelson, courtesy of JaShirl LLC).

Tougher still is how a film can stay readily available over time and platforms. Libraries, archives, distributors, and self-distribution can keep a film around, but this demands diligence over time. Then, how does a film accrue enough cultural capital to be remembered enough so that any Black gay man in need would know it existed?

Women, people of color, the disabled, queers, and others denied access to voice for most of film's history began making indie films in some numbers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s aligned with opportunities connected to technological and social movements. It was not until the 1990s that New Queer Cinema (named as such in 1992 by B. Ruby Rich in *Sight and Sound*) heralded a relative deluge of narrative feature films where there had been zero, including *Chocolate Babies*, which Harris was glad to see at *Queering the Canon: BIPOC NY*, but still mad about because of all the earlier not-seeing. This a matter of canons, taste, and also of gates, and thus fundamentally of race. Many forces need to align for a film to end up “in the canon.” As Geoff King explains in *Quality Hollywood*, prestige is awarded by gatekeepers like festival programmers, buyers, critics, and professors. Awards (like the ones #MostTonyNominatedOneHitWonders O. Harris did not get), reviews, and scholarly book chapters are interrelated symbols and practices of growing cultural valuation. And there is a “political dimension” to the traditions of giving value, itself producing a predictability and circularity to entry (King 19). Exasperation results when oppressive cycles of distinction stay stuck. Shyon Baumann identifies a “legitimation framework” that includes opportunity, resources, and

“intellectualizing discourses” (18) like this one. And then, some artists are downright counter-cultural. More than wanting *in*, they seek to stay out and proud, so as to critique, change, or demolish the structures that produce legitimation. Some people do not want to be seen on others’ terms. Many members of BIPOC queer New York scenes (like Winter, Jason, and Harris) live countercultural lives organized against hetero-patriarchy, cis-normativity, white privilege, racist capitalism, ableism, and the like, not to mention “straight” understandings of drugs, sex, work, family, and art.

Jason and Shirley (2015) is a film about the many costs of (not) being seen on others’ terms and the related delights of living on your own. It is a creative remake of one of the only films “in the canon” made before the 1970s by a woman: Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason*, discussed in this collection by James Morrison. Hers is a documentary about Shirley (and us) seeing Jason talk and talk. He is the first Black gay man to be willingly out on camera because this could (and does) lead to severe consequences (humiliation, violence, oppression), as he testifies to in the film. While Clarke also suffered the indignities of sexism and racism as a Jewish woman director who made critically acclaimed films, her *Portrait of Jason* has enjoyed countless honorific efforts (like Winter’s, Morrison’s, and mine here),¹ as well as its share of censorship given the salacious nature of Jason’s act and identity.² *Jason and Shirley* (and *Portrait of Jason*), queer or bust the canon by making films about (and by) people who are not supposed to be seen, who are deemed distasteful or objectionable, or who make some squeamish or outraged. Anger defines the scene. In both films, and the intellectualizing discourses that buoy them, outbursts of emotions, both on and off camera, allow us to see the stakes for those who experience under- or misrepresentation, as well as those who choose to challenge this legacy. How are canons made or changed? According to Wyatt D. Phillips, “Independent cinema is generally seen as a space for those marginalized by the mainstream to find a ‘way in’ to the conversation, but as this chapter makes clear, even independent cinema itself engages such boundary-forming and canon-forming practices.”³

The narrative film, *Jason and Shirley*, and the documentary it mirrors, *Portrait of Jason*, are self-reflexive works about formative hierarchies within American culture and its indie filmmaking. “I can’t make it with you; you can’t make it without me,” says Shirley (Sarah Schulman) to Jason (Jack Waters) in *Jason and Shirley*, reflecting lines spoken by the real Jason to the actual Shirley: “It gets to be a joke sometime: who’s using who.” The significance of support and censorship, taste and anger, power and cruelty in the workings of independent cinema and American culture – and how these are imbricated by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality – affect us all. An aggravating obstacle to the queering of the independent film canon is white dominance. “Oppression by white people... There is a lot of material there,” explains Jason to the camera, and to Shirley, always off screen, but in the picture even so.

Canon(s)

Jason and Shirley premiered at BAMcinemaFest in 2015 and went on to play on the queer film festival circuit. At the time of this chapter's initial writing, it was available on vimeo, distributed by the filmmaker.⁴ Later, Winter gained a much-deserved career benchmark. In October 2021, his films became available on the Criterion Channel, albeit only for a limited time (Hereford, Williams). Hence, this mark of prestige and opening up of access was quickly closed down again, evidence of the churning, burning cycles of distinction that regulate visibility. Thus, while this tale of anger, taste, and action hits at one happy ending, it circles forward to consider what enabled (and then hindered) this newfound (and easily lost) attention. There has been little written about Winter.⁵ Robert Mills, in a forthcoming piece about *Chocolate Babies*, reflects on these canon-troubles: "resisting an unproblematic alignment with either its cinematic or political contemporaries, *Chocolate Babies*' insurgent novelty here seems to have had the inadvertent consequence of obstructing its own entry into a periodized corpus" (3–4).

Jason and Shirley – like *Chocolate Babies* – is an insurgent and hard to align film made in Winter's signature style and unapologetic position, one built from a countercultural, avant-garde, and radical dismissal and attack on dominant culture. A hard-to-pigeonhole "drama fantasy comedy" (as Wikipedia labels it), *Jason and Shirley* blends narrative, performative, experimental, and documentary techniques to reconsider *Portrait of Jason*, itself a hard-to-categorize film. Winter, working in the canon form, albeit (borrowing from the musical definition of "canon") "at some other pitch," begins his version at a time unpictured in the original, before Jason arrives at the Chelsea Hotel. Behind the scenes, with the director and crew as they prepare for the shoot, we meet these characters, see the hard work of filmmaking, and become privy to the power relations that underwrite their scene, as the scene expands to include several rooms of Clarke's apartment and the roof of the Chelsea Hotel. These are narrative and visual motifs that challenge the stark, long-take, single-subject gaze of the original where Jason's face and one wall are all that we watch for more than two hours. Winter embellishes and extends Clarke's constricted frame, while also externalizing Jason's frame of mind, through the addition of trippy fantasy or perhaps hallucination sequences, fueled by what we did see, in the original, of Jason's drug and alcohol use, as well as his anger, sadness, and unrequited longing. We are made privy to some of the debauchery that Jason previously could only testify to as oft-told tales. In the remake, we watch Jason (remembering, fantasizing) having sex with an older white woman while working as her "houseboy" (played by Waters's real-life partner, Peter Cramer), and with a younger white male lover; in conversation with his dead mother; getting a heroin fix; and performing his much-talked-about "act" in a glittering, glamorous, empty club.

Outside of Winter's outré subjects and formal experimentation, there are other blocks on his long road to canon. The owners of Milestone Film and Video, Amy Heller and Dennis Doros, played their part. The distributors of *Portrait of Jason*, and the directors of Project Shirley – an “ongoing commitment to learn everything about Clarke as a director, an artist and a person” (Heller “*Jason and Shirley*”) – also attest to seek canonical change:

At Milestone Films, we sought out films that reflected the lives and work of African Americans, women, LGBTQ people, and Native Americans. Rather than smashing icons, we decided to work to radically reshape and enlarge the pantheon we believed in. [...] We are still at it. And we are amused to learn that many film programmers have adopted our Milestone motto: ‘We like to fuck with the canon!’

(Heller et al., “*How Can Film*”)

As do *Portrait of Jason* and Shirley Clarke! Clarke's inclusion of her own directorial voice, as well as the beautiful roll-outs of film stock and blurs as the camera comes out and in to focus, are two of *her* milestones, indications of her mastery and her privilege and power in this interrogation of filmic control (Mekas). Winter makes this explicit through scripted interactions where Jason (Waters) and Shirley (Schulman) discuss the play of power between them. This is only another canonical move, mirroring the master:

JASON: I did underestimate you.

SHIRLEY: What a surprise: that happens every day of my life.

JASON: What happens to you when the tables are turned?

SHIRLEY: Now, I'm the director. There's enough movies about women not by women.

Even as Winter's film thoughtfully considers Shirley's position, Milestone took umbrage at his portrayal of Clarke. In a scathing and tarnishing turn, these bulwarks of independent cinema penned an opinion piece, “*Jason and Shirley: The Cruelty and Irresponsibility of ‘Satire,’*” perhaps unselfconsciously taking up (again borrowing from the musical definition of “canon”) a “retrograde mirror”: “We feel we must go on the record about the film's inaccurate and simplistic portrayals of a brilliant filmmaker and her charismatic subject.... The filmmakers claim the right to re-imagine the events that took place in that Hotel Chelsea apartment, but they fail to understand something that Shirley Clarke knew and conveyed in all her films: the need for integrity.”

Winter imagines lots of things, including (as did Clarke), the play with and movement of integrity between people joined and separated by artificial hierarchies. In this, we all play a part – as viewers, writers, distributors, students,

canon-makers – although this is usually left offscreen, and only some of us, it seems, are self-aware. Okay... I too quickly entered the fray, writing an opinion piece for *IndieWire*:

I commend and support Milestone's project of unearthing and sharing materials for scholars, teachers, and fans of Clarke, and also acknowledge and salute their under-sung role as distributors of avant-garde, experimental, and independent cinema, including the work of female film directors, like Clarke and others whose voices and vision would otherwise fall outside the scope of accessible media culture.

(Juhasz "In Defense")

I go on to explain that I too am a supporter of Winter's work. As the white, female, culturally Jewish, and queer producer of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) – trying to gain traction for our tiny indie film, the first African American lesbian feature: "I knew about the glaring and damaging under-representation of Black queer Americans, about the obstacles to entry for films about and from this perspective, and perhaps as critically, the haunting burden for most artists in such a terrain to make and share 'positive images' of their under-represented community."

Back to Heller and Doros, in the name of Shirley: "Lazy filmmakers make bad movies and *Jason and Shirley* is false, flaccid and boring – unforgivable cinematic sins. Perhaps its most egregious and painful crime is taking the strong, brilliant woman that Shirley Clarke truly was and portraying her as a lumpy, platitude-spouting Jewish hausfrau." At this point, I will let their take-down skitter off this rondo. I do not want its ill-will to further saturate this consideration, even as I emphasize how their words did serve some role in muffling the film's opportunities. Elsewhere, I have written about the formative role of censorship in the history of AIDS cultural production. I note that the anger that it instills in those it tries to silence often produces the reverse, canon-like (Juhasz "AIDS Video"). And *Jason and Shirley* is an AIDS film. Schulman, Waters, and Winter are central players in the New York and international AIDS cultural scene. More on queer scenes soon.

In *Jason and Shirley*, Winter and his co-screenwriters and leads, the Jewish, lesbian Schulman and the Black, gay Waters, do perform as once-alive people with similar positions. And yes, some aspects of these portrayals are cruel, if also funny, sad, and complex. In their narrative re-rendering, these artists imagine what never made it to the documentary screen in Shirley's great work. But also, critically, Schulman and Waters perform an eerie doubling – canon-like – of the self-aware performances first enacted by Jason who played himself for a Shirley with her own need to stage power. "A man's world is a woman's world pretending to be a man's world," explains Jason (Waters) to Shirley (Schulman). Or as the real Jason puts it: "Sell a little tragedy; people like to see you suffer." Thus, if there is cruelty, irresponsibility, or

satire (in all this, from films to criticism to screening series conversations), this is canonical in the musical sense: mirrors in the opposite direction. For Schulman is one of our period's rare white, Jewish, lesbian artists to (finally, deservedly) reach canonical attention as an author and playwright; and Waters is an infamous denizen and revered artist of this and previous periods' demimonde of BIPOC queer New York. People, films, and causes move into and out of the picture as canons are changed within and by communities or art scenes. Writes King, "An art world, for [Howard] Becker, is constituted not just by a body of work but also its accompaniment by a range of institutional and discursive practices through which claims to the status of art are made, legitimized or contested – processes central to the notions of quality" (17).

The idea that films are placed into canons based on meritocracy is challenged by any look at the inner workings of the organizations and individuals entitled to choose. But, of course, there are many canons: mainstream, indie, Black, queer, academic, and so on. These influence each other; some are widely known, others stay small. The shaming of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (Barbaro) and the campaigns around #OscarsSoWhite (Ugwu) are contemporary efforts to reveal (and change) the longstanding obstructions and obfuscations behind mainstream film awards and the significant attention they allow. In a similar vein, Matt Brim's discipline-busting work, *Poor Queer Studies*, considers hierarchical support in another institutional setting: "To what extent does academic Queer Studies trade on the value – and therefore the values – of its wealthy institutions, thereby sustaining their commitment to structural inequality?" (10). His answer? "Queer Studies, like much of academia, construct[s] its identity around the myth of meritocracy that disguises the unqueer protocols of academic elitism" (195). How is this related to the queer BIPOC film canon that some of us need?

My back and forth over email about this chapter with the collection's editors reveals how even the most open-minded scholars can be hindered in our queer valuations by tastes and gates. As Winter does in *Jason and Shirley*, let's take a peek behind-those-scenes.

AJ: [Dear] Justin and Wyatt: I understood an essay I could write. On Stephen Winter's *Jason and Shirley* (2015). An essay about the film would put it into the Black queer canon, place it into American experimental documentary, think more about Winter's oeuvre, and would also talk about how it was black-listed by Shirley Clarke's distributor, Milestone Film and Video, and would, thus, of course, also need to be about *Portrait of Jason*. ("Re: An Invitation" 15 Dec. 2020)

In response a few days later, Justin Wyatt and Wyatt Phillips inform me that their editors have set forth some limiting pre-conditions for entry. "Routledge wants every film title to be accessible within both North America and Europe."

They ask, “Is *Jason and Shirley* readily available?” (Wyatt). I inform them that Stephen has affirmed that the film is available on his vimeo site, and that he is in negotiations for a broader distribution. They reach out again and I am informed that vimeo won’t cut it. I respond from the angry space of canon-busting.

AJ: Might there be a way to be more creative and/or flexible about this? The film’s lack of distribution is a sign and symptom and outcome of the very issues about voice, access, power, and legacy I’d want to consider in American Indie Cinema.... I believe that this is telling us something about academic scholarship and publication and its place in promoting or maintaining power and visibility in light of race, gender, and sexuality, that I think we need to address head on. (“Re: An Invitation” 16 Jan. 2021)

The Wyatts listen, readjust, and play their part in expanding canons. This chapter results.

Excess, Rage, Legibility, and Legacy

In 1967, a white Jewish female filmmaker – in an act of cinematic bravura aligned with avant-garde techniques of her scene – invents an austere, minimalist style to clarify the power of documentary as it aligns with gender, race, class, and sexuality. Decades later, styles and scenes a-changing, Stephen Winter tells his version of one Black gay man’s story. Winter’s style, like that of the gender-non-conforming performance artists, activist lesbians, Black and radical faeries, who make up his community and the scenes he represents with them, is a narrative rendered in his cinematic language as he attempts to honor Jason’s pain, courage, and over-the-top campy mess in the face of Shirley’s control and the success it gains her. While both films represent embodiments of queer Blackness and white female creativity, one is stark and conceptual, the other excessive and trippy (if no less conceptual).

Matt Brim, working as do I to show the behind-the-scenes of academic field formation, considers the racism of our queer canons: “If counternarratives put narrative in the service of Blackness by writing Black and racialized non-histories back into the historical record, they also do so by countering some of the West’s most familiar stories, revealing them to have been told in the service of whiteness” (170). Whiteness, like all unearned, institutionally sanctioned, and supported power, seeks to persist and dominate by staying unseen and unnamed. Shirley Clarke had the chutzpah to expose and examine whiteness by including her voice in an exposé of the life, style, and pain put into play by making Jason her film’s visible subject. Stephen Winter puts white power and Black agency into “the service of Blackness,” through psychedelic color, bravura countercultural showmanship, and the radical political agenda of self-representation.

Notes

- 1 The belatedness and other altered temporalities of the attention paid to women filmmakers in American indie cinema are discussed in Pamela Robertson Wojcik's entry on *Wanda* (1970) in this collection.
- 2 See Morrison here on Clarke's oeuvre and its reception, including the censorship of *Portrait of Jason* over several generations of viewership.
- 3 Editorial comments made during chapter revisions.
- 4 Eds.: As of June 2022, it was no longer available there, likely due to the licensing agreement with Criterion.
- 5 Michael Gillespie mentions Winter as part of his ongoing project to build an American and Black cinematic canon (see for example, Longo 115).

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