

Film As a Medium to Reveal Research About Black Women's Lives

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ABSTRACT

Sylvia Hamilton discusses the cultural and aesthetic contexts and challenges in the making of her 1989 film Black Mother Black Daughter.

RÉSUMÉ

Sylvia Hamilton discute les contextes culturels et esthétiques ainsi que les défis impliqués dans la création de son film Black Mother Black Daughter (1989).

What is considered 'history'?¹ What is worthy of investigation and study? These are questions I have asked myself during many years of research. Clearly, because of the dearth of material in school and university texts and other print and visual media, Black women's lives and history were not considered worthy of study - were not considered history. This realization meant that I had to begin redefining for myself what value I would place on my own research and experiences. "We" were women and we were supposed to be in the texts on women but we were not. The message transmitted and received, whether intentionally or not, was "we" were not valuable, not worthy.

Faced with this absence, this lack, I had to redefine value and worthiness. That choice was simple. The matter of selecting film as the medium to uncover this history and, in doing so, demonstrate its value, was much less so. Film is one of the costliest vehicles one could choose. It is very cash intensive and, therefore, highly competitive. Of all the art forms, it is one

which demands a unique level of collaboration. Beyond the people to be featured in the film, the filmmaker has to deal with a series of people - decision-makers, production crews and others - who may not understand your materials and who are more accustomed to dealing with more traditional (read white, mainstream and most often male) projects which they readily assume there is a market for. They are people who have been educated in the same university/school systems as the rest of us and they have never been exposed to the subject matter I was intent on exploring. The filmmaker, then, becomes educator: Course 101 - Introduction to African Canadian History; 102 - African Canadian Women's History; 103 - Basic Institutional Racism.

After I had coped with all these elements, I discovered I had a 29 minute film to show 300 years of history!

Then there was the question of the relationship between a filmmaker and her 'subjects'. What are the moral and ethical questions which every filmmaker

must ask herself before going into the situation to interview the 'subject'? In whose interest is this being done? What will the filmmaker/researcher leave behind and give back to those being filmed?

I believe every filmmaker/ researcher and academic must acknowledge their own power, privilege, and authority. We are, indeed, not all the same in this regard. With power and privilege comes moral and ethical responsibility to the individuals being studied and filmed. I think that one of the fundamental and essential principles must be respect. I have witnessed research which lacked this fundamental respect. In carrying out my own work, I have tried to ensure that this principle is one that guides and informs.

Making Black Mother Black Daughter

In writing about women filmmakers of the African diaspora, Dr. Gloria Gibson-Hudson comments on what she terms a female-centred narrative:

The female-centred narrative takes cognizance of women in relation to the convergence of race, sex and class. This cinematic perspective in turn provides an authentic historical and socio-cultural context to address specific thematic issues such as cultural identity, social invisibility, and economic marginalization. Within this aesthetic and cinematic structure evolves a framework in which individuals or characters exhibit a resilience to oppression and subsequently develop an increased sense of self-determination and an acknowledgement of 'woman self'.²

Black Mother Black Daughter may be viewed as fitting within this framework. A further consideration is that this film was produced by an all-female pro-

duction team. Males involved in the production served as technical advisors to the women performing key technical roles of camera operator and sound recordist. For the Atlantic region of the National Film Board (NFB), this was the first time ever that women were in control of all aspects of production.

Regardless of the composition of the team, however, it was of the utmost importance that we make a good film. On the part of the funding agency, there were a number of expectations, both spoken and unspoken, about this project. Was this a too risky venture, given the money involved and the level of experience of the team? In addition, I was personally committed to working with another Black woman filmmaker on the project and I brought this to the NFB table for discussion. It was agreed to and I invited Toronto filmmaker Claire Prieto to join me as co-director. Shelagh MacKenzie of the NFB became the producer and was key to getting the project started.

At the community level, there was great interest and a wealth of information which came along with expectations about who should be included. Selecting which women to feature was a difficult task. When I initially approached many of the women, they were puzzled by my wanting to interview them for a film. No one had ever approached them with such a proposal. They lived ordinary lives, did what they had to do. It was simple, they said. What did they have to say? After a number of visits they realized I was serious and was really going to make this film.

Moreover, taking a non-Black production team into the community and into women's homes meant not just the usual 'prep' and production meetings. We had to discuss history, culture and protocols to ensure the team understood and would be respectful of the situation we were working within.

Documentary filmmaking holds within it this special responsibility of dealing with 'truths'. Since such films feature actual people and their stories, one has to take special care in how the story will be told, what



Stills From Black Mother Black Daughter. Courtesy of Sylvia Hamilton.

elements will be included, what elements left out. Films have long lives and their impact is much different than other media. Choosing who will be in a film and then carrying out the interview and the process of editing are two of the major areas where a filmmaker feels the enormous weight of responsibility. You choose, you have a point of view, whether it is acknowledged or not, and you, along with the people you feature, must live with the decisions you make. You strive for honesty, fairness and integrity. And you are not striving alone on these matters. The film editor - in our case, Claire Henry - strives with you to achieve the filmic vision.

Film is an artistic medium and aesthetics are as important as content and both interweave to give the work its feel. The film was emanating from a cultural context and from a point of view. It was presenting images on screen which had never before been used. Music, archival text, moving and still images and sound were combined to evoke the emotional and cultural fabric/context of the women and communities presented in the film.

We were fortunate to have the work of local artists to help tell the stories. Poet and writer George Elliott Clarke wrote "Lydia Jackson" which Four the Moment, an *a cappella* quartet, transformed into a song. Four the Moment also wrote what became the theme song for the film, "I Love You Woman" and the refrain, "Black Mother Black Daughter" became the title. This theme song was written by Delvina Bernard after she read the initial proposal for the film and long before the actual production began. Four the Moment began performing the song at festivals and concerts, introducing it as a song for a film about Black women in Nova Scotia. Since the film took some years to make, "I Love You Women" had a life of its own at the same time as providing me - during those inevitable low periods when trying to get a film project going - with the encouragement not to give up on the idea.

Other elements of the cultural fabric I wanted to represent in the film came from the women featured in it; for example, they use language in a particular way. The common use of oratory, as in church prayers, expresses emotion and evokes a sense of being connected to others and to a higher spiritual power.

The women speak of family, not only in the nuclear sense, but as extended to the entire community. They speak of their reliance on the land for the resources needed to survive. This reliance began with the earliest Black settlers in Nova Scotia and is still demonstrated in the traditional crafts of basket and fabric weaving.

The women's stories reveal not only the history of African women in Nova Scotia, but our collective history as Nova Scotians and as Canadians. In so doing, their 'telling' challenges traditional representations of Nova Scotian and Canadian history. After screenings of the film in many settings, I was most often asked: Why is it that these stories have never been told in the history books? Why have we not learned about the existence and practice of slavery in Canada?

Making Connections

Film affords the unique opportunity to present a multi-layered vision which can communicate both explicitly and implicitly. One implicit challenge of Black Mother Black Daughter was this: the subversive possibility that 'my' experience could be universal; that is, viewers who do not share my race, class and gender might still understand, find truths and parallels in my work, emotional and spiritual connections. The widespread positive response to the film indicates the extent of these connections.

When the film had its Halifax premiere in April of 1989, the response was so overwhelming that there were more people than the screening room could hold. We had to organize a second screening and still people were in line for over an hour. It is estimated that over 1,200 people came to see the film on that occa-

sion. A similar situation took place at the Toronto premiere at Harbour Front Centre. A year later in New York, at the Margaret Mead Film Festival held at the American Museum of Natural History, the theatre, which held two hundred people, was filled a half hour before screening. Another two hundred waited outside, hoping for a second screening.

Overall, the key to Black Mother Black Daughter is that it was centred inside the experiences of African Nova Scotia women and endeavoured to be truthful to that experience. I believe audiences, without exception, respond positively to this film because it is

centred and maintains integrity. These audiences have included children as young as seven years and people, both male and female, from a wide range of racial and cultural backgrounds in Canada, the United States, Europe and the Caribbean. It has been screened in over forty film festivals around the world; it has been widely televised in Canada, and is used in schools and universities and in a host of conferences and workshops.

This widespread response underlines my personal contention that we can and need to find different ways to document and preserve women's history in all its richness and diversity.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of a presentation given at a conference titled "Teaching Women's History: Challenges and Solutions", organized by the Canadian Committee on Women's History and held at Trent University, 1993.

2. Gloria Gibson-Hudson, "Through Women's Eyes: The Films of Women in Africa and the African Diaspora", The Western Journal of Black Studies (Vol. 15, no. 2, 1991), 80.

