

**Imagining
'Lost' Things:
Notes on
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The Watermelon
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'The Watermelon Woman'**

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'Silences are being broken, lost things have been found.'

–Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken:
The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,' 1994

'We are in an imagination battle.'

– adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2017

You are about to watch two films, Shai Heredia and Shumona Goel's *I am Micro* (2012) and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). They both locate 'lost' things – and they are both warnings.

In *I am Micro*, a camera pans through a series of spaces. These spaces seem to have been forgotten. We see the sets from Ashim Ahluwalia's film *Miss Lovely* (2012), but they are not always populated by actors. There is no colour. We see an optics factory – dusty, no longer in use. It seems that only this camera cares to see these spaces. It presents them to us so that we might care, too. Writer and curator Shanay Jhaveri describes the film:

I am Micro initiates a conversation about the people who are forgotten and absent, and the fact that they are missing often goes unrecorded. These bit actors, lab technicians, uncompromising directors, committed producers fade from history, and often their disappearance also fades with time. It seems dedicated against such forgetting.

I am Micro is dedicated to protecting a history on the verge of erasure. *The Watermelon Woman* is similarly committed to memorialising history – but it must imagine a history that might never have been. Unable to locate narratives about the contributions of black women to American filmmaking, it fills in the gaps through a powerful act of imagination: 'Sometimes you have to create your own history,' the end credits pronounce. '*The Watermelon Woman* is fiction.'

These films teach us about watching as an act of location. They tell us loss is not a careless act in the past, but a series of continuous acts leading right to the present.

They contain a direct address. To you. They implicate you.

What does it mean for a lost thing to be 'found'? Which parts are easy to uncover? What is easier to leave unseen? Unsaid? Unspoken?

Your desire to unearth the stories behind these films, their context, their meaning and your relationship to them might depend on how comfortable you feel when you watch these films. The depth of your search might be impacted by how much you feel these works directly address you.

Ask yourself some questions:

How are you sitting? Are you comfortable? What makes you feel comfortable? What level of (dis)comfort is (un)comfortable? Have bodies like yours sat in these seats before? Have they made them extra comfortable for you? Who is around you? Are bodies like yours populating the

seats next to you? Behind you? In front of you? On the screen?

What do you see, feel, intuit from the images?

What have you decided you *know*?

The films have things to tell us.

In *I am Micro*, the voice of an unidentified filmmaker accompanies unnamed, unlocated images. But this unfamiliar voice becomes familiar. Because he tells a story about the struggles of artmaking. Poignantly, articulately, he elucidates the challenges inherent in imagining.

The lyrical voiceover is supplied by Kamal Swaroop, an Indian independent filmmaker who made the cult psychedelic feature *Om Dar-B-Dar* (1988). The film's release was delayed by censors for over a year in India, and it did not play commercially until 2014. It was released on the same day as *Miss Lovely*, the film whose sets *I Am Micro* tours. Film histories, acts of remembering and forgetting, collide in *I am Micro*. It becomes an archive storing the histories of these imaginings.

If finding connections helps keep the lost things safe, what might ruptures do? When we search and find ruptures, do we lose things? Or do we find something new?

Swaroop's voiceover reflects on ruptures in his past acts of creation, finds destruction at the same sites he sought to build:

*There is a kind of cruelty involved in that kind of filmmaking
It's totally self-centred
On the way, anybody can be killed
...
It's a game ... Who wins?
It's like a battle.*

Filmmaking is imagining. Making images. Watching is imagining, too. We reimagine the film, complicate it with all the things we know in the present.

We find ourselves in an imagination battle.

Watching is an imagination battle between the past and the present. Between ourselves and the selves on screen.

The Watermelon Woman deeply examines what it means to look back into the past from the present. Cheryl, a 25-year-old black queer filmmaker, digs for evidence of someone like her in film history. Becoming fascinated with a black actress, credited as 'the Watermelon Woman' in films she finds at the video rental store she works at, she decides to make a film about her. As Cheryl searches further, the story of the Watermelon Woman (who is later identified as Faye Richards, or Faith Richardson) begins to merge with her own story.

She discovers that Martha Page, the white female director whose films Faye Richards often appeared in, was also Faye's lover, she too falls for a charismatic white woman who wants to help her in her quest to make her film. Diana is well connected, providing a direct link to Martha Page's younger sister, Page Fletcher. In the interview Diana arranges, Fletcher denies the relationship between Faye

and Martha. As Cheryl vocalises what she has come to know in an effort to resist Faye's erasure and Diana stays silent, the film makes a point about familiarity and loyalty and where alliances might be tested. 'I think Diana knew what was up,' Cheryl says, 'but she stayed quiet most of the time. I wasn't going to be quiet. No way.'

After tracking down Faye's long-term partner June Walker, Cheryl speaks to her on the phone. June is relieved to hear Cheryl is a 'sister' and invites her over for lunch. When June is rushed to hospital and unable to meet, Cheryl is left only with a note, a cross-generational address from an elder. 'I was so mad that you even mentioned the name Martha Page. Why would you even want to include a white woman in a movie on Faye's life? Don't you know she had nothing to do with how people should remember Faye?' June's letter directly articulates a critique on the nuances of alliance across difference, a critique also hinted at elsewhere in the film.

In *The Watermelon Woman*, people who make themselves too familiar, too comfortable are questioned, knowingly side-eyed. Alicia, the clueless camera assistant, is gently mocked for referring to a cute black girl as 'sister.' When Camille Paglia opines on the mammy figure in cinema, relating it to the Italian matriarchs in her own culture, we are left open-mouthed, wondering if she really is in on the joke. Later, as Tamara, Cheryl's best friend, becomes resentful of her relationship with Diana, she says, 'Stacey thinks Diana is into chocolate,' inferring a purely fetishistic motivation for Diana's interest. June's letter grounds these moments of observational humour in a history of co-option and erasure. She asks, 'Please Cheryl, make *our* history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in the family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other.'

As her relationship with Diana ends and her friendship with Tamara is equally tested, Cheryl questions her alliances, her accountabilities. She is forced to question what she sees in Faye's story, what she brings to it, what she needs from uncovering it. 'I know she meant the world to you,' she says to June through her final to-camera address, 'but she also meant the world to me, and those worlds are different.'

Being inside or outside the family, or inserting oneself through over-familiarity, relates to our role as spectators, too. Ask yourself these final questions.

What 'we' is being prioritised when 'we' decide to come together to 'find' these films? When we come together to watch these lost things? These his/her/their-stories? What 'we' are you enacting as you watch these two accounts of loss? What family are 'we' (per)forming?

Whose silences have been broken?

Whose lost things have been found?