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The Possibility of Impossibility: Reading *The Watermelon Woman* with Derrida and Adorno

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Abstract
Hermeneutic criticism of *The Watermelon Woman* has been unable to reconcile the film's closing affirmation of identity and possibility with the narrative that precedes it and especially with the acknowledgement that Fae Richards is not real. An approach derived from the commonality Derrida saw between his work and Adorno's can show how the film narrates the fiction of identity and the possibility of impossibility.
Keywords: The Watermelon Woman; Derrida; Adorno; Black lesbian; Kulturindustrie; archive

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The Possibility of Impossibility: Reading *The Watermelon Woman* with Derrida and Adorno

Christopher Morris

Introduction

At the end of *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) its protagonist, Cheryl, declares her identity as a Black lesbian filmmaker and offers her just completed documentary, recuperating the life and work of Fae Richards, as an example of "hope, inspiration, possibility." But criticism has struggled to find unqualified support for that possibility in the film itself.[1] Two difficulties include Cheryl's lack of self-awareness and the effect of the concluding revelation—that Fae Richards was always a fiction.[2] A deconstructive approach that accepts the possibility of foundationlessness can offer an alternative to this dilemma in hermeneutics, which must always seek a theme or referent, however mixed. Instead of assuming that the film culminates in a statement derived from and consistent with what preceded it, viewers might also see it as allegorizing the fallacy of such an assumption—the depiction not of enlightenment but blindness, of lives everywhere and permanently cut off from the real. Such a demonstration acknowledges but demurs to Paul de Man's warning that deconstruction may repeat the illusions of what it exposes: as we'll see, that potential is already dramatized at the outset of *The Watermelon Woman*—in its sym-

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bolic first scene, a wedding reception, where a critique of a hegemonic discourse is shown to perpetuate it.[3] In the rest of the film, expressions of identity and meaning are depicted as dependent on arbitrary signs. In a related circularity that comes to seem inevitable, Cheryl's project of recuperating Fae Richards from the archives perpetuates error by distorting or erasing the work of predecessors. For this reason the quasi-identity of Fae (or Faith) may also evoke that name's association with fairies and fate.[4] It is as if artists and critics—figured here in Cheryl and those who write about her—have no alternative but to pursue phantasms. A similar sense of fatality accompanies Cheryl's brief affair with Diana, suggesting the dead end of the "lesbian" portion of her closing statement of identity. Finally, *The Watermelon Woman*'s treatment of the archive recalls the argument made by Derrida (1995)--that the archive always "works against itself" (p.11). That is, its ideals of conservation and canonization are vitiated in the very structure of curation.[5] In the end, the fictional verbal and image laden trove that inspires Cheryl—and that for critics now includes *The Watermelon Woman*—may be reducible to nothing other than "fae" understood as Derridean specter or trace. While deconstruction's exploration of such an emptiness in both art and itself can advance no new statement, it can at least articulate an *aporia* for others to address. Such an equivocal remainder or *reste* for criticism may exemplify what Derrida (2002) saw as perhaps his sole commonality with Adorno, a dedication to the "possibilité de l'impossibile" (p. 19).[6]

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The Hoax of Naming, Identity, and Discourse in the Kulturindustrie

The Watermelon Woman opens with an allegory of Enlightenment optimism vitiated by images of the Foucauldian disruptions it seeks to master—hegemonic power exacerbated by technology. The soundtrack's Mozart mimes an unseen ensemble playing for the reception,; it suffuses a scene of interracial and interethnic community that can be sustained, however, only so long as an awareness of its artificial production—in the apparatuses of photography, video, film, and soundtrack— is forgotten. Wedding promises like any other contracts presuppose conventions of representation as well as hierarchies; these enable Cheryl to tell the still photographer, "Wait your turn. We're making a video." But any exposure of the opening scene's faux idealism is immediately neutralized in Adornoan fashion when its makers are shown to perpetuate its values: Cheryl shortchanges Tamara. She justifies her exploitation by quoting Rose Troche from the book version of the film *Go Fish:* "If you want to make a film, you've got to make some sacrifices."[7] Because there is no such line in either version of *Go Fish*, Cheryl's takeaway from the archive is an appropriation based on nothing. Even more unsettling is her joke to Tamara that such economizing is necessary "to get to Hollywood, baby." As Fae's story itself soon reveals, even the most marginalized or putatively "alternative" artists have already been authorized of de-

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fined by what Adorno called the culture industry, pre-eminently Hollywood. A similar neutralization of ideology critique is apparent in Cheryl's decision to intercut shots of urban poverty into the wedding video she's producing: any such a "critique" is destined to become only a keepsake for a bourgeois bride and groom. Film making exemplifies the Adornoan principle that even alternative art exists at the sufferance of the ruling class—here, the society matron who pays Cheryl.[8] Any questions about what these hegemonic structures might suppress seamlessly morph into their perpetuation and decoration. For the family that commissioned Cheryl, just as for the film viewer, the aesthetic packaging of ideology-critique ensures that any challenge to social power will remain safely distanced—whether in a boxed video (during the nineties) or in a subscription-based streaming service like Showtime (in the twenty-twenties). The opening of *The Watermelon Woman* dramatizes the *aporia* that film's potential to represent an alternative to the lies it denounces is itself a lie. It can only repeat them in a new way, as criticism must in its way, too.

Viewers so forewarned might urge Cheryl to simply abandon film's false promise of liberation. Instead, leaving the wedding reception becomes her opportunity as narrator to announce a cinematic project: "I knew I had to make a film about Black actors from the thirties and forties because their story's never been told." For the rest of the diegesis, Cheryl's commitment to (and entrapment in) aesthetic ideology is demonstrated by her persuading viewers to believe that her

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wholly fictional project is real. After viewing an excerpt supposedly from *Plantation Memories,* she asks, "Is Watermelon Woman her first name? Her last name? Or is it her whole name?" Only a first-time viewer of *The Watermelon Woman* takes these questions seriously; all others understand her project anew—as an allegory of the performative creation of a name (and by extension, a film or a discourse) from a nothingness. The disparity between first and subsequent viewers has the effect of exposing any superiority the latter might feel for Cheryl's misunderstanding her own complicity, because audiences and critics must now concede *they* always commit the same error, too: only in retrospect can we pretend not to have been deceived. Or, as Paul de Man (1979) observed, "The deconstruction states the fallacy of reference in a necessarily referential mode" (p. 125). One critic called this contrived effect of *The Watermelon Woman* a "hoax," but if it is, it's the same hoax undergone by all viewers of photography and film.[9] Before we can critique what they represent, we must blithely agree that they represent. Once that illusion is retroactively dispelled, we must read the signs otherwise—the very definition of allegory and the rationale for turning to interrogative discourses like Derrida's or Adorno's.

Cheryl's questions about what the signs "watermelon woman" refer to can obviously be asked of the film's title, too, a synechdoche that names part and whole: insofar as Fae Richards is

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shown to be based on nothing, so is the film. That this equivalence extends to Cheryl the character, too, may be one effect of some of the film's advertising, still in effect, which features only her photograph next to the title and not that of Lisa Marie Bronson, the actor who silently portrayed Richards.[10] In this way Cheryl may herself be considered a "foundationless" watermelon woman and not exempt from the universal illusion her film depicts. Of course, any such identification will be shown to be "incorrect," too, but only after a film viewing, by which time the association will have been made. The retroactively exposed misattribution will have lasted long enough to illustrate the prejudice by which a name or sobriquet juxtaposed with a face is "naturally" assumed to refer to "the same identity." Of course, no absolute distinction is possible, either, since there are numerous parallels between the two figures. Both Cheryl and Richards have working-class origins in Philadelphia; both have affairs with more powerful white women; both are drawn to "Hollywood" and seek to transcend exclusively Black cultural milieus; portions of the professional lives of both are subjects of voiceover commentaries; and Cheryl even channels Richards, speaking her lines with her. This convergence of the two "watermelon" women recontextualizes Cheryl's concluding artistic manifesto as an incurable blindness to her own fictivity—one that is perpetuated in a criticism that must still try, even if only heuristically, to keep them separate.

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Abusing Predecessors in the Archive

Cheryl's silence about the way the name "watermelon woman" echoes Melvin van Peebles's *Watermelon Man* creates a second abuse of a predecessor, just as powerful as her self-interested appropriation of *Go Fish*. That Cheryl the cinephile fails to recognize Richards's anticipation of a classic of Black film making strains disbelief almost beyond measure; still, a re-emphasis on the self-blindness exhibited in her shortchanging Tamara can't be ruled out. Equally possible is the explanation that her robust lesbianism may have mandated ignoring a narrative about a heterosexual male. (Of course, that motive, if it exists, would not have precluded some vindicating reflection along the way— for example, that Richards's lonely struggles in the Jim Crow era might have been more admirable than van Peebles's well-financed Hollywood satire, created after the outset of the Civil Rights Movement.) In any case, the fact that Cheryl's silence can't be interpreted within the diegesis suggests some inevitability or fatality for artists to deliberately distort or eliminate predecessors; a third example, taken up in the next paragraph, confirms that suspicion. Viewers are left to interpret the omission of any reference to *Watermelon Man* as the avoidance of parallel implications of futility. On the one hand, both films end with images of seeming Black self-assertion—Cheryl's dedication to Black lesbian film-making and Jeff's decision to join a group of militants. On the other hand, both undermine these affirmations.

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Jeff's group solidarity is quixotic: he trains for "battle" in a group armed with sticks and mops. And to the extent Cheryl is Fae's heir, she becomes a second watermelon woman, an identity based on nothing; her blind "faith" in her selfhood, despite all evidence to the contrary, may stage her illusion of autonomy as a hallucination even more devastating than Jeff's.

Toward the end of the film we're given a third instance of the abuse of a predecessor. After her visit to the CLIT archives deepens her suspicion that Fae Richards was a lesbian, Cheryl announces to the camera, "A new book on this subject just came out—*Hollywood Lesbians* by Doug McKeowan."[11] She holds it up and appears to read a passage supporting speculation that the director Martha Page had a relation with "the watermelon woman." She rips out a photograph that she calls "killer" evidence confirming the relation. But only the title on the book's cover is visible, and her claims turn out to be new baseless performatives: *Hollywood Lesbians* was written by Boze Hadleigh, not Doug McKeowan. Instead, Doug McKeowan was the co-creator, with Zoe Leonard, of the Black and white stills and simulated film excerpts used throughout *The Watermelon* Woman; their collection was later published separately as *The Fae Richards Archive.*[12] Cheryl's misattribution assimilates prior signs in the service of fictive identity—not only Fae's and Martha's but her own, as director/detective/agent of revelation. By erasing a "real" name and replacing it with her colleague's, Cheryl demonstrates the alienability

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of all naming and becomes, herself, a watermelon woman, inventing herself, *ex nihilo,* as discoverer.

Of course, as with the misquotation of *Go Fish* or the elision of van Peebles, assigning a motive for Cheryl's abuse of Hadleigh must be understood as just another critical performative that is itself immediately vulnerable to exposure: to the extent this essay must omits—as any criticism must—any part of the film or its critical reception, the error it exposes is recommitted, so the prospect of an infinite continuation of interpretation-as-performative-abuse must be acknowledged, too.

Deconstructed Love

The film's love plot extends the groundlessness of identity introduced by its hoax to Cheryl and Diana: viewers learn that their affair is made possible by a mistaken belief in film representation. When they first meet, in the video store, Cheryl's recommendations of *Repulsion* and *Cleopatra Jones* reflect, respectively, misandry and an exalted Black feminism—themes that, taken together, point to the preferability of the Black lesbianism that is Cheryl's project. Her ideology and her seduction of Diana are thus derived from film understood hermeneutically—as the mak-

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ing of constative statements. Cheryl's exploitation of Tamara already dramatized her appropriation of others in the service of her agenda; now her seduction of Diana provides her with the opportunity to practice the lesbianism her project advocates in theory. No prospect for mutual emancipation, of the sort arguably idealized in *Go Fish,* is envisioned here; both women pursue pre-established goals. From Diana's perspective, seducing Cheryl attests to the continuing vulnerability of the Black community to the manipulation of white hegemons. Critics have noted how Diana's name and family background in diplomacy born of colonialism already figure her as the contemporary liberal heir to white nationalism.[13] The fact that Diana has already successfully seduced several Black men recontextualizes Cheryl as only the latest frontier for conquest. That Diana's imperialism is an extension of the Hollywood *Kulturindustrie* is demonstrated when she reprises "Truly Scumptious" from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*: an affair constructed by film is celebrated by one. Diana's fusion of self-aggrandizement with Hollywood only reinforces the blindness of both Cheryl's and Fae's aspirations to "arrive" there.[14]

The couple's mutual self-deception is rendered cinematically when viewers are able to see and hear what the consummation of their mutual seduction makes the lovers blind and deaf to. The video they begin by watching but soon ignore is one of the few race films Richards is said to have starred in. Her character objects when her Black companion applies white powder to her face. As Cheryl and Diana move from couch to bed, the two onscreen figures continue to argue.

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The friend of the Richards character accuses her of being a tramp, then complains, "Why can't I be happy fitting into their world?" and "God made me this color; he did it for a reason." To these existential questions the Richards character responds with a slap in the face. That a scene narrating violent conflict between women is playing unseen while a lesbian couple blithely prepares for intercourse may reveal what the seeming mutuality of interpenetrating bodies must repress. The critique brought about by the juxtaposition is strengthened by a non-diegetic soundtrack made up of two anaphoric passages heard over shots of supposed sexual bliss: the first repeats "I ain't afraid of …" followed by various predicates. The second is a series of eleven phrases beginning with the word "between" ("Between the fury and the moment," "Between the time and my confession," etc.). The former series presupposes an originary fear that is only emphasized by its repeated denials. The latter series implies the persistence of hard-to-reconcile—perhaps impossible to reconcile—divisions ("Between everything and everything else" "Between what I mean and what I say"), existing on a more universal, philosophical level.[15] Unsilenceable division and irreconcilability thus haunt Cheryl and Diana's lovemaking from the outset: fearful isolation or separation become the underside of copulation's promise of mutuality. Because these disembodied, anonymous voices so closely follow the video of Fae Richards acting in defense of her racial identity, their emphasis on division reminds viewers that the onscreen defense of Black

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identity they've witnessed *is* only an act. The soundtrack's disembodied, insinuating voices differ ontologically from the words of Fae's character only as a matter of degree, not kind: like Fae's words, theirs are acoustic echoes, presence-absences, traces emanating from or "based on" the Fae-condition, nothing,

The soundtrack exposes the bathos of Hollywood seduction as merely the contemporary avatar of the film's opening exposure of the Mozartian/Enlightenment spectacle of wedding harmony. The parallel might have warned viewers that the onset of Cheryl and Diana's "love" couldn't escape the tawdriness that already characterized its traditional culmination. In this way the eventual split-up of Cheryl and Diana—minimally motivated in any case—seemed fated even when they first become partners. This inevitability extends the mounting sense of repetition experienced earlier when something supposedly new is depicted as fated to abuse its predecessor. But criticism's articulation of even this miserable, disillusioned "learning" is quickly lost when the diegetic provenance of the voices is examined. Who integrated them into the film? Cheryl? Why? Once their origin in nothingness is allowed, the effect of their commentary, if it is one, remains undecidable, even for deconstruction. So no matter how plausible the interpretation just offered in this section may seem to be, it must be withdrawn, too.

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Deconstructed Archive

Every step in Cheryl's research effort increases the same effect of faux-learning and somnambulism that characterizes her doomed relation to Diana. Accumulating examples of breakdowns in articulation eventually contextualize the film's conclusion—Cheryl's manifesto and the completed Fae Richards documentary—as new expressions of inescapable illusion, which eventually includes criticism, too.[16] For this reason, the closing notification that the Watermelon Woman is a fiction may land less as a shock than as "aha moment"—a retroactive confirmation of what the film had all along implied. In this view, the juxtaposition of Cheryl's manifesto and the belatedly acknowledged fiction challenges everything, including the persistent hermeneutic assumptions that people have identities or that films make statements.

From the outset, the idea of naming an identity is depicted as a pathetic, Beckett-like effort to foist meaning onto the arbitrary; it's first dramatized in the video store when—following the verbal titles of film and director—Cheryl resignedly puts on her name-tag. The parallel acts of naming reveal the separation between verbal signifiers and what they supposedly represent: Cheryl the character is just as spectral as Cheryl the director. A name-tag is also worn by Tamara, and Annie is urged to get one; even the officious librarian wears one. (It says "Staff.") The distance the tags emphasize between names and supposed referents is reinforced when the

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Lee Edwards episode is introduced by a figural name-tag, his business card. Other segments are introduced by subtitles like "Ilene Dunye, My Mother" or "Camille Paglia." The arbitrariness of identity signs is then reinforced in establishing shots where place-names (Wynfield, Germantown, Swarthmore, etc.) are supposed to imply the existence of referents other than the cinematic images that ensue. Those familiar titles, in turn, prepare viewers to accept fictional variants like "Liberty News" (which introduces a supposed newsreel clip about Fae Richards) or "C. L. I. T—Center for Lesbian Information and Technology" (which introduces a non-existent setting). The self-mocking implausibility of the acronym is one of the film's many reflexive devices that in retrospect might have warned viewers not to trust any verbal signs, especially the one that "grounds" the entire film, Fae Richards. But of course, "Fae" is also a misnaming, a nickname for "Faith," and as Derrida (2021) observed, faith is as fundamental to photography and film-making as it is to religion.[17] The decision to "base" an entire film on "faith" allegorizes this fatality.

The Lee Edwards and library episodes indict archives in general. Edwards's sequestering of "inauthentic" sources ("some of the race memorabilia in the kitchen") emphasizes the arbitrariness of curation. The very choice of the archivable is contingent: Edwards acknowledges that "women are not my specialty," a limitation Tamara quickly ascribes to his being gay. But it's the

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neon “Drama” sign hanging from his interior wall that, like the earlier name tags, most dramatically depicts the separation between signifier and signified that vitiates archives as validators of identity. To Cheryl’s quizzical look he enigmatically responds, “You know who serves the drama in this house, right? Me!”—a quip that figures archivists as performers, too. Viewers must now imagine Cheryl the performer seeking the identity of Fae the performer by consulting Edwards the performer. And to the extent other signs in this archive point to putative “referents” as opaquely as the sign “Drama” referred to Edwards, no coherent conclusion will be derivable from his repository. That impossibility is dramatized even more starkly in the library sequence. That archives perpetuate societal prejudice is clear enough when records for the white director Martha Page exist but not for the Black “watermelon woman.” But even more fundamentally, archival research is here depicted as destinerrance, as an endless detour in a Derridean postal network: questing for identity consists of being shunted from one signifier to another, without ever arriving at a signified meaning.[18] After Cheryl and Tamara emerge from the stacks laden with books, which haven’t answered the question that brought them there, they finally turn to a staff librarian who “refers” them to—the “reference” section. The circularity of the quest for identity in the archives is irreparable and structural.

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Cheryl's taped interview with Shirley Hamilton exposes the futility of archives in terms of both her own search for truth and the fate of her documentary-in-progress. Miss Shirley first seeks to disabuse Cheryl of the "myth" that Fae was called "the watermelon woman," even though that identification came from the video box that first inspired Cheryl's search; this out-right denial of the origin of her enterprise anticipates the film's final disclosure that the water-melon woman has all along been a fiction. And the "basis" of Miss Shirley's recollection of Fae's relation with Martha Page ("if I remember my gossip correctly") introduces even more doubt. Extra-diegetically, the Hamilton interview is framed before and after with shots of black and white still photographs; Cheryl holds them facing the camera, a gesture that temporarily equates them with the documentary in progress. In that capacity the images may be said to com-prise the "atoms" or radicles of a film archive, the necessary minimal traces out of which larger units (like documentaries) are built. Exhibited to the viewer, they stage the "present" Shirley Hamilton footage as exemplary of the fate of all archives, which as Derrida (1995) points out, is only readable in the future. As in the case of Edwards's posters, the library books or the still pho-tographs, the identity Hamilton claims for Fae Richards is only what will have been said about it on some future date. In *The Watermelon Woman* that future date is simulated in the completed documentary that follows her affirmation, where viewers also learn that Fae Richards was always a fiction. It's not because the archive is "frail" or "ephemeral" that its generation of authentic

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identity or a recuperative history is impossible. Rather, as Derrida (1995) explains, it's because the constituent parts of the archive were never more than traces, like the still photographs, whose meaning, if any, is always questionable and hence indefinitely deferred (pp. 35-36).

The summa of foundationless referentiality comes in the Camille Paglia interview. Unnecessary from the diegetic standpoint of Cheryl's information-gathering, this interview dramatizes the destination of hermeneutics itself—interpretation, or the "pure meaning" of the sign, in this case, the watermelon woman. Paglia's seemingly unhinged monologue defends "watermelon" as over against traditional cultural criticism that associates it with Uncle Tomism. In contrast, Paglia argues that the Black mammy (and "watermelon" in general) should be understood instead as a "symbol of abundance"; she bases her interpretation on her personal experience with her grandmother and the colors of the Italian flag. Such an outrageous, idiosyncratic rationale is self-indicting; nevertheless, her free association opens to challenge any other ascription of univocal meaning to a sign. "Mammy" and "watermelon woman" are signs. They are like name-tags or the neon sign "Drama" that by themselves remain wholly arbitrary. The absurdity of Paglia's reasoning indicts hermeneutics in general, including Cheryl's and the viewer's attempts to establish the meaning of archival signs, and through them, of the documentary-in-progress. The scene

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challenges critics who may be tempted to laugh at Paglia to articulate why their interpretations of "the watermelon woman," in all its senses, are stronger than hers.

That June Walker, the putative lover of Fae Richards, registers in the documentary only as a voice, not an image, is a fitting conclusion to the film's constant undermining of archival sources. Live attestation, of the sort Cheryl elicited throughout, is no different from recorded voice or printed word—both are traces or specters. The fact that the voiceover of June's letter morphs into Cheryl's voice is audio confirmation of the way the supposedly "external world" has all along been assimilated into Cheryl's construction of it. The fact that Cheryl defies June's plea to exclude Martha Page from her documentary reinforces the primacy of what she calls "her" world, which is nothing more than the outcome predestined in hermeneutics: whose world has it been all along but Cheryl's?

Possibilities Elsewhere?

Critics have already pointed out that Cheryl's all-consuming quest to vindicate Fae Richards alienates her from Tamara and her day-to-day life in Philadelphia; for Thelma Foote (2007) she is "bereft of the real" (np).[19] A glimpse of that blindness appears just before she announces her closing affirmation of identity and purpose: she walks stony-faced past the street singer Toshi Reagan, ignoring her guitar-case, open on the sidewalk for donations. Understanding how

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Cheryl's obsession excludes her street-world can reinforce the self-deception of her concluding statement. The finality of both blindnesses calls into question other alternative "possibilities," including Toshi Reagan, that the film may at first seem to offer.

The contrast between the couples Cheryl/Diana and Tamara/Stacy provides one measure of Cheryl's obliviousness. We've seen that her dedication to her project ran roughshod over Tamara's plans with Stacy; those are jeopardized again in the library sequence when Cheryl ignores Tamara's plea that their extended search is making her late for a date. (Cheryl had marginalized Tamara earlier by shushing her when she called out Lee Edwards and when she objected to the librarian.) Unlike Cheryl, Tamara is depicted as open, sharing intimate details about Stacy, but when Tamara asks about Diana, her questions are ignored. Cheryl becomes indignant, and Diana—after having overheard their conversation—walks silently past both of them, a cold goddess of love spurning even her votary. But while Tamara's gritty unpretentiousness and belief that Hollywood is "junk" seems to set her apart from Cheryl, in the end any "possibility" she might appear to offer is illusory: to the extent Stacy's pursuit of a Wharton MBA will eventually make her the next-generation's version of Diana's parents, Tamara will remain safely on the ladder of the *Kulturindustrie*, where she began in the video store.

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In a similar vein, an early intercut scene of Cheryl and Tamara's rooftop jumping and dancing may momentarily evoke the image of some alternative freedom elsewhere, of greater value than that afforded by their lesbian love choices—perhaps a vision of non-sexual freedom or momentary release from the video store below them and its purveying of phony signification. In this figure, a temporary defiance of gravity in jumping and dancing is the permitted, pathetic attestation to its dominance. Here gravity functions like Adorno's *Kulturindustrie,* which can cynically tolerate a supposedly alternative film, like Cheryl's documentary, as "Kiddy's Cinema," as further evidence of Hollywood's hegemony. The emancipatory cinema that Cheryl idealizes stands as little chance of flourishing in Hollywood's America as their dancing does of exceeding physical limits, at least for very long. "Returning to earth" may be the fate of this and every other "possibility" imagined elsewhere in *The Watermelon Woman*.

And what about Toshi Reagan? Can't she be seen as a marginalized but ultimately victorious alternative? She makes art anyway, despite acknowledging through her open guitar-case that she lives under capitalism; indeed, she may be thought to defy her condition through her seeming indifference to being paid. The artist simply sings on the sidewalk until she dies, for whoever will listen; likewise, at the end of *The Watermelon Woman* Cheryl's celebration of Fae can be said to have been offered freely to anyone who chances to view it. Couldn't Cheryl's art, like Toshi's, defy the constraints of its production? Of course, the Adornoan reply is that such dreams

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of unmediated communication are precisely the lure perpetuated the media. Toshi Reagan's performance is accessible only on the soundtrack of a video, just as Cheryl's straight-to-the-camera affirmation is. And to the extent "mediation" presupposes techne and language, her songs will be artifacts like Cheryl's film, traces based on nothing.

A final sense of impossibility may come with the realization of the universality of Cheryl's dilemma: she is, after all, no more blind than anyone else. From the beginning viewers see examples of risk-taking assertiveness by other Black women, too. From Yvette's off-key singing at the karaoke club to the more accomplished voices at the Women's Community Center, there is no shortage of Black women who have already acted, like Toshi Reagan, on the "hope, inspiration, possibility" that Cheryl claims to want to model for others. In other words, Cheryl's quest is not only delusional but redundant. To the extent that Fae's exposure as a fiction gives the lie to Cheryl's dream, all who respond similarly to the allure of a self remain in a state of permanent denial. For Adornoans, her concluding affirmation of identity exemplifies the impossibility of anything but the residue of "damaged life" left by the *Kulturindustrie.* For Derrideans, that residue conceals the more depressing impossibility of any meaning whatsoever. At the end, Cheryl says she's left with nothing but the packet June Walker gave her: this presumably contains the

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stills and video clips created by Zoe Leonard and Scott McKeown, out of which the short documentary of Fae Richards's life, shown under the closing credits, was made. So, Cheryl's deluded affirmation only attests to the continued existence of the archive as spectral—that is, of still photographs and clips which are nothing more than compositions of light and dark. In the packet lies the trace; the archive itself is just the multiplication of such specters (Derrida 1995, p. 84). Of course, therein lies possibility, too: out of such phantasms will come numerous future documentaries and/or fiction films, discourses, works of criticism, theology, and philosophy. These foundationless signs are amenable to being shaped into any narrative whatsoever, as Camille Paglia and Cheryl Dunye demonstrate, in a never-ending process that returns viewers and critics to Cheryl's state of possible impossibility.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] Because no last name is given for this character even in the credits, I identify her throughout as "Cheryl," except in the last sentence, where "Cheryl Dunye" refers to the director of *The Watermelon Woman*. Evaluation of Cheryl's concluding affirmation of identity has been very mixed. For example, Sullivan (2000) concedes that the announcement of Richards's fictivity has the potential to undo the value Cheryl found in her, though this threat is "not total" (p. 459). Winokur (2001) recognizes the film's identity confusion but claims that Cheryl nevertheless achieves "certainty" (p. 248). Juhasz and Lerner (2006) believe that any identity created at the end was unstable, any community established was skeptical, and any political statement left unresolved (p. 18). Keeling (2005) argues that Cheryl's closing affirmation of herself as a Black lesbian filmmaker had the effect of excluding a "multifarious 'we'" (p. 224), i.e, members of her own Black working-class milieu. Her point is seconded by Cowan and Rault (2014, p., 300). Raimon (2012) acknowledges the film's indictment of history as "always **e**lusive" but claims it is also shown to be "continuously generative" of present agency (p. 16). Reid-Pharr (2006) emphasizes impossibility: the film shows that "what constitutes a 'real Black lesbian history'" is "just as manufactured as the other ideas and media that Dunye critiques" (p. 139). Despite his agreement with Reid-Pharr (2006), Ashe (2020) concludes that the film does indeed "rehabilitate Fae Richards" (p.195). Two critics who also emphasize "possibility" are Matt Richardson (2011), who says the film shows "there are valuable lessons in the most painful of experiences" (p. 111); and Zimmer (2008), for whom the film encourages audiences to produce "new molds and new figures of identification" (p. 60). The last chapter of Roscoe and Hight's *Faking It* (2001) is a call for a deconstructive approach to the genre of mock-documentary films, to which this essay responds.

[2] Cheryl's obliviousness to her condescension to Tamara is discussed by Cowan and Rault (2014, pp. 301-303) and below. Keeling (2005) sees Cheryl's decision to relegate June Walker's relationship with Fae Richards to that of a "special friend" as perpetuating homophobic discourses (p. 224). Many critics emphasize the abyssal effect of the closing revelation that Fae Richards was a fiction. For Reid-Pharr (2006), one implication is that "all our attempts to recapture the past . . . are exercises in fiction" (p. 138); Foote (2007) describes the film as perpetuating "a hoax on

viewers" that sends "the "film spectator falling through the trapdoor" (np). Braidt (2000) notes the possible inference that "everything is fiction," in the light of the way "every 'informant' for the documentary is in fact a fictional character" (p. 184).

[3] De Man (1986) conceded the predictability of deconstructive or "rhetorical readings" (19); however, since his book consisted of just such readings, his warning is easily waived. No deconstructive readings can be alike, and to embark on one is to welcome such potentially debilitating threshold warnings, especially if the neo-Wittgensteinian alternative is silence.

[4] In the diegesis, "Fae" is assumed to be a nickname for "Faith." According to the OED, the latter word preceded former, but the two were for part of their histories synonymous. In addition, "fae" always retained associations with "fay" and "fairy." These variants evoked both sylvan spirits and fate or destiny. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* incorporates all meanings of the etym.

[5] Derrida (1995) argues that the very conditions of archivization—repetition and consignation to an external place—menace it with destruction and forgetfulness. Such antithetical outcomes make the archive resemble other Derridean memes like *pharmakon* or auto-immunity and account for its "mal"—its sickness or evil.

[6] For the many Derridean resonances of *reste* ("remains"), including "trace," see Miller (2009) Chapter 5. At first glance, any commonality between Marxist materialism and the quasi-transcendentalism of "trace" seems impossible. Derrida (2002a) said deconstruction was possible "as an experience of the impossible" (p. 242), and in 2002 acknowledged the interest he shared with Adorno in "the possibility of impossibility" (pp. 19-22). Adorno's negative dialectic, alternating critique and self-critique, devolved into his 1974 reflections "from damaged life," a meditation on minimalism that characterizes the work of both philosophers. Derrida (1993) distinguished his own use of the phrase from Heidegger's, which refers to death (pp. 77-79); Derrida (2007) illustrates this broader application of the phrase. With a similar concern for the "other," Adorno (1973) blamed Heidegger for forgetting the social in theorizing death (p. 126). Derrida (2002) commends Adorno's "tout autre pensée du rapport entre le possible et l'impossible" (p. 20). The phrase "the possibility of impossibility" states an aporia whenever the oral emphasis is on the word "impos-

sibility," but also a potential exit from it whenever the oral emphasis would be on "possibility." As in the case of *différance,* the resulting oscillation draws attention to the difference between speech and writing. Delanty (2006) sees *Fichus* as part of Derrida's late rapprochement with the Frankfurt school (pp. 423-24). Zenklusen (2020) explores general affinities between deconstruction and negative dialectics.

[7] For a discussion of the way Cheryl's shortchanging Tamara introduces the recurrent possibility of credit economies exploiting debtor classes, see Cowan and Rault (2014). Because she makes up the line from *Go Fish*, this is the first of several of Cheryl's violations of the archive, which are taken up at greater length below.

[8] Adorno (1991) considered even emancipatory film ["Kiddy's film"] as part of the culture industry it ostensibly opposed: both were "the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims . . . The conformity to the consumer, on the contrary, which likes to masquerade as humanitarianism, is nothing but the economic technique of consumer exploitation" (p. 185). The fact that Cheryl cites *Go Fish* is further evidence that even films that celebrated the marginalized can be invoked to oppress. *The Watermelon Woman* was produced to be seen by paying audiences.

[9] Foote (2007) emphasizes the film's function as a "hoax on viewers" by comparing it with other films in the mock-documentary genre that announce their fictivity either in prerelease advertising or early in the film (p. 8?). For a discussion of how all viewing of photography and film is the result of what Derrida called "blackmail," see my 2005 essay.

[10] Keeling (2005) discusses other promotional materials for *The Watermelon Woman*, which depict Cheryl with Turner (who played Diana) in support of her argument that her self-affirmation as a Black lesbian filmmaker is achieved at the expense of Tamara, whose presence in the film at least equals Diana's and whose objections to her were spurned—prematurely in the event—by Cheryl (p. 223). The film itself shows how promotional materials reinforce the improbability of film serving as a vehicle for the expression of authentic Black identity. The walls in the home of the collector Lee Edwards are decorated with posters advertising Black cast Hollywood films from the thirties. But Edwards explains that the Black owned and operated Royal and Dunbar theaters in Philadelphia would have gone out of business if they'd played only those Black cast films; even Black moviegoers "wanted to see the stars, the costumes, and all that junk." Thus, any modeling of Black identity promised by the promotional posters is already depicted as an illu-sion made possible by the dominant culture on which it depended. Like the shots of gritty urban realism Cheryl intercut into her video of a white wedding, the Black cast films in Edwards's archive became safely quarantined and neutralized by the Hollywood extravaganzas they preceded and drew additional paying audiences for. And like the posters for *The Watermelon Woman,* those in the Lee Edwards sequence illustrate the mirage of autonomous Black identity, a warning that Cheryl must either ignore or repress in order to persevere with her project.

[11] Cheryl pronounces the name McKeowan with a "d," though the close captions render the name "McKeowan."

[12] Leonard and Dunye's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1996) consists of the stills, painstakingly fashioned to simulate age and fragility, shown in *The Watermelon Woman* as putative evidence of Richards's life. As an archive of nothing, the book distills the teaching of the film, exporting it as a chilling mantra to new audiences. According to Cowan and Rault (2014), the *Archive* was first advertised, then withdrawn from

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the 2013 exhibition “Rare and Raw” at the Leslie-Lohman Museum—an event that itself captured the Derridean sense that photographs, like all other signs, are only present-absent traces, which film may blackmail us into considering real.

[13] Raimon (2012) notes Diana’s status as a diplomat’s daughter who fetishizes blackness (p. 12). Winokur (2001) notes Diana’s association with the white goddess of the hunt and neocolonialism (p. 239). Foote (2007) argues that the subtext of Cheryl’s bedroom scene with Diana is the danger to the Black woman of rehearsing “the dynamic of the Black mammy/white mistress relationship” (np).

[14] Cheryl’s counter-allusion is to her high school prom’s playing “Sail On” by the Commo-dores. Sung in the voice of a “small town boy,” the lyrics describe a couple going separate ways, in part because the singer’s partner “gave me nothing in return.” The song anticipates Cheryl’s breakup with Diana; it tracks both her less worldly persona and her self-interest. Like the soundtrack during their lovemaking, the song emphasizes the futility of coming together.

[15] This scene of putative mutuality conspicuously features tongues. In its inarticulation, the scene’s visual potential to evoke bliss may be undercut with what the voices (produced by the tongues on the soundtrack) say: silent physical tongues may promise a bliss that unseen voiced tongues deny.

[16] Critics already concede that Cheryl’s interviews expose the difficulty of arriving at valid historical recuperations. For example, Winokur 2001concludes that “historical repression renders a full recuperation of history impossible” (p. 232). Reid-Pharr (2006), argues that the film teaches no understanding America and race is possible without first acknowledging “the frail and ephemeral nature of the evidence” (p. 139) available to researchers. These and similar conclusions emphasize an inadequacy in the archive but never the possibility of a fatality of failure—evident in the film’s emphasis on the separation between signifier and signified, the necessity to recommit errors and the impossibility of love.

[17] Derrida (2021) argues that because technicity can give the illusion of “being face to face with the thing itself” (p. 202) it must be connected with faith in the religious or fiduciary sense of granting credit to an image. And while both literature and film provoke belief, one tends to believe a film more.

[18] Derrida (1987) coined the neologism “destinerrance” in *The Post Card*. It implies that choosing a destination or referent for language is already to be in error. For a good discussion, see Miller (2009), Chapter 3.

[19] Foote’s admirable phrase finds further support in Keeling (2005), who showed how Cheryl’s quest marginalized Tamara and sacrificed the“multifarious we” (p. 224) it could have championed instead. Cowan and Rault (2014) take Keeling’s argument further, speculating that Cheryl’s quest compromises “the radical politics of bad, queer, black debt” (p. 306) in the pursuit of credit and respectability.

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