

Bridgett Davis

Directing the Gaze

An Inside Look at Making *Naked Acts*

“When, I ask, do we start to see images of the black female body by black women made as acts of auto-expression . . . ? When, in other words, does the present begin?”

—Lorraine O’Grady, visual artist, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Subjectivity”

If we are our bodies, then who are we as Black women? And further, how do we form a sense of sexuality out of whatever it is our bodies reveal us to be? This complex question is the one I posed for myself as a Black feminist back in 1992 when I set out to write a screenplay that would focus on a Black woman’s journey to explore her own sexuality. The film that emerged from that screenplay, *Naked Acts*, was completed four years later and tells the story of Cece, a contemporary African American actress who does everything in her power to avoid doing a nude scene in a movie and almost gets away with it. But to everyone’s surprise, Cece ends up revealing herself in ways she never imagined. Emotional nakedness, she finds, is much harder than just taking your clothes off.

Naked Acts ultimately became much more than, and much less about, one woman’s sexual coming-of-age. I soon discovered that in my efforts to explore a Black woman’s sexual identity, I needed to first explore the myriad influences—personal, familial, communal, and societal—that have an impact on her sense of herself as a sexual being. Then and only then did it make sense for me to deal with her having a healthy sex life. Besides, what I loathe most about so many Black film characters is that they seem to fall out of the sky onto the screen, with no context

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for who they are or where they come from; I was determined to give Cece a rich backstory.

I reached for a historical context out of which to create this prototypical contemporary Black woman. I started by acknowledging that we've had a markedly different *sexualized* experience in this country than that of white women. I knew that as a justification for acts of brutality, white slave owners had created myths about Black women's abnormal sexual appetites; had made us out to be sexually aggressive exotics, forever lascivious, forever "asking for it." I knew too that considering this historical baggage, it was no wonder that Black mothers had admonished their daughters over the years to "keep your dress down and your panties up" in an effort to counteract the whorish image laid unfairly upon us.

Extending the context, I looked to the dominant film portrayals of Black women in this country's cinematic history. Much, after all, of how we see ourselves is shaped by how we have been represented. No other image was more ubiquitous, of course, than that of the Mammy. The Mammy image had haunted my psyche since my college days, when I wrote a research paper on Hattie McDaniel, whose 1940 Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in *Gone with the Wind* seemed to forever immortalize the overweight, subservient, yet bull-strong Negro woman in popular culture—what Hollywood Black actress Sheryl Lee Ralph calls in a *New York Times* article the "Fat Mama on the Couch Syndrome" Joy Horowitz, "Black Actresses Still Waiting for Star Roles," (May 28, 1992).

My challenge with *Naked Acts* was to provide some subjectivity, to tell the rest of the story. Without that, I strongly felt Black women on screen would forever stay relegated to the two extremes—asexual mule or oversexed jungle bunny. To be sure, there is a third stop on the continuum of extremity in terms of our image within popular culture—that of the nagging bitch, the ball-buster, the castrator. Actress Ralph has a name for those portrayals as well. She calls them examples of the "Sassy Sister on the Corner Syndrome." It's interesting to note that no matter how demure and sexually repressed Black women have been in real life, we've never been portrayed as pure women, as the Virgin Madonna. That image has been reserved for our white counterparts.

And so, I knew that with *Naked Acts*, I wanted the present to begin—that is, I wanted us to get beyond the limitations placed on our bodies by our racialized past. Namely, I wanted the Black woman's body to be a source of beauty, an "object" of desire. But this is a tricky slope to climb, as the line between celebration and exploitation can be thin—especially in a medium as powerful as film and particularly with all the

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baggage we carry around this subject as Black women. It was further complicated by a radical decision on my part to showcase Black female nudity in the film. I believed it would be a cowardly act to tell a story about a Black woman learning to accept her own body and yet never reveal her nude body at any time on screen. Still, I knew it would be tough to avoid the very stereotyping I was critiquing. I ultimately decided that none of the women characters' nudity would be used in any sexual contexts, but rather in natural, everyday settings. (I had a little fun with the main male character's body. He gets to take *his* clothes off during love scenes.) Too, the audience would anticipate seeing Cece's body as she strove to keep it covered but would go on this journey with her, as she slowly peeled off more and more layers, shedding cultural baggage along with her clothing and wigs, until finally viewers would see her body only as she revealed it to herself, for herself. The effect, I hoped, would be for audiences to feel that they were witnessing a private moment, a private yet empowering moment that had nothing to do with sex but everything to do with self-awareness and the individual's own sexuality—because we are our bodies. Still, I knew this was risky.

I knew that for this woman, Cece, to be a genuine African American woman of the 1990s, she would have to embody all of those women who were influences upon her, who helped shape and form what her sexual image of herself would become. I also knew that this character's sexual identity would have to evolve out of my personal research, my effort to gather and look at the stories of contemporary women within my own life. I started with my siblings.

All three of my sisters were overweight, two of them obese. I saw how each made life choices, sometimes destructive ones, that I now feel were highly influenced by their relationship to their own bodies—and, in effect, by how they felt about themselves as Black women. I was equally influenced by a close friend from my days as a newspaper reporter in Philadelphia who had just lost fifty pounds when I met her. A beautiful Puerto Rican woman, she once told me that the two biggest changes she had to get used to after her weight loss were the flirtations from men who had barely noticed her before she lost weight and accepting what she now saw in the mirror; or as she put it, "In my head, I'm still fat."

Another influence, also stemming from my early reporting days, was my memory of being in an Atlanta newsroom the day "cropped" photos of Vanessa Williams posing nude came across the news wire. I'll never forget the glee with which the white reporters rushed out to buy

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copies of *Penthouse Magazine*, then clustered around the pictures, feigning shock and shaking their heads yet drinking in every photo nevertheless. So close in age to Vanessa Williams, and as another Black woman, I took the public and media denunciation of her personally. I felt that a naive young woman exploring her sexual power and her liberation had stumbled into a quagmire of stereotypes swarming around Black women's bodies, societal roles for women, and men's exploitation of those women. I felt she was a symbol of the schizophrenic attitudes toward sex and race and gender that America embraces (the Good Negress became the Bad Nigger-Girl). The fact that Williams overcame the debacle, rising in fame with her sexy image intact, only highlights the hypocrisy with which she was publicly denigrated and "punished" in the first place.

Finally, there was Oprah. Watching her over the years go through a public battle with her weight, which in effect has really been a private battle to conquer low self-esteem, has provided an extraordinary metaphor for Black women in this country. So many of us don't have the features or the figures that the dominant culture embraces, which naturally leads a lot of Black women to feel inferior. Luckily for us, here was a national figure, a woman who looked like us, working through her own similar issues on a public stage. Oprah is another symbol of America's darker-hued daughters triumphing over the damage done to the Black female psyche.

Because I always envisioned *Naked Acts* as a historical, iconographic story told through a contemporary lens, I incorporated all of these various Black women's lives and stories and portrayals into both the characterizations and the plot of the film. Cece became a twenty-seven-year-old actress who has just lost fifty-seven pounds when you meet her. Her mother, Lydia Love, is a former Blaxploitation Queen who now owns a video store. And her grandmother is a former Black actress from the 1950s. Imagine that your grandmother was Dorothy Dandridge, your mother was Pam Grier, and you wanted to be an actress. Who would you be? How to combine the smoldering-yet-nice-girl sensuality of one influence with the buxom, afro-haired, in-your-face sexiness of the other to emerge with something that is uniquely you? That is Cece's struggle.

The other women populating the film are Winsome, Randi, and Diana. Winsome represents a rarely seen type of Black woman—one who suffers from the belief that she can't be thin enough, one who sees her body as a tool for her work as a dancer/art model/actress. Randi is the full-figured character who flaunts her body, overcompensating for the asexual image usually laid upon Black women her size by relying on

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an over-the-top sexiness. Finally there is Diana, the “sistah spirit” who eases Cece through her struggles to regain control of and love for her own body. Diana is the emotionally centered female character of the story; she embodies what the others would be if the best parts of each of them were integrated into one woman.

The two male characters in the film represent the complex roles that Black men have played in helping to define what Black women feel about themselves as sexual beings. Joel, Cece’s old flame and the first-time director of the film she is cast in, is the man who both loved her when she was heavier and wants her to show off her newly svelte body in his film. His character speaks to the ambiguous agendas of Black men in the entertainment business who genuinely love Black women and yet willingly compromise them for their own success. Marcel, as an older Black actor and producer, represents the voice of integrity and uncompromising principles. He is Cece’s father figure—the man who tells her what’s good for her, who pushes her to be honest, who will settle for nothing less than the best of herself.

I chose to make Cece’s actual father someone whom she idolized, a man who loved her but who left her mother when Cece was a little girl. Shortly after his departure, Cece became the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of one of her mother’s boyfriends.

Three major factors influenced my decision to give the main character this particular history: (1) I knew that many experts believe there is a correlation between childhood sexual abuse and eating disorders—which for Black women often result in obesity. Oprah is our most prominent example of that. (2) As an English professor, I often gave a writing assignment to my students: describe in detail your first childhood memory. I’d given this assignment at least twenty times, and without fail, in every class, I found young women writing about sexual abuse. I teach at an institution with a large population of students from other countries, and what affected me so profoundly was that these brave women were from Eastern Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America, as well as the United States. I couldn’t help but believe that this random sampling was representative of a silent epidemic. Herein lay the universality of the story. Women around the world, I realized, suffer from sexual abuse as young girls. I wanted in some small way to comment on that. (3) I felt Cece needed a motivation for resenting her mother as she did. Surely, if she felt her mother had not protected her as a child, she would grow to feel abandoned by her and would be struggling more with defining herself, with “stepping out of her mother’s well-endowed shadow,” to quote Marcel, the producer.

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Finally, I made the decision not to show a “before” picture of Cece when she was fat nor to begin the film before she lost the weight. Some people have questioned me on that decision—feeling that perhaps seeing Cece struggling with her weight would help explain her problems. But I strongly believe that obesity is often a symptom of an internal, psychological battle, and I felt it important to show that Black women’s body issues are not corrected simply by “losing weight”; I didn’t want viewers to subconsciously think that Cece’s problems could be solved if she just learned some discipline and ate less—a bad rap placed on so many overweight women. I wanted to show viewers that here was a woman whose problems *began* after she shed the pounds—because she hadn’t yet shed the mental weight of her poor sense-of-self.

Casting a film that would include the nudity of Black women—even if it was nonsexualized—turned out to be its own major challenge. I wrote the screenplay with the lead actress in mind, so I was thrilled when she, Jake-ann Jones, agreed to do the part. I only found out days before shooting that the issues facing her character were in fact issues Jake-ann Jones had faced in her own life. She’d been overweight as a child and teenager, and she too had been sexually abused as a girl. I knew too that she was taking a professional as well as emotional risk by agreeing to be in a film that required complete frontal nudity by story’s end. At one point, I entered our production office just before the shoot began and found her standing at the top of the stairs, completely naked.

“You have to see what I look like,” she said. “You have to know what you’re getting.”

It was a powerful, defining moment. I understood then that she was entrusting me with her career, her body, her image. She needed to feel she was literally in good hands. After all, here she was, a Black actress, willingly exposing her nude body in a film. In my journal, dated 23 July 1994, I wrote: “Jake has to be treated very tenderly throughout this shoot. . . . She is laying herself open for this role. She has to be protected.”

I assured her not only that her body was perfect for the film but that I would see to it that it was photographed in a sensitive way. And thanks to my cinematographer, Herman Lew—a feminist Chinese American man—it was. Shooting that final scene of the film, in which Cece strips while taking photos of herself, required several preparations. First, I insisted upon a closed set, so that only myself, Jake-ann, and the cinematographer were allowed on. Next, I made sure the scene was shot at the end of the first week of production—just long enough for the actress

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to feel accustomed to the shoot but not so far in that her anticipation and anxiousness about the scene would have worn her out emotionally. Finally, I told her to think of the undressing as a dance, one she would perform only for herself. And so, with a cassette player on set, we played an evocative song by Annie Lennox chosen by Jake-ann, and I let her do the entire scene as one long take. That meant that she was able to get through it without stopping. This was important for the pacing that I was after and for her own comfort. This way, we only filmed the scene twice. I felt it would be too trying if I forced her to take her clothes off over and over and over again just so I could get the “coverage” I needed as the director. Subsequently, I simply used jump cuts to move the scene along.

In trying to cast for the part of Diana, the “sistah spirit” in the film, I initially couldn’t find the right actress to play the part. The problem was that Diana had to do a nude scene in the sauna room. I auditioned several actresses, and when they found that the part required nudity, they refused it. This I found both understandable and ironic. Understandable because Black actresses feel fully the double standard placed on them in the industry: a white actress can disrobe in a film and launch a career (e.g., Sharon Stone and Annette Bening); a Black actress is tainted by it and relegated forever to “those” kinds of parts (note Tracy Camilla Johns, *She’s Gotta Have It*). Therefore most Black actresses make it a rule not to take their clothes off in a film. Ironic because this need to “cover up” to compensate for historical stereotyping, to avoid societal punishment, was the very issue I was attempting to explore in the film—attempting to show how it cost us a true relationship with our own bodies. Yet the situation I wanted to examine on film was potentially thwarted by the reality of that very situation. Real life was imitating art.

Luckily, I was saved by a chance meeting with a Black woman art photographer, Renee Cox, whom I met while still writing the screenplay.

“I’m creating this woman character who takes nude photographs of Black women,” I said to her. “But I don’t think such a person really exists.”

“That’s what I do,” she said. I couldn’t believe my good luck, but in fact, Renee has built a career out of doing self-portraiture photography of herself in arresting, self-affirming and challenging nude poses. In fact, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani went on a censorship rampage against the Brooklyn Museum of Art for showing one of her pieces in a February ’01 exhibit. The piece, entitled “Yo Mama’s Last Supper,” depicts a revised version of The Last Supper, with a nude Renee portraying Christ at the head of the table surrounded by her disciples, who are all Black men. Seemingly so outraged by the temerity of a Black

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woman representing Christ in her own naked image, Giuliani threatened to create a Decency Commission to review art that would be shown in publicly financed institutions. We subsequently used one of her most stunning pieces in the film (a large-format photo of herself, nude, holding her son in her arms). More importantly, Renee was completely comfortable with the concept of nudity within artistic contexts, and she agreed with me that we as Black women needed to get beyond our own reticence about revealing our bodies. Although she was not a professional actress, I ultimately cast her as Diana because I believed the comfort she felt with her own body would transcend performance. And it did. And fortunately for the film, she had no problem with the sauna scene.

The themes of the film continued to play themselves out in the making of it. Most notable to me was the intensity with which the actresses playing Cece and Winsome worked out with a trainer throughout preproduction so that their bodies would “look good” on film. This again seemed like an irony. Here I was trying to comment on how visual media forces Black women to conform to a prescribed body type, and my film was prompting these two women to do just that. It was both enlightening and unsettling.

Since its completion, *Naked Acts* has gone on to screen in more than two dozen film festivals throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, Cape Verde, and Brazil. The film also enjoyed a one-month theatrical run in New York City in 1998, where more than 600 ticket buyers showed up for the opening night screening. Audience response has been consistently supportive and, in many cases, effusive. Men express gratitude over the chance to view women's bodies from a fresh perspective. As a male colleague said to me, “Here I am, a man who's not opposed to the male gaze, finding myself watching Cece strip from *her* point of view. That's a first for me.”

Women, of course, have offered the most emotional responses to *Naked Acts*, many shedding cathartic tears by the film's ending. Black women especially seem to appreciate the emotionally raw journey taken by an African American woman struggling with an internal, personal issue. One friend, who brought her eighteen-year-old daughter to see *Naked Acts*, said to me afterward that she was glad her daughter saw the film because “she doesn't like breasts, even though she has large ones herself, and this was the first time she didn't say ‘ugggh!’ when she saw a woman's breasts on the screen.”

Too, many seem relieved that the main character is *not* a lighter-skinned woman. As one Spelman College student said to me after a

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screening, "It was so good to see a dark-skinned, *thin* Black woman as the heroine for a change." She and her fellow Spelmanites talked back to the screen when Cece refused to take her clothes off in a love scene and insisted that her lover take his clothes off instead. "You go, girl!" they yelled.

White women have embraced the film's body image themes as well—finding a universality in Cece's character. In one instance, after a screening in New York, a young white woman approached me in tears. She was crying so hard, she couldn't speak. Finally, she just hugged me, said "thank you," and walked away.

Similarly, after another festival screening, a heavysset white woman ran up to me and said, "I understand Cece!" She began to recount in breathless detail how once, when extremely depressed, she'd picked up an Instamatic camera and begun snapping photos of her nude self. "I needed to do it," she said. "It made me feel valuable again."

Nowhere was the audience response to the film more intense and complex than on the African continent. *Naked Acts* was invited to be the opening-night film for the 1996 Southern African Film Festival in Harare, Zimbabwe. The film showed before a full auditorium of four hundred people, including African dignitaries, U.N. representatives, and African filmmakers, as well as hundreds of local residents. I was not prepared for the responses.

As soon as the lights came up, an older African woman came up to me and said, "Why did you have to show her body like that? Something so private?"

"Have you ever seen your own body in a mirror?" I asked.

She walked away in anger.

I then met a woman, a UNESCO representative, who quietly approached me after the screening and—referring to the flashback scene in which Cece is abused by her mother's boyfriend—explained that the rape of young girls in Zimbabwe was rampant. In fact, she told me that many African men from that region falsely believed that the cure for AIDS was to have sex with virgins, the younger the better. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu is now bringing that issue to light as the continent faces decimation from the epidemic.

Later, during a reception, another Zimbabwean woman whispered to me that she really liked my film but that I would have to understand that the love scenes in my film were disturbing because Africans don't kiss. "Well, we know that we do, but no one has ever seen it," she explained. Certainly not, I realized, on the big screen in Africa or in recycled black sitcoms exported to the continent from America.

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I subsequently discovered that the Zimbabwean culture is a very modest, conservative one, and so the nudity in the film was disturbing for obvious reasons. Yet equally disturbing were the sex scenes between Cece and Joel—because they weren't married.

By the time a Zimbabwean man launched into an intense discussion with me, insisting that the sexual abuse Cece suffered had nothing to do with her problems, I at least knew enough to receive his comments within the context of an African perspective. Not surprisingly, my film, which was to have screened two more times during the festival, was quietly pulled from the screening schedule.

That hypocrisy arose again for me when I showed the film in, of all places, our nation's capital. Invited by the Women Make Movies film festival in Washington, D.C., I sent the standard promotional picture to the festival coordinators. The photo shows Cece's nude body covered up by rolls and rolls of film. To my surprise, one of the coordinators of the festival—a white woman—called to ask if I had alternative photos I could send. "Cece's nipple is showing on the photo," she said.

I looked and looked at this publicity still that had been printed in newspapers and magazines in numerous U.S. cities and at least seven other countries. What nipple? I never found it, but she was insistent that it was there. Another example of America's schizophrenia about the Black woman's body.

In contrast, the same photograph was displayed in full color as part of a centerpiece article in a weekly magazine in Milan, Italy. Attitudes toward women's bodies are so different in Italy that the female programmer of *that* festival fell in love with the image and wanted to showcase it wherever she could.

Industry response to the film has been a completely different matter. Critics have lauded it, calling the film, "Fresh, funny and original," "smartly written and charmingly neurotic," and "a rewarding and invigorating find." Yet while many film distributors—from the biggest Hollywood studio to the smallest independent label—saw *Naked Acts*, none trusted that it had marketing potential. For one, it's not easily categorized, isn't "like" something else they've seen. (The best label I could come up with has been, "It's a weak cross between *All About Eve*, *Cinema Paradiso*, and *Hollywood Shuffle*.") The most consistent response I've heard from distributors is, "We don't know who the audience is for this film."

That ludicrous comment no longer surprises me. Without realizing it, I made more than a progressive film; I made a radical film with a Black woman at its center, a context for her complex life, and a multi-

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layered plot. I've learned that the more textured a story by a Black filmmaker, the more troubling it is to mainstream marketers—especially if that texture is not directly exploring the race issue but instead is exploring the humanity (rather than pathology and stereotypes) in contemporary Black life. If the story is neither a comedy nor a dramatization of history, that's even more troubling. That is why we ultimately chose to self-distribute the film.

What impresses me most as I reflect back on the life of *Naked Acts* is that considering all of the times it has screened—at festivals, in museums, at community centers, in classrooms, at conferences—people have asked me innumerable questions about the film but have rarely asked about the final scene—when Cece strips for herself before the still camera. That scene I expected to create the most controversy, and yet people don't mention it. I've come to view the silence as success, because it suggests that viewers have lived with this character in such a way for ninety minutes that by the time they witness her unveiling, they feel less like voyeurs, more like allies. They are, I would like to believe, cheering Cece as she finally liberates herself and lets go. The silence suggests to me that I've done what I set out to do with *Naked Acts*: I've presented a Black woman who embraces and celebrates her own nakedness—and gets away with it.