"Whose Portrait?" Fabulations and Triangulations in Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967)

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Portrait of Jason, the fourth feature-length film by American filmmaker Shirley Clarke, was released in 1967. It is a white heterosexual female filmmaker's film about and with a Black gay man, the self-professed "hustler" and performer Jason Holliday. After *The Connection* (1961) and *A Cool World* (1963), *Portrait of Jason* was Clarke's third film about/with Black protagonists, a series if you will,[1] which she concluded in 1985 with her last film, *Ornette Made in America*. All of Shirley Clarke's films were restored by Milestone Films in New York between 2012 and 2016. Each time a film's restoration was completed, it was shown in the Forum section of the Berlinale, the International Film Festival Berlin. This was my introduction to *Portrait of Jason*. In 2013, I was asked to write a short text for the Forum catalog that, despite its brevity, was supposed to address the complex and critical reception of the film.[2] This critical reception mainly revolves around the relation between the filmmaker and the film's protagonist. Is this film, made out of material from a nonstop twelve-hour shoot at Shirley Clarke's penthouse suite at Hotel Chelsea in New York City, with Jason Holliday increasingly drunk and stoned and presumably on heroin, a display of exploitation? How do we understand the constellation of white, heterosexual, middle-class, avant-garde filmmaker and Black, gay protagonist, at least temporarily homeless, addicted, and dreaming of stardom? Whose portrait is it actually? What is this film a portrait of?

The soundtrack of the film contains numerous requests for Jason Holliday to tell "the truth" and to be "honest," and the critical reception to the film for the most part appears troubled by the tension expressed in this directive. The two poles (truth/lie) thus have been transferred into constellations of two,

1 In Irene Gustafson's words a "series of films in the 1960s that centrally explore issues of Black masculinity" (2011, 26n1).

2 Some of the ideas developed here began to take shape in that catalogue contribution and I have taken up some of the formulations used there to develop them further in this article. See Heidenreich 2013.

such as Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the relation between the "film-maker" and the "character," the "white camera" and the "black forger," or, in Rachel Brown's words, "the duality of fantasy and reality" (Brown 2017)—a longtime fascination of Clarke's. In a footnote however, Brown describes the troubling uncertainty of the film with the phrase "the audience's unanswered questions" (ibid.). Instead of relegating the audience to a footnote, in what follows I propose to think it as a third party that demands consideration. Instead of asking whose truth the film reveals or hides—that of Shirley Clarke or her protagonist, Jason Holliday—I would like to leave this duality, these "questions of two," behind and consider the film as a set of triangulations. I loosely borrow this term from Haile Gerima's concept of triangular cinema, which he presented at the Edinburgh Film Festival's Third Cinema Conference in 1986, and which insists on the necessity of creating a relationship between audience/community, film-makers/storytellers, and critics/activists. For Gerima, the political potential of cinema, especially in the confrontation with racism and through the lens of an Afro-diasporic perspective, must be thought of as triangular (Gerima 1989). I would like to expand from this and consider triangulation as a queer mode of reading (and filmmaking); as that-which-is-not/beyond/more than-binary. These triangulations serve to complicate the truth/lie constellation that seeps into literal understandings of drag, and they also address the entanglements of race and sex that inform every aspect of the film, its making and its reception.

In relation to *Portrait of Jason*, some of these triangulations involve additional actants in the (making of the) film, some concern the film's materiality, in other words its (un)availability, some follow along the line of critical reception, of scholarship and film criticism as well as less formal forms of writing and engagement, while some connect to other works—films—that expand the notion of what *Portrait of Jason* actually *is*. In following these triangulations, I take my lead from what Marc Siegel has called the "porousness of the cinematic text," which makes it possible to "open onto a cinematic experience beyond that of the moment of projection" (Siegel 2017, 196). Siegel argues against the tendency to fix "both images and identities" in an "originating textual system" and instead shifts his attention to "the dynamic, speculative relationship between them" (ibid.). He theorizes this as "a gossip of images," as a queer practice "apposite of cinema." Gossip always requires more than two—*you didn't hear it from me!*—to come into being. Gossip is always about an absent other, or several others, and it covers its tracks by refusing authorship, or taking credit, yet gossip is based on its own version of credibility, trust, and of fact-checking. Its scene is that of intimacy (as opposed to rumor, as Siegel argues)—in other words, it is not speaking from a distance, but from a position involved. In this sense, I also think of triangulations of/with/in/around the film as vectors of desire, expanding *Portrait of Jason* in numerous directions.

Like Marc Siegel, I want to look at the circulation of images and "intel," or words, in relation to *Portrait of Jason*, joining a queer cinema practice that does not aim at a "conclusive truth claim" (ibid., 200) but (with Marc Siegel taking a theoretical lead from the late Douglas Crimp's writing about queerness as fabulousness) as "non-normative possibility" (ibid.). This not least as Jason Holliday himself claims to be fabulous, but also because his performance has been described as a form of fabulation. Fabulation, following Marc Siegel reading Deleuze, effects a transformative movement, destabilizing the positions in front of and behind the camera.[3] In this sense, fabulation has to be understood as a form of *drag*; here specifically not only in relation to gender, but also in terms of race and class. Or, as Tavia Nyong'o succinctly argues, *Portrait of Jason* should be understood as a form of "afro-fabulation" (2019). Before going into this in more detail, first let me introduce the film and the people involved in its making—and its remaking.

Shirley Clarke was born in New York in 1919 to a wealthy Jewish family of inventors and engineers. She first studied dance, including with Martha Graham, and in the 1950s went on to study film at the City College of New York with Hans Richter and others. Clarke made numerous short experimental films—first dance-related, then an architectural film nominated for an Oscar—joined the New York Independent Film Makers' Association, and soon became one of the leading figures on the American avant-garde film scene.[4] She won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature in 1964 for her portrait of Robert Frost. Her first feature-length film, *The Connection* (1961), was banned in the US for many years as obscene, since the term "shit" was constantly used in the film, which in this case was actually a slang term for heroin. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Clarke taught film and video at the University of California. In parallel, she experimented with live video, thus returning to her roots as a dancer. Shirley Clarke died in 1997 in Boston, Massachusetts.

Milestone Films, the company that restored Clarke's films, was founded in 1990 by husband and wife team Amy Heller and Dennis Doros, who called their work with and on Clarke's films *Project Shirley*. The intimacy suggested by this title—just the first name—is essential here.

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3 Marc Siegel argues this in his forthcoming book *A Gossip of Images*. In all of my thinking about and with *Portrait of Jason* Marc's work and input and his generous sharing of ideas as well as bibliographical references and of course, gossip, has been constitutive. This text would basically not exist without his work.

4 For biographical references see, for instance, Milestone Film's press kit "Portrait of Jason" (n. d., a), the Berlinale Forum 2013 catalogue ("Portrait of Jason" 2013), but also Nyong'o 2019 and Siegel (forthcoming).

What is known about the film's protagonist, Jason Holliday, is much sparser, not least because he himself provided various different biographical narratives. He was born as Aaron Payne, and his parents owned a restaurant in Trenton, New Jersey, where they had moved to from the South. He apparently contributed to the family's finances as a child performer, attended but did not finish college, went on to study acting and dance (also with Martha Graham among others), performed on stage and in nightclubs, and died in 1998 in Flushing, in New York. Milestone Films's press release for the restoration of *Portrait of Jason* provides further information.[5] However, they are a very involved player with interests of their own, and their narrative does little to reveal "the truth" either—not least as they appear only to follow the tracks of written accounts and documents, and most of which speak the language of whiteness in twentieth-century USA.

"*Okay, Jason, go!*" This call goes to Jason Holliday at the beginning of *Portrait of Jason*. The image is blurred at first, then comes into focus and Jason answers to the camera: "*my name is Jason Holliday, my name is Jason Holliday* … laughter, pause … *my name is Aaron Payne.*" Aaron Payne is Jason's birth name, but Jason—that is the name that best expresses his personality, as he states in the film. Jason's decision to introduce himself not just once, but three times, sets the tone of his *portrait* right from the start: "*What I really want to do is what I am doing now: perform.*" And that is what he does: he stages himself, is staged, narrates, invents, confesses, asserts. He challenges first and foremost the 16mm Auricon camera that records him and that is handled by Shirley Clarke and her longtime lover and collaborator Carl Lee, son of the legendary African American actor Canada Lee. It was Carl and Canada Lee who introduced Clarke to Jason Holliday. Clarke had also worked with Carl Lee on *The Connection* and *The Cool World*, films in which he also starred as actor. Also present was Jeri Sopanen, the Finnish-born cinematographer who had previously worked with luminaries such as Jean-Jacques Cousteau. But Jason Holliday not only challenges the camera and the team; he also challenges us viewers and our ideas of identity, identification, and truth.

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5 See Milestone Film's press kit "Portrait of Jason" (n.d., a). I use Jason Holliday without the much used addendum "né Aaron Payne," as he claims in the film that Jason is the name, that he chose for himself and that best suits his personality. The use of the prefix "né" is used in the frame of the patriarchal logic of name changing in marriage for women (née). From today's perspective of naming politics within queer, trans, and nonbinary communities, I refrain from using "né" because I cannot ascribe this formulation to Jason Holliday himself, but to a logic of origin and truth that both the film and my (as well as others') critical thinking seek to defy.

Portrait of Jason defies categories: documentary, fiction film, casting reel, interview. It may well be all of these things, as well as a "critical test of reality," in Irene Gustafson's words (Gustafson 2011). The film was enthusiastically received immediately after its release. To this day, many texts about the film quote Ingmar Bergman, who was among the first to see it as part of a carefully curated sneak preview audience,[6] who allegedly had called it "the most extraordinary film I've seen in my life."[7] Despite its fame, the film has barely been available for decades. With remaining film prints in utterly poor condition, it circulated mostly on VHS, and since 2006 also as a first restoration attempt on a DVD by the British company Second Run Features, accompanied by a booklet containing a speculative note by Tom Sutpen: "It's been described as so many things that one possible explanation for the persistent unavailability through the years of a film so exceptional has been its unusual way of eliding all categorization."[8] Then in 2013, *Portrait of Jason* was restored by Milestone Films and released on DVD and Blue-ray (and for cinematic distribution as DCP); an event that seems to echo Jason Holliday's own words, "*This is a picture I can save forever.*"

In the course of the film, Holliday talks about drugs, about the almost exclusively white women he works for (as a domestic servant—"*a houseboy*," in his words), his big nightclub show project, the sex he no longer wants to have, but talks about, the doctors he consults and his white "*head shrinks*," presumably psychiatrists … and he also talks about racism (without using the word)—for instance when he calls these white doctors cops. He talks about props and uses them to reenact scenes from the movies and musicals he performs, many of which could be called "classic" drag performances, such as a Barbra Streisand musical number from the stage version of *Funny Girl*, and impersonations of Mae West, whom he calls a female faggot. He distances himself from the concept of gay marriage understood as a long-term monogamous relationship: "*I have better taste*," he says. He identifies as a lesbian, he tells us about his childhood, about his violent father, about his mother, and he tells us about feeling lost and being homeless. He tells us that he has to tell, that he will better not tell: "*I'll never tell—I have to tell. I AM HERE ON THE THRONE. I get to tell whatever I want. THIS IS MY CHANCE TO REALLY FEEL MYSELF AND SAY—I'M THE BITCH.*" In between, he is asked by Clarke to tell more: "*what else have you got*?" The picture becomes blurry time and again, the sound continues,

6 Including luminaries such as Amos Vogel, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Norman Mailer, Elia Kazan, Andy Warhol, Geraldine Page and Ruby Dee, see Milestone Films's website "Portrait of Jason" (n.d., b).

7 Milestone Films press release uses the attributed quote as epigraph without referencing a source.

8 As quoted in Gustafson 2011, 2.

even when the camera is off and we see a black screen. The only person we do see in the film is Jason Holliday—but off-screen, on the soundtrack, we hear the voices of the other crew members, including Carl Lee, who in the last part of the film begins to berate Jason Holliday: "*be honest, motherfucker*," "*you're just full of shit*." Holliday responds with, among other things, a declaration of love and a request for attention: "*Please turn around and smile at me*."

Since the release of the restored version on DVD and Blue-ray by Milestone Films, additional layers have been added to the film, its restoration, and its reception, expanding the film in several directions. These new layers include, in the words of Tavia Nyong'o, "another chapter" added to a "saga that began almost a half century ago" (Nyong'o 2015), namely, Stephen Winter's 2015 film *Jason and Shirley*. It is a fictional reenactment of the twelve-hour film shoot, starring Sarah Schulman, who cowrote the script, as Shirley and Jack Waters as Jason. Like Rebecca Brown, who connects her wording of "the audience's unanswered questions around Portrait of Jason," to Winter's film (Brown 2017), Nyong'o too understands *Jason and Shirley* as a response to the viewing experience of *Portrait of Jason*: as "an attempt to dig a little deeper into the dynamic of attraction and repulsion between the auteur and her star, and offers one plausible answer to the question that has bedeviled viewers of the confrontation" (Nyong'o 2015).

Stephen Winter, who himself is both gay and Black and probably best known for his film *Chocolate Babies* (1996), said of *Jason and Shirley*, or rather regarding his motivations for making it, that *Portrait of Jason*'s years-long unique selling point—the only American film with an openly gay Black protagonist—had been both extraordinarily relevant to him and, especially as a cinema-loving kid, utterly disturbing. The film stayed with him for decades:

> My take after over 20 years of viewing is that Jason is not only complicit in his exploitation but ultimately the film's primary engineer of narrative and characterization. Remember, Jason's profession was hustling and part of the hustle is to take more for your service than what was originally offered, and hold your liquor longer than the mark. Shirley is the one who seems to give up and say, "End, end, end," when she can't stand to film anymore. (Winter in Kohn 2015)

I will come back to Winter's film and its relationship to Milestone Film's restoration project. Before I do so, however, I would like to address Tavia Nyongo's concept of afro-fabulation, that is, a "theory and practice of black time and temporality" (Nyong'o 2019, 5), which he develops in resonance with Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation in his 2019 book *Afro-fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. I am particularly interested here in the chapter

"Crushed Black: On Archival Opacity," in which Nyong'o discusses *Portrait of Jason*. Nyong'o's focus is the impossibility of repair, and a critical reading of restoration and/or as reparation. The history of racism and violence, he argues, cannot be repaired, especially not in a present that is equally, albeit differently, marked by it. The restoration of *Portrait of Jason* by Milestone Film incorporates the release of additional material—including the fifty-four-minute comedy act recorded by Jason Holliday sometime after the film shoot, but in the same year, 1967, as well as a scene that was present in the first cut of the film, the preview version, but which Clarke then edited out. In this scene, she confronts Holliday with accusations concerning Carl Lee—what Holliday did or didn't do with him, revealing the centrality of Lee to her relation to Holliday. By including these extras, we might concede, Milestone Film also wanted to give Holliday space, to give him credit, not only to Clarke. In a sense they tried to restore him too.

Nyong'o asks what happens when practical restoration and historical reparation collide. His argument expands on the photographic term "crushed blacks": "These are the 'shadow areas that lack detail and texture due to underexposure' and are thus called 'blocked up' or 'crushed,' according to the Illustrated Dictionary of Photography" (ibid., 47). Crushed blacks need to be "improved" in postproduction or, as with *Portrait of Jason*, in digitization:

> To link the phenomenon of blocked-up shadows to the question of African American representation in cinema, theater, and visual culture might appear to overburden a technical detail with symbolic and cultural weight. If I persist in drawing these connections, it is because I am persuaded that representations must be treated as immanent to the technical apparatus that construct them, especially if we would wish to unburden ourselves of their oppressive weight. (Ibid., 49)

Nyong'o suggests considering technical imperfections for their queer antiracist potential and he links these to, in Gavin Butt's words, the "imperfect and troublesome relations" (Butt quoted in ibid., 54), within the film and in the production of the film:

> That is to say, if *Portrait of Jason* was from its inception troublingly imperfect, then the best that restoration or recovery could hope for might be to amplify those imperfections. The tangled relationships in the film would need to grapple with the feelings of shame, delight, exposure, and anger that *Portrait* both depicts and evokes, complications that strike at the heart of all we risk when we claim both life and art for performance. (ibid., 55)

By looking at the restoration of the film, the question of who owns (or controls) the story—Holliday, or Clarke, or Lee—begins to shift. The same goes for the question of who—or whose truth, if any—the film actually shows: Aaron Payne, Jason Holliday, or Shirley Clarke? I would suggest that the film both shows and embodies constellations—including power structures and contradictions—because the film is thoroughly embedded in desire. Desire is multivectorial, yet its existence does not require reciprocation. On the contrary, it lays claims, can become possessive, violent even. At the same time, it makes the desirer dependent. Desire is also key to cinema, it makes cinema come into being, driving performers, filmmakers, audience, and critics alike. Desire is a messy, at times violent, potentiality.

I would like to return here to Stephen Winter's film *Jason and Shirley*, the reenactment of the making of *Portrait of Jason*. The film's release led to a remarkable backlash by Milestone Films founders, Amy Heller and Dennis Doros, who publicly denounced the film (and were on the verge of suing Winter) under the headline "The Cruelty and Irresponsibility of Satire" (Heller 2015). They claimed that, while they believed in freedom of speech, they felt: "we must go on the record about the film's inaccurate and simplistic portrayals of a brilliant filmmaker and her charismatic subject" (ibid.). Heller and Doros called the film "bad cinema and worse ethics—that cynically appropriates and parodies the identities of real people" (ibid.). Winter responded with astonishing calm to this public accusation, insisting that his point was not to set the record straight—or to misrepresent it, as Doros and Heller had claimed. Instead:

> It was never my intention to replicate that day, but rather to reimagine its historical and emotional significance from Jason's point of view. So contacting people whom I don't know wouldn't help me get to the film I wanted to make. I wasn't crafting a documentary, or biopic, or a remake. I needed to go deep into the archive of my own life to find the emotional truth of Jason. I had to get to the Jason within me so I could reveal the Jason within us all. (Winter in Kohn 2015)

The argument of Doros and Heller vs. Winter once again revolves around questions of truth, and realness. In reference to *Portrait of Jason* both parties miss the point: The film is not a "true portrait," but it is also not a "false" one, it is *cinema vérité* in the sense of Deleuze: not a cinema of truth, but the truth of cinema. In his second cinema book, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze reflects on fabulation as a form of storytelling in which the character and the author/director are mutually dependent, each invented by the other:

> What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real or fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the

> becoming of the real character when he himself starts to "make fiction," when he enters into "the flagrant offence of making up legends" and so contributes to the invention of his people. The character is inseparable from a before and an after, but he reunites these in the passage from one state to the other. He himself becomes another, when he begins to tell stories without ever being fictional. And the film-maker for his part becomes another when there are "interposed," in this way, real characters, who wholly replace his own fictions by their own story-telling. (Deleuze 1989, 150)

A few pages later Deleuze directly addresses *Portrait of Jason*, a film in which "it is the passage which must be grasped in all its possible "distances," in relation to the character and to his roles, but always internal distances, as if the white camera had slid into the great black forger" (ibid., 154).[9]

What Deleuze is missing here however, is that the camera is not only white. It was not only Shirley Clarke who directed the camera (and Jeri Sopanen), but also Carl Lee, who is the key presence in the much-discussed disturbing final sequence of the film. In this scene, he throws accusations at Jason Holliday and argues with him, audibly giving directions, speaking from the off space, from "behind the camera." The camera is, in this sense, also Black. And what the film shows is not just a relationship of, in Deleuze's words, black forger and white camera, but a constellation with several agents.

Portrait of Jason is a film that was supposed to explore cinema's potential as a medium of the "self," and had therefore initially been planned as a self-portrait, as Clarke later stressed in various interviews, only to declare herself too camera-savvy to be suitable for the project.[10] So it became a film about Jason Holliday. However, Milestone Films' furious response to Winter's *Jason and Shirley* seems to suggest that *Portrait of Jason* is in fact a self-portrait of Shirley Clarke. Doros and Heller took issue with what they thought was an attack on Clarke's reputation, and not on Holliday's.

The vehemence of their reaction, however, speaks also to a different relation. I have already pointed out the strange name they chose for the restoration project of Clarke's feature-length films: *Project Shirley*. The use of her name

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9 See also Marc Siegel's thinking about fabulation and his complex reading of Deleuze in his forthcoming book *A Gossip of Images*.

10 Clarke talks about this in Burch's and Labarthe's film (1970): "The reason I didn't do me and did do Jason, is that I think it's very difficult for a person who is a filmmaker who is so aware of filmmaking to make a film about themselves. A person who that is done to … can't be as au courrant as a filmmaker would be. I would have destroyed the film before the film is over."

indicates the intimacy Doros and Heller assumed with the subject of their work. In a public announcement after the completion of this project, Dennis Doros describes this moment as "the end of a long and happy marriage." He writes: "Amy liked to call Shirley Clarke the other woman in my life" (Doros 2016).[11] And as disturbing as this possessive cis-male claim to a polygyny marriage, in which one of the partners is dead and thus deprived of the possibility of giving consent, might be, it is one of the triangulations that I consider to be key to *Portrait of Jason*—and to the film's incommensurability, as Nyong'o puts it with reference to José Muñoz (see Nyong'o 2019, 49ff.).

Shirley Clarke is said to have made the film to outmaneuver Andy Warhol, who apparently had had his eyes on Jason Holliday too.[12] So, we also have a competitive triangle of Clarke, Warhol, and Holliday. Then, as Nyong'o points out, the restoration and work with Clarke's archive revealed that the film may actually be dealing with a love triangle between Shirley Clarke, Jason Holliday, and Carl Lee:

> As the night progressed, Holliday's increasingly belligerent audience derailed his intended performance and set the stage for the angry confrontation between Holliday and an off-screen Lee. The final edit of the film is elliptical about what those "lies" are, exactly. But notes left by Clarke in her log books now held in her archive refer to some of the topics Jason discussed on those other ten hours of film: "straight guys" who are "idiots waiting to be had"; "gigolos" who are "really fags-for-money"; and, most scandalously, a story "about stealing a guy from a girl." When this missing footage is included in the extended cinema of every night life, it is the bizarre love triangle between Lee, Holliday, and Clarke that emerges as the true subject of Clarke's portrait. (ibid., 64)

11 The article by Doros on the website of Milestone Films is framed by two photographs, one showing a woman in a bridal dress (Clarke? Heller?), the other a baby. This one has a caption: "Shirley Clarke in 1919." Doros's claim is also one of genealogy, of patrilineage, the project is his baby, as is Shirley Clarke, who is also his second wife…

12 See for instance the press by Milestone Films' press kit "Portrait of Jason" (n.d., a), in which she is quoted off record: "In a 1969 interview at the George Eastman House, Clarke said, off-the-record, that a month before shooting her film, Warhol coincidentally met Jason Holliday at a bar through Paul Morrissey. He then tried to shoot a film with Jason and Edie Sedgwick, which Clarke said, was in the wastebasket as far as she knew. 'They simply couldn't do it.'"

And this kind of archival gossip—the porousness of the cinematic text—continues in other directions too, complicating everything even further, as it includes heterosexism and racism expressed in or as desire.

When Nyong'o speaks of "crushed blacks," he is also addressing another layer of meaning of the term, namely, that of having a crush, being smitten, crushed out on someone or something. Nyong'o's theorization of the crush refuses any romantic notion of shared mutual desire. Instead, he looks at the emotional manipulation of the documentary camera turned into a hostile tool for interrogation, as in the final scene of *Portrait of Jason*, where Jason Holliday is verbally tackled and taken apart by Carl Lee, where he bursts into tears, only to abruptly recompose himself and declare that "I am happy about the whole thing." As Nyong'o puts it:

> To be crushed, after all is to be dejected, defeated, and abject in the face of another. But also: to "have a crush" is to construe love as a kind of defiant ownership of one's abjection: I may not have you, we crushed ones say, but I have the way you have me. (ibid., 56)

The "I have the way you have me," the desire for someone else's desire, can also become very icky, to say the least, as the next constellation of triangulations reveals, which entails racist, homophobic, and sexual violence. "I am not to my knowledge a homosexual," writes filmmaker James Toback in an article on Alain Delon.[13] Since 2017 hundreds of allegations of sexual harassment have been made against Toback by numerous women* (Whipp 2018). By claiming that he is not a homosexual, Toback expresses his desire for Delon by means of disavowal for this man he desperately wanted to work with, as he tells Roger Ebert in an interview, using the words "who is my most desired" (Ebert 2012). In addition to a number of comedies, Toback directed the film *Black and White* in 1999, a story of white middle-class teenagers fetishizing the "black" lifestyle of rap, guns, and big cars. This "semi-improvised piece of documentary fiction," as Michael Sragow writes in the introduction to his Toback interview (Sragow 2000)—featuring, among others, parts of the Wu Tang Clan, Mike Tyson, Claudia Schiffer, Ben Stiller, and Brooke Shields—is a difficult piece to watch and is not my subject here. I mention this film because, on the one hand, the film supposedly cross-references Shirley Clarke's 1963 film *The Cool World* in terms of content and form. On the other hand, in an interview following the release of *Black and White*, Toback talks about his desire for Black men, for

13 I could not find this article that Toback says he published in the paperback magazine *Projections* 41, no. 2. This quote is based on Toback's own self-referencing in various interviews, such as Sragow 2000 or Ebert 2012.

which Shirley Clarke again plays a crucial role. The interview is titled with the N-word, quoting Toback's claim in the interview that as a teenager he lived the life of a "White N" (Sragow 2000). To explain his motivations for making *Black and White*, Toback begins by locating its origins in his childhood. He recounts his obsessive interest in the sons of the domestic worker his parents had employed—in his words "the woman who worked in our apartment when I was growing up"—and nonchalantly interjects a violent episode: "I was keenly aware of them being a completely different kind of person because of race. I think I ended up doing something physically violent to one of them, but it was out of a competitive friendliness" (ibid.). In the interview, he immediately moves on from this creepy story to then talk about his best friend in high school, the only Black boy "in a purely white, liberal, upper-middle-class, largely Jewish private school in New York," with whom he was "quite close," to then switch to Clarke—more precisely to her partner/boyfriend/lover, to Lee:

> The real turning point came when I met and fell under the spell of Carl Lee. When I was 15 or 16 I saw Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* [the 1963 urban underground classic] and was magnetized by Carl Lee. I went back to 72nd Street, where I lived, and down the block, there, two hours after seeing him play the lead on screen, was Carl Lee standing in front of his white Triumph TR6, smoking a cigarette in his navy-blue blazer and his white shirt, looking very debonair. I told him I'd just seen the movie and that he was great. He was effusively friendly, and by the end of the conversation I had lent him $20 and bought some marijuana for him. (ibid.)

James Toback moves on to praise Carl Lee, as "hip-black-actor icon … He had a huge effect on everyone who knew him" (ibid.). Then he shifts to describe the relationship between Clarke and Lee, thereby claiming intimate knowledge:

> Shirley Clarke's whole life revolved around Carl Lee; they had this on-and-off 30-year relationship and she totally supported him the whole time. His influence was a combination of language, style, personality and psychology. … The attraction was definitely physical, and stylistic and psychological. (ibid.)

This is also exactly the moment where he expresses his own desire for Lee, which he introduces with his "strange little thing" for Alain Delon: "In my first sentence I say, 'I am not to my knowledge a homosexual.' That would be the appropriate phrase to describe my response to Carl Lee" (ibid.). James Toback goes on to describe his relationship to Lee as a "very unusual, interesting

friendship" (ibid.), which is said to have lasted until Lee's death—claiming more years than Lee's relationship with Clarke. His claim resembles the disturbing intimacy that Dennis Doros claims to have with Shirley Clarke beyond her death, and is further reinforced by his account of financial domination. Carl Lee played a small role in James Toback's 1983 film *Exposed*. Toback reports that Lee showed up to the set completely high and in urgent need of money, which he, Toback, provided: "He died of an overdose an hour later" (ibid.). However, Carl Lee died in 1986, so this too is a telling fable, a fabulation, revealing nothing about Lee, but a lot about Toback.

His claim to have supplied Carl Lee with money two times—first he "lends" him twenty dollars in exchange for weed, then he provides fifty dollars for the last fix—also hints at another triangular constellation, that of drugs, more precisely heroin. Both Lee and Holliday were addicts, and the intimacy of shared drug use also constitutes something of a love affair (in addition to Holliday's profession of love for Lee). This intimacy definitely played a big part in the legendary jealousy of Clarke that set the film project in motion in the first place.[14] Toback's "sugar daddy" act, however, simply means that he is trying to force himself violently into a constellation that he too is crushed out on. But Clarke herself is also caught in an abject kind of possessive crush. Between 1964 and 1972 Janine Bazin and Andre Labarthe produced a series of portraits, called *Cinéastes de Notre Temps*, filmmakers of our time. Clarke was included in the series in 1970 (*Rome Brule, portrait de Shirley Clarke*). In this film portrait, she fabulates about her films and filmmaking in the presence of an illustrious audience of mostly figures from the French film avant-garde, such as Jacques Rivette. Here, she delivers the very portrait of herself that then became that of Jason Holliday. Or in the words of Gilles Deleuze, who gossips about *Portrait of Jason*:

> The "I is another" of Shirley Clarke consists in this: that the film that she wanted to make about herself became the one she made about Jason. What has to be filmed is the frontier, on condition that this is equally crossed by the filmmaker in one direction and by the real character in the opposite direction." (Deleuze 1989, 154)

In her actual portrait—that is that of Burch and Labarthe—Clarke fabulates in style and tonality as "one of the boys," attempting to deflect the way those male colleagues of her tried to gender her by talking about "*ladies and cameras*." She does her best to show that, in fact, she's got more balls and definitely a

14 See, for instance, Bob Fiore's comments in Wolfe 2010.

bigger dick than them. Her claim to rank among the (white straight) boys—her "holding court"[15]—leads to a bizarre homophobic denial of Holliday's gayness:

> *Jason is very symbolic. Obviously, he is a real person, but what has happened to Jason, and what has made Jason who he is, is definitely the fault of American white society. And what intrigues me so much in the film is that Jason, without ever once saying this, you can't leave that film and not be aware of what has been done to him. Not only his de-emasculation* [sic] *because I'm absolutely convinced for instance that Jason is a made-up homosexual.*

Clarke claims in this portrait, her own fabulation, that Holliday "*screams at you I love you!*," but that he could never truly love. Holliday does however declare his love—but for Lee, not for her. Nyong'o comments on this scene:

> Setting aside the question of what a "made-up" (as opposed to real?) homosexual might be, I am taken by Clarke's telling misremembering of her own film, the film that she claimed to have obsessively edited over months. In this quotation, she implies that Jason screamed "I love you" at her, when in point of fact, as she must know, he screamed it at Lee. So her insistence that he could never, never, really love must be read as overdetermined by her refusal to admit that her beloved Lee could ever have made a reciprocal "adjustment" to America, could ever have "de-emasculated" himself to a level where he could desire someone like Holliday, even for one night. (Nyong'o 2019, 66)

What speaks here, in this postscript portrait masked as prequel to *Portrait of Jason*, is Clarke's denial of her own feelings and desires, even if these are what set her film in motion in the first place. But what *Portrait of Jason*—"*this is a picture I can save forever*"—does, is continue to expose that very desire.

Shirley Clarke, in her "own" film portrait, calls for a specific coming together: "*the filmmaker, the audience and the film must all be part of something together. And I don't want them separated behind the screen anymore.*" A suggestion that in my mind resonates with Haile Gerima's triangular cinema:

> This triangular relationship best functions through constant critical and innovative deliberation that includes an analysis of the history and practice of conventional cinema. In this process, all inevitable,

15 See "Rome Is Burning" 2025.

> spontaneous, aesthetic outbursts take motion, becoming organised, coherent, dynamic and vibrant cultural moments. (Gerima 1989, 69)

I do consider *Portrait of Jason* an aesthetic outburst, but one that defies becoming coherent or organized—because it is suffused with desire. This desire opens the film to constellations beyond "sets of two" and beyond the binaries of true/fake and revealed/hidden, beyond simplistic understandings of drag—to what I have described as triangulations. But this desire is not only "crushed out," it also potentially crushes that which it lays claim to with the violence that informs it.

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