

Films for the Feminist Classroom

Issue 1.1

All of Us. Directed by Emily Abt. Brooklyn: Pureland Pictures, 2008.

Living on the Fault Line, Where Race and Family Meet. Directed by Jeff Farber. Montpelier, VT: Community Family Media, 2007.

I Have No Memory of my Direction. Directed by Midi Onodera. Toronto: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 2005.

Reviewed by **Kristen W. Springer**

The three films reviewed here explore how race and ethnicity influence the meaning of family. Two of the films (*All of Us* and *Living on the Fault Line and Where Race and Family Meet*) are U.S.-based films that examine the intersection of family and racial/ethnic identity, as well as how racism and sexism shape opportunities of nonwhite family members. *I Have No Memory of My Direction* is a Japanese-based film that offers an interesting and provocative illustration of family understood through ethnic legends.

All of Us is a documentary about HIV/AIDS among African American women told through the experience of Mehret Mandefro, an Ethiopian-born, Harvard-educated physician. In this film, viewers are brought into the lives and families of two HIV-positive African American women in the South Bronx. Intertwining personal stories with expert interviews provides the facts, family context, and life stories necessary to understand the complicated social and economic factors that place African American women at heightened risk for HIV infection. *All of Us* could be shown in undergraduate and graduate classes related to health, gender, families, and race/ethnicity. The film would be very useful for exploring the intersecting disadvantage of race, class, and gender.

All of Us discusses research showing that African Americans constitute a disproportionate percentage of HIV/AIDS cases among women, and that almost all these cases are contracted sexually, in large part because women—particularly poor and African American women—lack power in intimate relationships. The interviews and case studies illustrate the devastating consequences of this powerlessness. For example, Tara Stanley—an HIV-positive woman recovering from painful, reconstructive vaginal surgery for cervical cancer—is being pressured for sex by her live-in boyfriend, but feels unable to refuse his advances. Rather than imply individual responsibility, *All of Us* astutely highlights the structural problems underlying Tara and others' powerlessness. For example, poverty—which is not uncommon for African American women—forces women to stay in dangerous

relationships. Furthermore, fully half of women with HIV/AIDS were sexually abused as children; Tara, for instance, tells the camera how she lost her virginity to her father at five years old. Childhood sexual violation often triggers a lifetime of abuse and unwanted sexual activity, making it unthinkable to demand safer sex and/or refuse sex. This powerlessness can have devastating consequences, as exemplified in the last moments of *All of Us*, when we learn that Tara overdosed on prescription drugs, following reports of domestic violence at her home.

Living on the Fault Line, Where Race and Family Meet is a documentary of interracial adoption in Vermont that would work very well in undergraduate courses on race, families, gender, and social policies. The film begins by taking viewers into the homes and lives of several families engaging in idyllic family activities: cooking together, taking walks, canoeing, and singing around the piano. The point of this opening segment is to clearly show the “normality” of interracial families. However, the film unfolds to show that the tenuousness of this normality is akin to “living on the fault line,” where everything can seem perfect until racism unexpectedly bubbles to the surface.

The film artfully shows the difficulties of raising nonwhite children within a white community and by white parents. The challenges are not trivial: several of the children had been profiled by police, called “niggers,” and excluded from social events because of their skin color. Even “typical” parenting concerns involve an added layer of complexity: one mother, for example, worries about how she can help her black teenage daughter feel beautiful given the cultural exemplar of beauty as a white girl with long blond hair.

Living on the Fault Line also does an exceptional job of discussing conferred white privilege as one crucial engine for racism. The sensitive attention to white privilege as something whites have whether or not they want it can help provide the language and context for starting non-defensive classroom dialogue about race and racism. The film also offers a beautiful opportunity for discussing how race, policies, and social conventions should or should not be involved in defining families. For instance, the film delves into ethical questions about whether white parents are able to sufficiently parent children of color; in this sense, the film questions whether race should be the defining characteristic of family boundaries.

I Have No Memory of My Direction is an autobiographical, experimental narrative by Toronto-based filmmaker Midi Onodera. The film weaves through questions of memory, war, family, and Japanese legends as the protagonist ruminates on her responsibility as the appointed “guardian of her father’s memories.” The protagonist and film creator clearly unite around this theme, given the fact that Onodera produced *I Have No Memory of My Direction* while her father suffered from Alzheimer’s disease.

Pedagogically, the film could be shown in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses as a starting place to discuss the meaning of family and the role of families

in memory keeping and memory making. Throughout the film, Onodera plays with the idea of family as loyalty, genes, and/or shared culture—with the famous Japanese dog Hachiko serving as an object lesson. As described in the film, Hachiko greeted his owner at the train station every day after work. The legend further describes how the dog continued to meet the train for ten years after the death of his owner. Hachiko is presented as a cultural symbol of loyalty and love in Japan, while the film narrative suggests that Hachiko could represent the meaning of family. How, for instance, should one best remember a passed or ailing family member? An amorphous woman's voice-over asks this question when looking at a taxidermist statue of Hachiko: "Does this representation of Hachiko bring us closer to the spirit of the animal? Is it possible to preserve loyalty and capture love?"

Onodera also suggests that genes define family and memory making during a segment in which the protagonist auditions for a cameraperson on a film about Hachiko. The producer and the protagonist are tied together by their perceived familial—genetic—right to do their jobs. As the narrator explains, "They have each carved part of their identity out of who they believe their father to be. Each of them believes that they have an inherited right to do what they do, be who they are. Each of them wishes to see through their fathers' eyes." In this sense, family is genetic, family confers rights, and family shapes how one sees the world.

All of the films reviewed here provide insight into how race and ethnicity shape the meaning and practice of family. Furthermore, each film demonstrates how the very micro-level, personal contours of family dynamics are profoundly shaped and constrained by macro-structural factors, including shared ethnic heritage, racism, and sexism. The films also question the varying definitions, boundaries, and meanings of family, and ask whether family is defined by biological/genetic ties, shared racial/ethnic history, desperation and limited choices, and/or love and loyalty. The films do not necessarily answer these questions, but they provide wonderful opportunities for discussion while highlighting the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary families. Each of these films could be used as the focus of classroom dialogue or supplemented with any number of rich texts, including the excellent anthology of contemporary research on racially, ethnically, and sexually diverse families called *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families* by Susan J. Ferguson.¹

1 Susan J. Ferguson, *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

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Living on the Fault Line