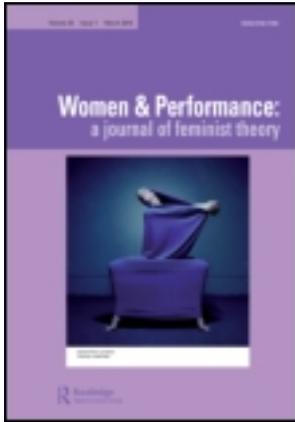


This article was downloaded by: [New York University]

On: 14 April 2014, At: 17:42

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwap20>

Film Review

Published online: 11 Dec 2007.

To cite this article: (2007) Film Review, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 17:3, 379-382, DOI: [10.1080/07407700701621616](https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700701621616)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07407700701621616>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

FILM REVIEW

Twelve disciples of Nelson Mandela

Directed by Thomas Allen Harris

Produced by Thomas Allen Harris, Rudean Leinaeng, Woo Jung-cho and Don Perry for Chimpanzee Productions/Independent Television Service (US)/Curious Pictures (South Africa), in association with POV/American Documentary, National Black Programming Consortium

Distributed by Cinephil-Philippa Kowarsky Productions, Tel Aviv

With: Tshepo Clement Madibeng, Matsepo Majara, Kabi Thulo, Maria De Koker, Mxolisi Mantlana, Mbuyiselo Nqobi, Mncedisi Kwinana, Fezekile E. Peter, Andile Lizo Ngwilingwili, Linda Carlos Hlogwane, Alex Selesho, Watson P. Thapong, Richman Mphou, Edward Charles Human, Vuyo Mfanekiso

English, Setswana and Afrikaans dialogue

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.

Simone Weil

In the pages between the *Inferno* and his infamous rendering of the face of God in *Paradiso*, Dante Alighieri spoke of his exile through the voice of his great-great-grandfather, who prophesied, 'Thou shalt leave each thing/Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft/Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove/How salt the savour is of other's bread;/How hard the passage, to descend and climb/By other's stairs.'¹ Documentary and performance art filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris's film *The twelve disciples of Nelson Mandela* embarks on a similar voyage, to document the life of his late stepfather, Benjamin Pule Leinaeng. Leinaeng, referred to as Lee, was one of the first anti-apartheid activists to be exiled from South Africa, in 1960. As he retraces Lee's footsteps with his camera, climbing into his stepfather's unfamiliar and difficult history, Harris gives voice to many unsung revolutionaries. His film facilitates our understanding of how governmental policy can directly alter the course of human life.

The word 'policy' derives from the Greek word for 'citizenship'. The film negotiates the space between the two, and raises questions that Harris tackles

with compelling narratives and selective, historical recreation. First, how do policy and citizenship, either enacted or denied, shape cultural history, landscape and expression? Second, how is exile performed on the body of individuals who have been stripped of their definitions of belonging, their citizenship?

Harris's innovative use of multiple kinds of media gives a glimpse into how Lee and his comrades started their journey from citizens to radical exiles. The film begins with Harris reflecting on an often turbulent, personal history, which Lee and he shared. The narrative then begins to show how Lee's life joins a larger political past with the other 11 disciples/exiles who under the guidance of Isabella Winkie Direko, their teacher, and Nelson Mandela left their homes in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Assembling a mosaic of rare family photos, archived film footage and improvised re-enactments from Lee's life, the filmmaker creates a visual history of how his stepfather's exile shapes his own family's history, and an understanding of nationalism and home. His mother, Rudean, and Lee offered him growth in a space that was privy to the American black-power movement's rich activist culture and South African political stories. Then, of course, there was the personal anguish Lee experienced away from his home in South Africa.

Punctuated between Lee's and Harris's stories are those of the seven remaining disciples, each of whom offers deeply personal experiences of living under the apartheid state. Reflecting on exile and the South African pass law, one of the disciples remarks, 'Brutalities of the pass law made people realize they had to fight against the policy otherwise you are buried.' This phrase becomes a key marker in how then the 12 men perform exile. For, if brutalities of governmental policies are equivalent to a very real state of death, then exile is what Edward Said refers to as a discontinuous state of being;² a space where time and temporality are in flux and home is an ever-expanding dot on the horizon. But exile does not hone the agency of those exiled. The exiled individual is born into exile or it has occurred to them. To enact exile, then, is to enter a temporal state of being where every achievement from the exile's new land is held in tense dialogue with the loss and the memories of a different past.³ This film, then, is a cultural product of policy and citizenship at play between past and present. Harris extends the geographic line Lee starts and continues to rupture the space that is labeled 'home'.

Lee's life is emblematic of this tension between two spaces. Although Lee's many successes outside of South Africa are recounted (ranging from winning several scholarships to study abroad, through devoting his life to becoming a broadcast journalist for South African anti-apartheid politics, to his work at the United Nations as an anti-apartheid advocate), there is also visible a yearning for home and community that is not fulfilled until Lee's eventual move back to South Africa late in life. This melancholia comes through in Harris's eulogistic film; however, the eulogy turns to elegy as he begins to bring into focus people from both the exile's homeland and his new home. By incorporating dramatic re-enactments using untrained adolescent actors from Lee's South African community (many of whom grew up learning about Lee and the other men),

Harris weaves a possibility for reconnection between the old homeland and the new.

Fred Moten, speaking of the relationship between the tragic (eulogy) and the elegy, writes, 'what animates the tragic-elegiac is something more than home (lessness) and (the absence of) singularity and totality: perhaps also there is a certain constellation that exceeds them, that exceeds the structure of their oscillation between happiness and despair, resurrection and mourning.'⁴ It is this precise vacillation between the despair of leaving South Africa and the bittersweet joy of making a family in New York which makes this documentary ultimately most compelling and emotionally resonant. While you see Lee embrace new experiences, fall in love, parent his stepchildren, you also encounter him grappling with bouts of severe depression and alcoholism.

Exile is performed on the body of the one exiled and becomes a master/slave archetype; the one exiled bows to the term but imagines a different future in which unity is potential and home is possibility. To perform exile, the exiles feel 'an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.'⁵ Lee's case is no different. Through his work with anti-apartheid groups in New York, his network of South African friends increases and with that his sense of belonging. What he works towards, however, is not just the hope of forming a community in his new country, but also his right to return to Bloemfontein. Harris presents these issues through the interviews of the activists, artists and friends Rudean and Lee surrounded themselves with during this time. The filmmaker's vantage point is one of nostalgia and the archived film footage of meetings and parties in the Lee home show this part of Harris's childhood as a celebratory and intellectually stimulating time.

In Lee's story, Harris illustrates how the single thread of unity in his stepfather's life was a sense of home. While the Bronx served as a surrogate for home once Lee had formed a community of fellow exiles, it could never take the place of Bloemfontein. As each interview, historical recreation and photograph shows, his personal history was deeply woven into the political history of South Africa. Lee's eventual return to South Africa is joyous because years of carrying the visible and emotional weight of his exile are finally expelled as his feet touch native soil. It seems as though Harris comes to a similar revelation by the end of the film. Harris's understanding of the emotional toll exile exacts and how important a return home can be is affectively and visually evident in a final scene where, after Lee's death, he is welcomed to South Africa with the reverence and respect bestowed upon his late stepfather. He comments,

When Lee's comrades shared with me their struggles with alienation, depression and homesickness, I gained an appreciation for their strength and stamina and felt tremendous remorse for rejecting Lee as my father . . . I wanted to reconnect with him by way of the men who were bonded to him by a

common political, historical and emotional journey. It was only in the process of making this film that I realized just how much I was his son.⁶

Lee's realization is what fuels this documentary and the dialog whispers of a time and place where the search for home is experienced as celebration and anguish, but always readily present, accessible to the open ear.

Sujay Pandit

© 2007, Sujay Pandit

NOTES

1. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XVII, <<http://www.bartleby.com/20/317.html>>.
2. Said 2000, 177.
3. *Ibid.*, 173.
4. Moten 2003, 98.
5. Said 2000, 177.
6. PBS POV, 2007. 'Twelve disciples of Nelson Mandela', 14 April 2007, <<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/twelve-disciples/about.html>>.

REFERENCES

- Moten, F. 2003. *In the break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Said, E. W. 2000. *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.