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BLACK CAMERA FILM REVIEWS

KAREEM MORTIMER. *Children of God*.

Nassau, Bahamas: Mercury Rising Media Production, 2009.

Reviewed by Angelique V. Nixon

Children of God, written and directed by Bahamian filmmaker Kareem Mortimer, is one of the first Caribbean films to deal explicitly with homophobia and sexual minorities in the region. The film tells the story of an interracial gay romance between two young men, Johnny and Romeo, and the troubled marriage between conservative preacher Ralph and his wife Lena. The film centers around the shy and conflicted white artist Johnny, who embarks on a journey to find himself and work on his art. He meets Romeo, a young black musician, on the boat ride from the capital city Nassau to nearby island Eleuthera, where Lena and her son are also traveling. The three main characters are each escaping something: Johnny from his troubles at home, Romeo from his family expectations to marry, and Lena from her discovery that she has acquired an STD from her husband. Ironically, while Lena promotes an antigay campaign through her church, her husband Ralph is involved in a secret gay affair. The plot of the film is driven through their three stories and the backdrop of public debates regarding homosexuality in the Bahamas, portrayed through snippets of radio shows, sermons, and public meetings. The film details the internalization of homophobia and painful secrets of gay male desire within a conservative Christian context: the preacher Ralph leads a double life as he denounces gay rights through his church, and Johnny and Romeo grapple with shame about their same sex desire.

In many ways, this is a story we have seen before, particularly in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) film portrayals of the tragic gay romance destined for failure and ending in violence, but what we haven't seen before is this story in this location. It is the nuance of place and religion that gives the film an edge in its representation of sexuality and homophobia. But it is also this nuance that makes one question the narrative choices made by the writer/director of the film, particularly in terms of race and sexuality. The premise of the story and focus on the white character is an interesting choice considering that the writer/director is a black Bahamian man. This is not to say that black filmmakers shouldn't write and direct films about white characters, but rather there is such a lack of black gay stories (and certainly none from a Bahamian perspective)

that it would have added depth and dimension for both the black and white characters to have equal attention. The story is so much about Johnny and his growth that it leaves out room to experience Romeo's growth. As the film progresses, we see Johnny accepting his sexuality and feelings for Romeo, while Romeo struggles with his secret desire because of family pressures until the very end. Nevertheless, Romeo is the catalyst for Johnny's coming into his own and it is through Romeo that Johnny affirms his sexuality. We never experience Romeo coming into his own, but rather he is more conflicted about his feelings through the course of the film. Johnny's courage to speak out and claim his sexuality leads to his death at the hands of a closeted young black man. The tragic ending of the film is framed through Johnny's growth and Romeo's fear.

Sex and sexuality in *Children of God* is represented mostly through a white male gaze—specifically in the scenes between Johnny and Romeo. Certainly, the interracial love story has its own attraction and appeal for a wide audience. The problem here is not the interracial love story itself, but rather the ways in which black sexuality is used in particular to awaken and inspire growth in Johnny and the way their relationship develops. The romantic affair between Johnny and Romeo unfolds quickly and in awkward ways that don't feel genuine, while their characters fall flat in a dearth of any real connection. The racial tensions subtly playing out between Johnny and Romeo are never addressed even as the film relies on their racial difference to spark interest. At one point, Romeo asks Johnny if he's scared of black people, to which Johnny proclaims that he is not white with no further explanation; Johnny's statement is never contextualized within the rubric of Caribbean mixed-raced identities or identifying with black Bahamian culture. Furthermore, both Johnny (and his father) appear white (of course this is complicated because mixed-race folks can look white and be mixed). Yet throughout the film, Johnny seems completely uncomfortable with Bahamian culture and identity. While Romeo appears more in touch with being Bahamian, there are moments when he seems out of place. Perhaps this has more to do with non-Bahamian actors playing these two roles or the lack of chemistry between the actors. Regardless, the romance between them feels forced and at times unconvincing. At the same time, the film does give us beautiful and touching moments that call for tolerance and acceptance in the Caribbean using the rhetoric of Christianity—the message is clear: we are all children of God regardless of sexual orientation and only God can judge us at the end of the day.

Hence, the film provides a glimpse into the religious, patriarchal, and Christian society of the Bahamas and the homophobic violence that can

develop within a deeply conservative way of life on such a small island-nation (or in any small community). Since its premiere at the Bahamas International Film Festival in December 2009, it has received much acclaim and positive reviews for being the very first narrative feature to address these difficult and painful issues within the Caribbean. *Children of God* does portray Christianity within the Bahamian context, and it offers some insights into the reasons for homophobia. However, it fails to truly engage the complexity and interconnections among religion, nationalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and notions of masculinity within the postcolonial context that give rise to homophobic violence. Homophobia itself must be contextualized within colonial/postcolonial structures, independence movements, and globalization and how these all affect the intensity of religion. Furthermore, most of the Bahamian women are represented as the vectors of homophobia—with Lena's leadership role and Romeo's mother and girlfriend leading him away from Johnny and back to a "normal" lifestyle. The women are represented as straight, close-minded, and Christian, while the men are more complicated—from bisexual/gay to closeted and homophobic to open-minded even in Christianity. Therefore, I see this film as not fully representing the broad spectrum of sexual minorities (i.e. lesbians and transgendered folk) and the kinds of activism that have taken place on the ground in the Bahamas for many years. At the end of the film, brief recordings of a local activist serve as the only voice from any LGBT rights perspective. The reality of course is much more complex and diverse, but the film does bring all these issues to the forefront even as it leaves them up in the air.

I offer this critique of the first Caribbean narrative film representation of gay romance and homophobia with the utmost respect. Nevertheless, I must also call attention to the silences that remain about race, gender, and representation. It is within these silences I see misreadings and misunderstandings forming in the minds of certain audiences. Bahamians (for the most part) come across as fanatically Christian and almost naturally homophobic because there is no context offered other than religion. But there is always more. The film leaves me wanting more specificity, more realism, more context, and more of a genuine love story. Yet I celebrate this film for being the first, and I give thanks to the filmmaker for his courage to say the unspeakable and represent all that is taboo. It is long overdue in the Caribbean visual landscape, and I know that this will mark the beginning of a new era in Caribbean film production. The film is shot so beautifully that it captures viewers at once—and it is surely the craft of the writer/director that has wielded the independent success of *Children of God*. As a queer black mixed-race Bahamian woman writer, I look forward to more stories

on film that make sense of our present and create space(s) for us all to be and in the words of June Jordan “live and love freely.”¹

Note

1. *A Place of Rage*, VHS, directed by Pratibha Parmar (1991; England: Women Make Movies, 1992).



DENNIS DORTCH. *A Good Day to Be Black and Sexy*.
New York: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2008.
Reviewed by Dolores V. Sisco

Dennis Dortch’s feature film debut has been around since winning its Sundance Festival debut in 2008 and testifies that black independent filmmaking is alive and well, even if it has been virtually ignored by mainstream film goers. However, the film does have its admirers who have found the film on premium cable and DVD through its heavy promotion on urban radio stations, social networking sites, and even Black Entertainment Television in between the hip-hop videos marketed to young, black hipsters. The action of the film follows six couples ostensibly during one day.

The film consists of six entertaining vignettes of various sexual situations over a single day. Dortch arranges his vignettes like a mix tape of banging beats and sexy, neosoul slow jams, a style reflected in the choice soundtrack that effectively complements each erotic and emotional narrative. The first piece, *Reciprocity*, treats the subject of oral sex. It opens with one of the most unabashed and realistic female orgasms ever captured on film. *Her Man* is about a booty call that goes seriously wrong for a married man who can’t keep track of his cell phone. When his left-behind cell phone rings, Helene answers it (“I’m D’Andre’s girlfriend”) and has a merry chat with one angry wife. *Tonight I* looks at the way the desire for romance and the effect of clumsy crudeness shape two young teens’, Tamala’s and Jabari’s, failed attempt at sexual relations one night. *Reprise* begins with what appears to be a reprise of an ongoing quarrel, as Candi (Nana Hill) tries to convince her lover that having her finger up his rear end will heighten his sexual pleasure. *Tonight II* continues the examination of teen sexuality from Tamala’s point of view later in the same night as