

# DIRECTOR SPOTLIGHT

—WOMEN FILMMAKERS AT TRIBECA—

Abigail Child, *On the Downlow*

A few of the subjects in Abigail Child's *On the Downlow*  
By Jennifer Merin

**JM: *On the Downlow* reveals the hidden lifestyle of bisexual men, more specifically of African-American men in Cleveland. They're quite candid, seem to want their stories known. Yet, it's crystal clear throughout the film that bisexuality is a keenly sensitive issue and a very uncomfortable subject for them. Why this emotional dichotomy? Why not just come out?**

**AC:** The men self-describe themselves as *downlow*, as dipping on both sides of the fence -- meaning they have sex with women and men. What's controversial about this is twofold, in my opinion. First, bisexuality, itself, isn't recognized in the gay community -- where some people say it doesn't exist, and that it's just cowardice. Secondly, in the black community, "gay" itself is suspect -- which has to do, I think, with our political and social environment, where masculinity, and black masculinity in particular, is especially valued, and where a man, and particularly a black man, is supposed to have children. So, I think there's the issue of bisexuality, then there's the issue within the black community -- there are those two directions of controversy.

**JM: You're a New York filmmaker, yet you chose to make this film in the Midwest. There must be countless men living on the downlow in New York. Why'd you go elsewhere to make this film?**

**AC:** Actually, it's because of the way I came into it. I started this as a more general film about bisexuality. I'm bisexual, and I feel it's truly invisible. If I'm with a woman, I'm gay. If I'm with a man, I'm straight. So, bisexuals have to be in two places at once to confirm themselves, if you will. As I was working on this project, somebody said, "You've got to check out downlow. It's 21st century bisexuality." I'd actually been looking at multiple races, genders, transpeople -- and I didn't have enough well spoken black male voices. So I did a search, and the people from Cleveland responded. Originally they said, "Come on out, you can share our bed, and do whatever you want." And, I said, "Oh, thank you. No."

But several months later, I reconsidered. A couple of fortuitous events happened. I found Robert Banks, a black D.P. in Cleveland who's part of the underground film scene and knew my work. And, he'd been working with an intern from Antioch College who'd been my intern the previous summer. So, we went to Cleveland, stayed at Robert's house, shot for 48 hours and made a 20-minute film called *The Party*. It was kind of raw and kind of amazing.

Then somebody mentioned that Logo, the first gay cable station in the country, was starting up -- this was 2004, maybe -- and we went to Logo, proposing a feature doc on downlow. So, basically, Logo led me around for almost a year after I contacted them even though they were green lighting me -- because that's what cable television is like. In March, 2005, they sent me to do a casting tape. I went back to Cleveland because that's where I had connections. I actually called people who'd signed releases, people who intrigued me, who seemed verbal. Three people in this film were in that 20-minute version.

**JM: Who?**

**AC:** Billy, who talks about losing his kids and giving up being gay for them. Kerwin -- he's the very beautiful guy who comes out to his dad. Tony, who'd just gotten out of prison and talked about being a drag queen. We came back with the casting tape, finally got OK'd on that, and AJ -- the amazing Arthur Jafa, who shot *Crooklyn* -- came on board because he knew my experimental work.

**JM: How would you define the experimental nature of your work? How does this film follow?**

**AC:** My experimental work plays with formal devices -- sometimes I use documentary tropes, sometimes I use narrative tropes. They're films you've never quite seen the like of -- I flatter myself to think that I've actually broken some bounds. And some people think so, too; I'm having a retrospective at Harvard Film Archives next fall.

So this film was sort of a return to my doc roots, but still dealing with sexuality. And my work is often about how private lives are part of the historical moment and looks at public history through private memory, and how sometimes there's a split between the private world inside a person and their public presentation of themselves in movies, even in home movies where people are smiling and meanwhile the mother's having a nervous breakdown or Hitler's coming in. That sort of divide between private and public self, and how we present ourselves is very strong in *Downlow*, as well -- where Billy says you can't change your inside, but you can decide how to present yourself.

**JM: How's you get these guys to be so completely open about their hidden lives and inner issues?**

**AC:** Partly it was through my contacts, and I did interview a lot of people. These guys are 18 to 32. Clearly, some were reluctant. Some were going to use the film to strengthen their own resolve -- like Kerwin, who was going to come out to his dad. He knew he maybe wanted to, but the film was the push that helped the shove. But 45-year-olds I'd meet at clubs would listen to me, then say, "Oh, no." I mean, because it's an oxymoron, really, to have downlow people speak on camera, isn't it?

**JM: Absolutely. I mean, talk about coming out... this is very public.**

**AC:** Exactly. It might partly about Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, but I also think it was a subcon-- I mean, Billy wanted to talk. He wanted to say downlow isn't just cheating on your wife, but that it's also hiding your identity from colleagues, especially on the job. And, I should also add that Ohio's one of the states that's gotten much worse

about gay laws. If you work for the government and it comes out that you're gay, you lose your job in Ohio. Somebody told me there was a much bigger gay scene in Cleveland until these rules were made. But a lot of people have left Cleveland because these rules interfered with their job situations and ambitions.

And, about getting the intimacy -- I think that people talk to me. I trained as an ethnographer. I come from docs. I know how to ask questions, how to listen. But there's a kind of humorous thing, too. I'm a small woman. I think Joan Didion said it -- that small women are just not threatening. Well, when we meet, I'm not a big guy. I wish I had that exact quote. You know, Joan Didion's small, too. So we're not threatening. In fact, people don't think we're anything. But that's a whole other issue. Or is it?

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