

eISSN: 2254-1179

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14201/candb.v10i135-152>

## “Usable Paradoxical Space”: Negotiating Captivity and the Gaze in Michelle Mohabeer’s film *Blu in You*

**Heather Smyth**

hsmyth@uwaterloo.ca

ORCID: 0000-0003-1732-1137

*University of Waterloo. Canada*

**Submitted:** 30/09/21

**Accepted:** 19/04/22

### ABSTRACT

To this special issue of *Canada and Beyond* on “Caribbean Canadian” cultural production, this article offers a reappraisal of *spectacular* violence in the legacy of Sarah Baartman, as explored by Guyanese Canadian filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer. Mohabeer’s film *Blu in You* confronts the racist, heteronormative violences that underpin Western modernity, in particular objectification of the gaze over racialized Black and queer women, in the process situating queer Caribbean Canadian women as Baartman’s resistant inheritors. This paper seeks strategies for addressing the limitations imposed on queer critical race critique by inherited and flawed systems of knowledge. In particular, it explores the paradoxes that arise in addressing the legacies of Sarah Baartman using visual art. I use Mohabeer’s film and its references to Baartman and captivity, routed through feminist critical race critique, to propose ways of imagining liberatory epistemologies within compromised contexts, the critical inhabitation of delimited positions, and the exercise of transformative agency within restricted zones.

### Keywords

Sarah Baartman; Black feminism; spectacle; representation; agency.

## Introduction

Critical race theory necessitates identification of the interlocked layers of oppression and violence that structure our ways of knowing and being into “racial formations” (Omi and Winant 2014). Gender and sexual justice are at the root of this project, for as intersectionality theory—and experience—make clear, the modes of subordination that divide humanity according to “race,” ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and other forms of classification are interrelated and mutually constitutive. As Sherene Razack (2015) notes, “the mark that gets you evicted from humanity is a roving one.” Resistance to patriarchal racial formations has no singular point of entry, of course, and while many forms of resistance are direct and oppositional, the zone addressed by this article is compromised and cramped. This article engages with visual art/performance that confronts the iconography of slavery and spectacles of violence against Black and racialized women to explore the risks, limit-points, and possibilities of this confrontation. It focuses this exploration on a Caribbean Canadian experimental documentary film that stages the complexity of engaging with and undoing legacies of gendered and racist epistemologies.

This article begins with a pedagogical problem and works outward. In three consecutive offerings of a graduate-level English course on gender/sexuality and critical race studies, I have begun the course with a screening of Guyanese-Torontonian filmmaker Michelle Mohabeer’s 2008 film *Blu in You*.<sup>1</sup> In the film, the role of gendered and racialized spectacularization is foregrounded in the conversation of the film’s speakers, Nalo Hopkinson and Andrea Fatona; in its presentation of archival still and video images of Black women, especially in entertainment/performance contexts; and in the film’s imagery and filmic techniques and its incorporation of queer erotica. The central historical referent of the film is Sarah Baartman,<sup>2</sup> also known as the “Hottentot Venus,” a KhoiSan woman abducted and put on display in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe in enslaved

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1. I am grateful to several classes of graduate students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo from 2012-14 who have offered their insights on this film during group discussion in my seminar “Gender and Post-colonial Literature.” Of particular note are comments shared by Megan Farnel, Sarah Gibbons, Tommy Mayberry, Maša Pasovic, Maria Pop, Farah Yusuf, and Elise Vist. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for *Canada and Beyond* who offered very helpful comments on this draft as well as reviewers at *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* for a previous submission.

2. “Sarah” has also been written as Sara, Saartjie, or Saartji, and “Baartman” has also been written as Baartmann or Bartman. The terms KhoiSan or Khoi are sometimes referred to instead of Khoikhoi (Magubane 2001, 832).

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conditions, her brain and genitalia after her death dissected and displayed by comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier. Sarah Baartman and the image of KhoiSan women in general performed a critical function in discourses of race, sexuality, and gender at least since the sixteenth century in the Anglophone world (Wiegman 211n9). As Wiegman points out, this critical function included displacing the "threat (and actuality) of [European] interracial sexual practices with African women" (57). And Sarah Baartman marks also a critical point in the history of 20thC decolonization: the movement to repatriate her remains in South Africa followed the release of Nelson Mandela and the first non-racial elections in that country, making Baartman a "transnational postcolonial icon" (Garrett 78).

The inclusion of Mohabeer's film deliberately posed a conundrum for this graduate class, focused as that seminar was on worrying the epistemological foundations that produce racialized, hetero-patriarchal, and other colonizing systems of knowledge. How could we speak about and resist Baartman's dehumanization without reanimating the categories human/nonhuman that were at the core of her subjugation, and that continue to structure racialized and gendered hierarchies, including in our classroom? How could we address our own position as those who "look," even critically and with an interest in justice? Is there a viewing relationship of witness and critique that could overcome the spectacularization of Baartman's images? What could we do with the impulse to "re" humanize Baartman—to restore her to subjectivity—using the tools of historical critique and of creative endeavour, without thereby continuing to use Baartman to explore our own questions?

Mohabeer's film foregrounds the colonial and racialized history of the visual in Baartman's dehumanization, with a voiceover (speaking Mohabeer's poem "Evocation")<sup>3</sup> declaring she was "violated time over with their gazes," "commodified, fetishized...[the] spectacular vision of the primitive other" who has undergone a "public dissection" long after her death (Mohabeer 2008). Mohabeer strives to wrest "the visual" away from this history, working both within and against the genre of documentary film in her focus on Black women's performative play with the visual—including extended discussion of Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, and Grace Jones—and with her inclusion of queer women of colour erotic images as a way to exercise agency over the representation of Black women's sexuality. Mohabeer's film and her thematically directed dialogue between the Caribbean Canadian queer women interlocutors importantly demonstrates the many ways in which racialized and gendered modes of "looking" and being "looked at" can be challenged, ironized, and critiqued.

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3. Mohabeer email to H. Smyth.

At the same time, the film prompts a continued unsettling concern about the areas of potential incommensurability and challenge in using the antiracist visual to undercut the racist visual given the endurance of racialized and gendered visual codes. In other words, along with oppositional, more openly resistant challenges to the racist and patriarchal logic of the visual, Mohabeer's film foregrounds that zone where agency is exercised from within a restricted area, where the tools themselves are compromised or delimiting, and where images of captivity are inhabited, digested, and recontextualized, in an ongoing process of transformation.

Mohabeer wields the medium of film and experimental techniques to explore the complexities of diasporic, queer, mixed-race, experiences. Many of her other films—a list that includes *Exposure* (1990), *Coconut/Cane and Cutlass* (1994), *Two-Doh* (1996), *Child-Play* (1998), *Tracing Soul* (2001), *Echoes* (2003), and *Queer Coolie-tudes* (2019)—use what Mohabeer calls “experimental disjunctive aesthetic form” (2015) to critique dominant and normalizing discourses. Tara Atluri (2009) notes how Mohabeer's films “offer a rare glimpse into the multiple layers of irony and resistance that define dissident Caribbean sexualities” and argues that her “non-traditional film techniques speak to how colonial ideas of rationality are often unable to contain the shifting bodies and broken narratives of queer postcolonial subjects” (1-2). My identification of ‘compromised and cramped’ spaces of resistance in *Blu in You* is prompted by the predominance of images of ropes, chains, and wooden boxes in the film, echoing the restrictive and punitive tools of slavery as well as the cramped conditions of Baartman's boxed display. Mohabeer ironizes and transforms these images through technologies of negative imaging and front projection, while also creating visual effects of repetition, redoubling, and distortion, transforming appearances with psychedelic colouring and shimmering, oceanic movement.

The following discussion will outline scholarship on Baartman's overdetermined signifying function and the role of the visual in her containment; will propose models of critique that carve out space for challenging her iconography; and will examine how Mohabeer's filmic techniques and “experimental disjunctive aesthetic form” enable a critical approach to the legacy of Baartman and images of captivity.

### ***In the ‘locus of confounded identities’***

Sarah Baartman often features in critical race studies as an exemplar of the shaping of subjectivities through the interlocking and contradictory forces of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Greg Thomas points out this complexity in *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and Erotic*

*Schemes of Empire* when he notes, "The entire history of our African presence in American captivity lays bare a raw sexual terror that defines the cult of white supremacy here and elsewhere" (1). While Baartman's iconicity starts from a literal captivity, scholars including Saidiya Hartman (2007), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Rinaldo Walcott (2021) affirm that Black North American experience is distinguished by continued modes of captivity and unfreedom that are not merely metaphorical but constitute "the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 6).

Hortense Spillers contends that in the "socio-political order of the New World" the captive body fulfills a number of discursive functions—as "the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" and yet "in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor." Further, "in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of 'otherness'" which then "translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness'" (67). Spillers points out the overdetermined nature of the, in particular, captive African woman's signifying function, and its continuation in the "locus of confounded identities" available to racialized women, which are "a sort of telegraphic coding...markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (65). This continuation—and by extension, the continuation of Baartman's signifying function, and her encumberment by "mythical prepossession"—is enabled by a "dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation [which] remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement" (68).

In parallel with Spillers, Sharpe (2010) queries the repatriation of Baartman to South Africa as a redemptive project that relies heavily on her signifying function, asking, "what is being shored up through the retroactive subjectification of Baartman and the reclamation of her from and for history, when that work is most often connected to a cultural and national(ist) project? ... What would it mean for this work to be *for* Baartman?" (72-3). She asserts,

One can read the redemptive conferral of subjectivity to Baartman...itself as a retroactive and redeeming subjection analogous to objectification. That is, subjectification = objectification as Baartman once again is overwritten with multiple histories and used in the service of a number of national and political agendas that involve not the emergence of history but its repression. (2010, 74)

How can we think our way out of what seem all-encompassing epistemological systems? The task must take into account Sharpe's detailing of a

“subjectification” that is subjection; Spillers’ claim that “there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean”; and the ways that, as Judith Wilson puts it, “race, gender, and the visual structure one another in a complex set of interlocking, epistemological feedback loops” (20). Sharpe limns the challenges and provisionality of this reading when she praises South African writer Bessie Head for her invocation of a KhoiSan woman in her novel *Maru*, through whom she “attempt[ed] to create a space *from which one might imagine imagining real liberation* through suspending oppressive social relations as they are passed on, constituted, and reproduced in the present” (2010, 70; emphasis mine). Replacing exploitative images with empowering images is insufficient to challenge the ideology behind racialized and gendered “looking” and the circulation of stereotypes.

Critics like Zine Magubane, Katherine McKittrick, and Sharpe have astutely pointed to how the continued focus on Baartman perpetuates her use and abuse as an icon, even by those who challenge the visual technologies that entrapped her. Sharpe (2010) draws attention to “the representational minefield” enacted through a 1996 South African exhibition of KhoiSan history (prior to Baartman’s repatriation), arguing that although the curator “attempt[ed] to rupture being and looking like, being and doing” through an “exposition of epistemological violence,” the exhibit only “participat[ed] in the very reproduction of the KhoiSan as object” that it set out to challenge (90). Magubane and McKittrick (2010) indicate in particular Sander Gilman’s 1985 essay “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature.” Magubane (2001) argues that Gilman’s article is “cited by virtually every scholar concerned with analyzing gender, science, race, colonialism, and/or their intersections” but that these ostensibly poststructuralist studies “valorize the very ground of biological essentialism they purport to deconstruct” by adopting Gilman’s “ahistorical and psychologically determinist perspective” (816-817, 821). Magubane and McKittrick assert that Gilman’s efforts to gloss over the colonizing, racist, misogynist context of Baartman’s capture and display are thoroughly undermined by his reproduction of the illustrations of her medical dissection and his positioning of her as a symbol of something beyond herself, based in unexamined racialized biological assumptions. He uses Baartman to mark the historical development and intersections of multiple discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and class but does not question her pathologization and position as *other to* and *different from* a powerful norm that her dehumanization supports.

Gilman’s example is a broad target, but McKittrick points out that even committed antiracist projects have tended to use Baartman to understand linked racism and sexism, or to use her as an icon of resistance, “visually brandishing her body as condemned” (2010, 119). This legacy, she argues, has perpetuated

an ongoing "visual currency" (118) in which Baartman—and by extension, the racialized and gendered bodies in the name of whom she is invoked—remains "a unitary scientific spectacle of alterity" (119). In other words, Baartman has remained iconic because of the perpetual recirculation of her image in many contexts, both supportive of and critical of colonialism, racism, and misogyny. Because Baartman always stands in for iconography that is larger than herself, she remains objectified, and the scientific racism that underpins the modes of "looking" that are associated with her are not fundamentally challenged. McKittrick's essay alerts us to the high stakes involved in any invocation of Baartman, including in Mohabeer's film.

Indeed, the nuanced work of Black and racialized women artists like Mohabeer to reclaim Baartman provides evidence of the complexity of the problem. In *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, Nicole Fleetwood points to the ongoing complexity of Black visibility and representation, the "simultaneously troubling and overdetermined discourse of blackness in the visual field" (15). In particular, she asserts that "the explicit black female body is an excessive body" (109). Fleetwood focuses less on "the political and cultural efficacy of a particular representation" (15)—that is, the hope that "get[ting] it 'right'" (11) or "the expectation that the representation itself will resolve the problem of the black body in the field of vision" (5)—and more on "the significance of visibility to produce and reinforce how subjects come to be racialized and come to understand the codes of racial differentiation" (15). Fleetwood identifies the multifaceted and multipurposed circulation of racialized images through iconicity, which is "the way[] in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes" (2). Baartman, in other words, becomes a visual image that stands for many manifestations of racialization and engendering, and these functions shift and change over time, troubling even resistant mobilizations of her image. Fleetwood's primary structuring principle is that "the black body is always problematic in the field of vision because of the discourses of captivity and capitalism that frame this body as such" (18) and she asks, "how might we investigate the visible black body as a troubling presence to the very scopical regimes that define it as such?" (18).

### **'Inside and outside, captive and free'**

On what grounds and in what lived context could racialized and sexualized images be circulated in ways that would *not* perpetuate this fetishization and racialized "looking"? Can Mohabeer's film escape this circuit? One way to focus on the issues arising from this problem—though by no means to solve it—can be found in Katherine McKittrick's book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and*

*the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006). McKittrick's nuanced work articulates the problems and possibilities of finding liberatory epistemologies within compromised contexts, the possibility of reinvention and the critical inhabitation of delimited positions. Though other models for thinking through these problems are available, I draw from McKittrick's concept to gesture to the shared circuit of Baartman's legacy that passes through US, the Caribbean, Africa, and Canada, and to situate Mohabeer's specifically Caribbean Canadian film through the visual components of McKittrick's concept of "critical attic space" (52). McKittrick engages a particularly nuanced exploration of how we might challenge the grounds of these perpetuated limiting ideologies—what she calls "ideological and geographic 'captivities'" (144) that are "recyclable, lasting, and spatially rigorous" (50). In her second chapter, "The Last Place They Thought Of: Black Women's Geographies," McKittrick reads the narrative of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. From 1835-1842 Brent escaped slavery by hiding in a tiny attic garret in her grandmother's home on the North Carolina plantation she escaped from: a hiding place *within* slavery. McKittrick points out that Brent had removed herself from the slavemaster's vision so that she no longer functioned to affirm his own sense of his place in the world in reference to her, and she could watch slavery take place from a protected and critical vantage point. However, she suffered physical restriction and pain by living in the garret, and she was both free and unfree in her hiding place. McKittrick calls this a "usable paradoxical space" where Brent is "positioned across (rather than inside or outside, or inevitably bound to) slavery." She is "both inside and outside, captive and free" (42). Brent's story, she argues, "blend[s]...oppression, captivity, control, and agency" (39). McKittrick's analysis of Brent's story becomes a facet of her exploration of how scholars might position some of our critiques of racist misogyny across the delimited ways of thinking and systems of knowledge woven into our theories: engaging in critical race critique, acknowledging the violent epistemologies embedded in our tools, pushing incrementally and watchfully at their limits. "Across" can become a reading strategy and a means of envisioning the knowledge-creating function of our deeply flawed critical practices even while we are within them, using them to think our way out of their limits. As Brent herself writes, "[my grandmother's attic] was the last place they thought of. Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment" (qtd. in McKittrick 2006, 42).

In "the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 6), Brent's comment can perhaps be translated to propose that there is no place that can afford a fully free critical space to undo the history of racialized and gendered looking; the "telegraphic coding" of these "markers" are "so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean"



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(Spillers 1987, 65). McKittrick suggests that within a social world that delimited what was possible to do and to imagine, Brent found a space of agency, both compromised and transformative.

**'Go right through it'**

The concept of "critical attic space" offers a tool for exploring how *Blu in You* confronts, works within, and critically shifts the iconography of Baartman's enslavement and dehumanization. I argue that Mohabeer's film "create[s] a space *from which one might imagine imagining real liberation*" (Sharpe, 60, emphasis mine). Mohabeer addresses the legacy of racialized and gendered visual codes by, at times, operating *across* and within images of confinement and captivity. The title frame for the film, for instance, displays each word of "Blu in You" separately suspended from ropes (see Fig. 1). Knotted ropes appear throughout the film, shaped as if to tie a person's hands or feet together, or to form a noose (Fig. 2), as well as a large wooden box sided with chicken wire, perhaps echoing the box in which Baartman was sometimes displayed and caged (Fig. 3).

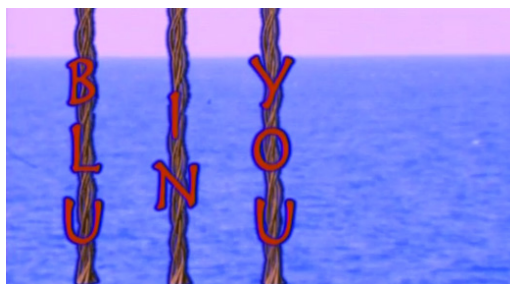


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Unlike some critiques of Baartman's captivity that show images of Baartman herself in confinement, Mohabeer's film resists the potentially exploitative and objectifying function those images might have and instead shows the images to *reference* or quote captivity without showing a woman captive. Her film is sensitive to the porous boundary line between pornography and erotica, and engages with the mixed desire, fear, and assertion of power that framed Baartman's display and exploitation in her time. Mohabeer similarly confronts the ways that medical drawings of Baartman's dissected genitalia perpetuate her exploitation and exposure centuries after her death. Instead of reproducing these images, Mohabeer references them by using filmic techniques to morph the images of confinement—and in one instance, rows of royal palm trees—into shimmering and doubling images that resemble women's genitalia (Fig. 4, Fig. 5). She manipulates visual perception with special effects and psychedelic colour to challenge the potential that the images will have a mimetic function—that is, that the images will be taken to be realistic, naturalized, representative, and even ethnographic presentations of the subjects in her documentary film, smoothly aligned with colonial and patriarchal ideologies. The rope of captivity, for example, shimmering underwater and doubled, becomes labial and aesthetically beautiful, offering a reference point for the film's transition from spectacle to queer erotica.

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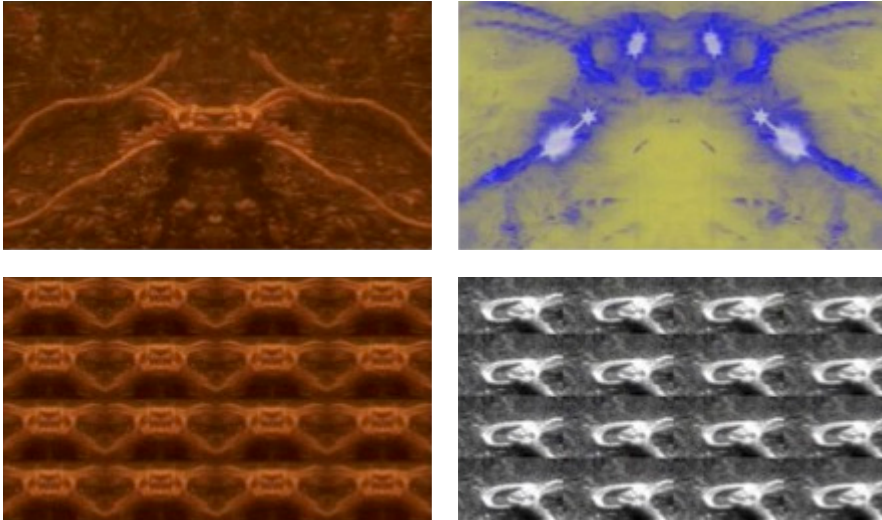


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

In her creative methods of addressing the question of what to show, display, and reveal in Baartman's iconography, Mohabeer's film bears comparison with Suzan-Lori Parks' play *Venus* (1996), which stages Baartman's life and death. Critics point to Parks' plays as "punitive scopic events," "dangerous racialized spectacles," for "she interrogates (white) spectatorship, empowering audiences

to see truths once hidden by masks" (Kolin 15). *Venus* in particular uses a "series of poetic repetitions and revisions" to "produc[e] fresh histories of the various experiences of enslavement, forced migration, colonialism and its afterlife" (Saal 67). In interesting comparison with Mohabeer, Parks staged one of the most potentially dehumanizing elements of Baartman's story—her dissection by Cuvier—during the play's intermission: both inside and outside the play's frame, in its own marginalized space. Garrett argues that this strategy "anticipates and satirizes the impulse to flee, putting the spectator in a double-bind. Neither staying nor going, the play implies, absolves anyone of the sin of complicity" (Garrett 79). This staging draws attention to the contradictions of representing Baartman ethically and refuses redemption for the audience.

Mohabeer uses the technologies of film to trouble the question of whether to show or not show the violence against Baartman and the violences of the Atlantic slave trade. Mohabeer's film and editing techniques feature movement, mobility, and multiplicity. The predominance of water in the film—ocean-like bodies of water and water's edge—invokes the continuities of the African diaspora and the shared legacies of racialized/sexualized spectatorship across its many geographies. The presence of the rope and box/cage underwater link Baartman's history with iconography of the Middle Passage and the Atlantic slave trade. However, images also appear underwater to show transition, blurring, and indeterminacy. The rope of captivity is distorted and transformed as the water moves, then is doubled and multiplied. The captivity of Baartman is multiplied to many more instances of the exertion of patriarchal and racialized power, and the doubled images begin to resemble Rorschach inkblots, gesturing to the unconscious level of both the enforcement and internalization of these forms of violence and trauma, and perhaps also to the interpretive possibilities of the images. The multiplied images may also gesture to Baartman's dismemberment and dissection. The multiplied image and use of changing colour also ironizes and puts into question the fixity of Baartman as an icon of captive dehumanized Black women. The use of negative image effects suggests reversal as well as x-ray exposure of what is hidden underneath.

The multiplying images also challenge the representational techniques of documentary filmmaking, accentuating the two-woman interlocutory and conversational format and disjunctive narrative in preference to an objective or linear presentation. Close-up shots show Hopkinson inverting her pressed palms first one way and then the other, using her hands to indicate multiple sides of the issues and to gesture to the complexity of the problems the women discuss (Fig. 6). Her hands moving together mirror the Rorschach inkblot film technique, so that her voice and body and *intention* become part of the film's transformation of images of captivity and dissection into thoughtful critique and resistance, while at the same time signalling connections between

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the unconscious and the unsayable and our bodies' knowledge. The both/and of her hand's gestures and her speaking to/with and physical proximity to Fatona—foregrounding multiplicity and relationship—underscores the film's acknowledgement of the connection between absolute or closed systems of thought and the objectification of Baartman.

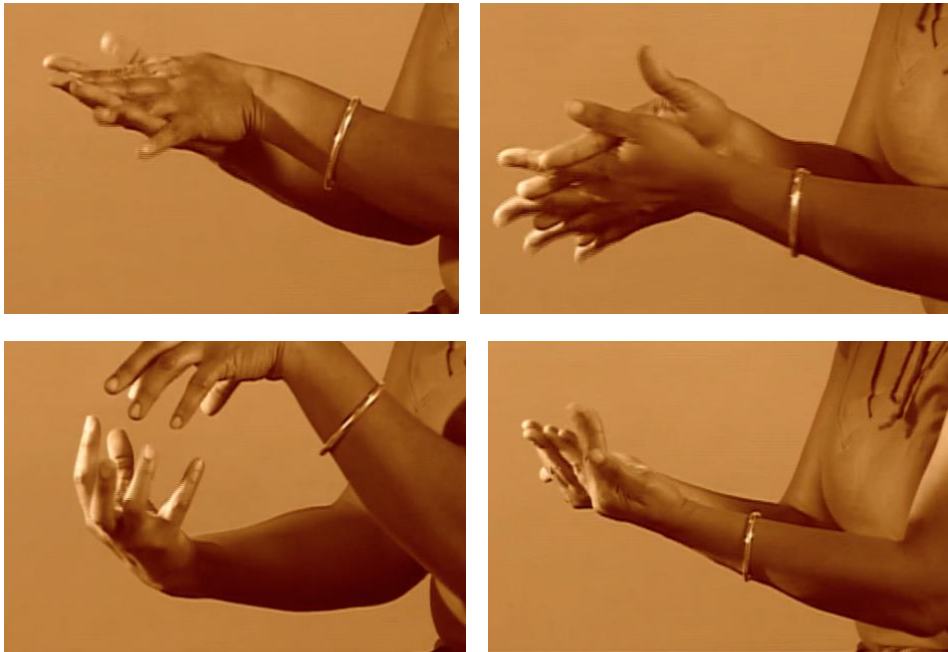


Fig. 6

Critics like bell hooks (1999) have articulated the possibilities of opposing dominant discourses of racialization, power, and "looking" and finding spaces of agency. She writes, "spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see" (308). hooks, like Manthia Diawara and Stuart Hall, among others, defines the space of oppositional spectatorship and the ways that the visual codes of a "dominant cultural order" (Hall 134) can be resisted—the "preferred meanings" of an ideologically framed visual text might be decoded in oppositional ways. In "Encoding/decoding," Stuart Hall argues that the connotative level of televisual (or filmic) signs, "though...bounded" is also "open, subject to more active *transformations*, which exploit its polysemic values" (134; emphasis in original). However, "polysemy must not...be confused with

pluralism" (134). Hall points out that the "dominant cultural order" structures the "preferred readings" of an event and marks them with "the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (134). "Encoding" shapes "some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate," such that even "misunderstandings" of a dominant meaning will "refer, *through* the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology" (134-5; emphasis in original). Hall's articulation mirrors Spillers' suggestion that codes are loaded with "mythical prepossession" (65), and his argument that even resistant meanings must "refer" to dominant orders "*through* the codes" substantiates the usefulness of McKittrick's (2006) "*across*."

One of the ways Mohabeer's film addresses agency is its exploration of the differences between display and performance, and the role of framing. Using the initial image of a nude Black woman figure *framed* in a window frame, viewing an ocean, the film *re-frames* display as self-contained and quotidian *just being there*. Andrea Fatona speaks to this in the film, and to the idea that ethnographic spectatorship projects racialized and sexualized frames onto what it views; in contrast, "as Black women there is a sense of the everyday or quotidian notion of how we present ourselves to the world." Fatona and Hopkinson seek places of agency and resistance and focus on performative agency with reference to Baker and Dandridge. But of Baartman, Hopkinson says, "we can never know how Sarah Baartman performed her body, because we're getting it translated." The unnamed nude woman in the frame offers a quotidian deflection of the ethnographic gaze through her disinterest in the viewer and the blurry domestic scene that surrounds her, perhaps capitalizing on what Michel de Certeau identified as the value of quotidian resistance: "the common, the quotidian, the personal, the *plural* practices" that can be "transgress[ive]," "*cutting across*" the "boundaries imposed by all totalizing systems" (Reynolds and Fitzpatrick, 63). Tina Campt's concept of Black fugitivity and the quotidian is especially relevant here. Her *Listening to Images* (2017) studies state-mandated identification photos of Black subjects to explore "quotidian practice[s] of refusal" (32). Campt's "fugitivity" is "not an act of flight or escape or a strategy of resistance" (96) but rather "a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy... creative *practices of refusal* [are] nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant" (32; emphasis in original). Campt's study of quotidian photographs offers a way to imagine the framed woman in Mohabeer's film as refusing the terms of a white heteronormative scopical gaze—refusing to accept but also refusing to engage, instead resting in the film's Black queer erotic space.

Mohabeer also confronts the issue of spectatorship and spectacle by using front projection effects and introducing the figure of a Black female spectator

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in the foreground of the film, played by Melanie Smith, holding a remote control. This woman watches portions of the documentary or of embedded films on the reflective screen with her back to the documentary camera, changing the channel with her remote and on occasion turning to face the viewer of the documentary (Fig. 7). While the viewer of the film primarily sees Smith's back, her early and repeated appearance in the middle ground of the film positions her as the focalizer or point of view figure. This figure speaks to the problem described here: there is always a viewer, a spectator, so can we undo the subject-object relation that has prevailed in the history of gendered and racialized looking? Is the woman with the remote in control? These questions are especially pertinent in that Smith's first appearance follows the film's textual display of a reference to Walter Benjamin quoted from Rony's (1996) *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*: "film is comparable to surgery, the instrument allowing the operator to penetrate the body of the subject while, paradoxically, maintaining his or her distance" (46). The quotation uneasily cites Baartman's surgical dissection, but perhaps also the filmic technique of suture, which in psychoanalytic film theory becomes "a metaphor for the 'stitching' of a spectator into the narrative illusion, notably through the use of the shot/reverse shot technique (which makes the spectator alternately the subject and object of the look)" (Chandler).



Fig. 7

Even as the film claims the ground of decolonization and critique, and seizing the tools of representation historically coded as ethnographic spectacle, it addresses the ongoing imperative to query the risks of engagement. Near the end of the film, Fatona and Hopkinson discuss the means available to Black queer women to own their own sexualities on a continuum that includes BDSM. Hopkinson asks, "what does the whole notion of playing with slavery and master-ownership mean for a Black woman with that kind of history?" She asks whether it implies "internalized issues" or whether it's "one way of tackling this 500 year

history." Her speech is followed by an image of the rope of captivity—or perhaps of sexual play—cut into pieces, shimmering underwater and coloured in neon blue. This image of freedom and transformation is juxtaposed with the scrolling words at the bottom of the screen, "IS THE BURDEN OF REPRESENTATION STILL IN EFFECT?" (Fig. 8). Fatona addresses the imperative levied on Black queer women to speak for or represent an entire identity group, saying, "given our histories, though...we still carry that burden of representation and it's a huge burden to carry." The women concur that "reading practices" and the interpretation of images must change in tandem with reorientations in creative representation, though "people *will* put on you what they want to see, or what they think they're seeing." Hopkinson addresses the ongoing potential for voyeurism in the visual, saying, "You are aware you're going to be watched...I don't think you can get away from being watched, being eroticized, perhaps being fetishized. For me one of the ways to deal with that is not to try to go around it or subvert it or prevent it but to go *right through it*." By going *right through* images of captivity, enslavement, and spectacle, Mohabeer's film works *across* a restrictive field to seek a paradoxical but usable place of queer critical race agency.

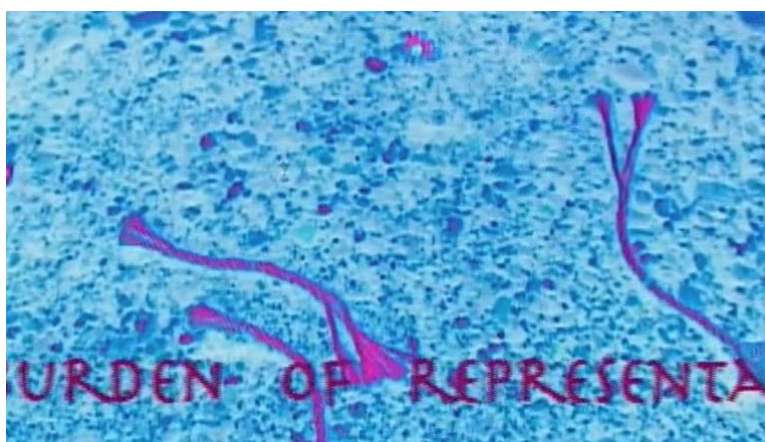


Fig. 8

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