

Decolonising Archives

Disorienting the Gaze:
Ngozi Onwurah's Early Films
by Ana S González Rueda

Decolonising Archives is a programme developed by UAL Decolonising Arts Institute in partnership with UAL Library, Archives and Special Collections. It sets out to explore institutional histories, memories and what it means to decolonise the university from within. We welcomed our first 4 researchers in residence in January 2020: **Dr Elisa Adami, Dr Khairani Barokka, Dr Mohammad Namazi and Dr Ana González Rueda.**

They shared their research projects in an online symposium on 2 December 2020. Each of the researchers focus on a specific collection, aspect of a collection, or particular materials within the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre and London College of Communication library; the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection and the Special Collections at Chelsea College of Arts library.

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Introduction

As I approached the idea of decolonising the archives at UAL, I was drawn to the 1980s, the so-called “critical decade”.

The Decolonising Archives research residency provided an opportunity to look into a generation of Black artists that challenged the Eurocentrism of British art schools and engaged with issues of identity and representation within the framework of emerging postcolonial theory.¹

Artist Rasheed Araeen locates the Black arts movement in the “larger historical context of the global processes of decolonisation”, that is, as part of the colonised struggle for liberation, but also the broader dismantling of Eurocentric racist assumptions and perceptions.² This paper investigates the forms of control that modernity/coloniality exercises on knowledge, the senses, and perception.³ It concentrates on Ngozi Onwurah’s early films: “The Body Beautiful” (1990)—held at Central Saint Martins’ British Artists’ Film and Video Collection—and her graduation film “Coffee Coloured Children” (1988). Initially concerned with how the films complicate the dominant model of perception as a form of appropriation, my analysis concentrates on Onwurah’s disorienting critical strategies.⁴

The research’s decolonial framework entails positioning myself as a white, Mexican, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied woman from an upper middle-class family, working at UAL. I came to the UK as a postgraduate student nine years ago and have been granted “leave to remain” as the spouse of an EU citizen. I cannot know the racist violence that Onwurah’s films deal with, and I acknowledge the structural problem of the limited number of Black British scholars and art critics.⁵ I attempt not to resolve, but at least to address the conflict inherent to my approach to the subject. I have stayed close to the films’

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narrative and discussed critical points of my analysis with the artist. My theoretical framework draws from Black feminist perspectives, especially the writings of Audre Lorde and bell hooks, as well as from intersectionality, as expounded below.

This study engages with the current scholarly debate about the possibilities of decolonising art history, particularly regarding issues of interpretation.

Jennifer Nelson, for instance, suggests that art history seems to colonise its objects by attaching meaning to them;⁶ while for Kamini Vellodi, decolonisation presents an opportunity to prioritise the “*passage of ideas*, in place of facts, certainty, specialist mastery, and the *settling of ideas*”.⁷ Feminist theorist Minna Salami stresses the need to reimagine knowledge by pointing to its white and male bias. She emphasises the need to move away from the modern, Europatriarchal understanding of knowledge as a quantifiable good to be controlled, possessed, and accumulated, with the ultimate aim “to rank, compete, and dominate”.⁸ In the context of art education, her conception of knowledge as a “living and breathing entity”—rather than a commodity—is urgently needed.⁹ I follow her thinking in treating knowledge as a “pliable”, creative project. I am also inspired by bell hooks’ transgressive approach to teaching based on ways of knowing that “go against the grain”.¹⁰ Her pedagogy acknowledges and values everyone’s presence. It deconstructs the traditional understanding of the teacher being solely responsible for the classroom dynamics and creates excitement through collective effort. hooks insists on the inextricable link between theory and practice and stresses that we must connect theory with the lived realities and the world beyond academia. Considering “the with whom and what for of the project”¹¹, I organised a film and reading group that explored hooks’ conception of conversation as a place of learning.¹² In particular, she notes the

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polyphonic quality of conversation and the possibility of moving between the mundane and the profound. During our online meetings, we discussed “The Body Beautiful” and reflected on our identities, family histories, and some of the participants’ experience of racism at different points of their lives (such as the threat of skinheads during the 1980s). Onwurah joined us for our third and last session; I have incorporated parts of our discussion throughout the text.

A decolonial approach to Black British art history must also re-insert empire as a fundamental category of analysis.¹³

As Celeste-Marie Bernier notes: “For a nation working explicitly to effect the subjugation and dehumanization of nonwhite bodies, cultures, histories, memories, and narratives, acts of appropriation, objectification, and commodification have remained the order of the day.”¹⁴ In a paper concerned with “assembling the 1980s”, cultural theorist Stuart Hall considered that we had not found ways of articulating the relationship between the work and the world, comparing their connection to that “between the dream and its materials in waking

life”.¹⁵ More than ten years later, Bernier warns that we have still not developed an alternative critical language that does justice to Black British artists experimentation with new visual vocabularies.¹⁶ This project follows her call for working imaginatively and developing alternative, malleable, and open-ended analytical frameworks.

My approach to Onwurah’s films, particularly in the second section of this paper, is guided by political theorist Anna Carastathis’ interpretation of intersectionality based on her close reading of the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s writings between 1989 and 1991.¹⁷ Rather than conceiving it as an additive theory of double or multiple oppression, Carastathis highlights the concept’s challenges to ingrained, exclusionary cognitive and perceptual habits. She puts forward intersectionality as a “profoundly destabilising, productively disorienting provisional concept”¹⁸ that indicates “a point of departure, not the triumphant arrival of antiracist feminist theory”.¹⁹ Critics of intersectionality, such as the scholar and activist María Lugones, point to its reliance on and reproduction of fixed identity categories and question its ability to address the complexities of lived experience. Lugones stresses its failure to account for interstitial social locations and intermeshed oppressions.²⁰ However, Carastathis

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understands intersectionality's "failure" as its function. She recognises that, while it engages with race and gender as separate categories, its ambition is to disrupt their divisibility at the level of cognition. Although intersectionality does not transcend the colonial/modern binary, in Carastathis view, it "anticipates", and "illuminates" the task of "impure resistance" and uncertain, risky, and tentative transformation.²¹

The first section of this paper "Bodies" concentrates on "The Body Beautiful" and the film's reflection on illness drawing from feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde's account of her experience with breast cancer and mastectomy. I also delve into the film's depiction of the changing relationship between mother and daughter amidst a complex network of conflicting looks. The intersectional analysis presented in the second part of this paper "Times" addresses Onwurah's focus on her family's experience of racial tensions at the time.

Adopting intersectionality as a "provisional concept" entails a specific temporality and a historical approach to the films, mindful of how the past keeps acting in the present and the work still to be done.²²

In what follows, I refer to the artist by her last name and use her first name to write about the films' depiction of different points of her life.

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In the opening scene of “The Body Beautiful”, teenaged Ngozi storms upstairs running away from an argument with her mother. At the top of the stairs, she turns around and calls her mother a “tit-less cow” before slamming her bedroom’s door behind her. In the next sequence, Ngozi appears as a young woman and lies in bed with her mother, Madge, embracing each other. The take is scarcely lit, but enough to show their bare bodies and Madge’s mastectomy scar.

A voice-over introduces their family history through Ngozi’s point of view. Her mother was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1929, and her daughter describes her life as “unremarkable and uncomplicated”. Madge married Ngozi’s father, “a young Nigerian medical student” in 1957, and they went to live in Africa. However, the Nigerian Civil War started three years later, when Madge was pregnant. Ngozi’s father sent them back to England without him and, as she says, “[they] would never live as a family again”. For the most part, the voice-over alternates between Madge and Ngozi’s narrative. Back in England, a younger Madge appears heavily pregnant and rocking anxiously on an armchair. At this point, the artist has inserted a male voice into the story:

It is important for you to realise that you are far from being the first woman to face the prospect of losing a breast. So many breasts are surgically removed each week, that one hospital officer said: ‘these days we do more mastectomies in this place than tonsillectomies’.²³

The dismissive tone of this medical advice contrasts with Madge’s recollection:

For five months, they grew inside me, the cancer and the child; life and death fighting for possession of my body. Each day as they grew stronger, I must grow weaker. But I had felt the foetus move inside me; it had become my child, nothing and no one was going to harm it.

Madge speaks back to what Lorde described as a diminishing “imposed silence” about women’s lives.²⁴ As a post-mastectomy woman, Lorde stressed the need for

voicing and recognising survivors' feelings and experiences as she recounted her sadness, despair, mourning, and loss.

Ngozi recalls how her mother kept her illness and pain to herself. Madge's mastectomy took place only two days after giving birth. As a small girl wearing bows on her hair, Ngozi cries out for her mom as she is rushed into the operating room. In the following scene, Ngozi puts on a brave face to visit her at the hospital. The male voice returns with its recommendations:

When packing your hospital requirements, include a few tiny safety pins, a needle, some thread, some of your husband's large white handkerchiefs and a pure silk scarf if you have one. This kit is to help you experiment with a temporary breast form so that you leave the hospital feeling at least partially compensated.²⁵

The narrator's normalising tone comes into conflict with the charged scenes between mother and daughter, accentuated by a blood IV drip that falls and smashes on the floor. Lorde underlined the devastating effects of the emphasis on "physical pretence at this crucial point in a woman's reclaiming of her self and her body image".²⁶ From Lorde's feminist perspective, this kind of advice directs women's energies to the past and prevents them from dealing with their present and future; it also reduces the mastectomy to a cosmetic procedure. Having experienced this insistence on the prostheses after her surgery, Lorde observed how it confines women to a position of "secret insufficiency" in which their identities depend on their outer appearance.²⁷ In her view, women are offered prosthesis in a similar way that children are offered candy after an injection. However, Lorde refused to hide her scars to become a more acceptable "victim". She refused to comply in order to appease a "woman-phobic world" and wrote from her desire to share her strength with others.²⁸ In centring Madge's account of her illness, "The Body Beautiful" forcefully confronts the silence and invisibility surrounding breast cancer.

The film explores how mother and daughter feel about their bodies, how they look at each other, and how others look at them. More than reacting against dominant modes of spectatorship, it creates an alternative that immerses the viewer in a complex web of conflicting ways of looking. For example, Madge, who also had rheumatoid arthritis, notices a man in the park while she is watching her children play. However, she considers that men belong to her past and that her children shield her from rejection and pity. From Ngozi's perspective, her mother was a bit slower and needed more help than others. There is a playful and tender moment in which Ngozi's brother washes their mother's hair in the bathtub. This scene is juxtaposed with a professional fashion shoot in which teenager Ngozi is expertly posing with other models. In a second photoshoot set against a river, she looks striking in a red velvet dress as she follows the photographer's directions. Madge takes Ngozi's place in the camera's lens for an instant while she reflects that her model daughter had "joined that elite group of women, pencilled in by men, who defined a sliding scale of beauty that stops at women like me".

The artist seeks to move away from Madge and Ngozi's internalised gaze and joins what feminist theorist and activist bell hooks describes as the "political struggle to push against the boundaries of the image".²⁹

The tension between looks heightens during the scene in which Madge has reluctantly joined Ngozi at the sauna. Inside, Ngozi uncovers her chest and rubs oil on her skin while Madge looks nervously at the other women leaning against the wall with their breasts exposed. As Madge finally relaxes, her towel slips and reveals her scar, which the camera shows in close-up. At this point, Ngozi becomes painfully aware of the other women's alarmed, disturbed, and avoiding looks: "I was seventeen years old; I didn't have a clue". Through this realisation,

the film questions objectifying social attitudes towards women and breast cancer. Onwurah remembers that as she started to see her mother as a woman, she realised that she was judging her in an ingrained and very reductive way.³⁰ As Lorde argues:

“Women have been programmed to view our bodies only in terms of how they look and feel to others, rather than how they feel to ourselves”.³¹

During our group conversations, UAL PhD candidates Remi Rana Allen and Claudette Davis-Bonnick spoke of the need of an “armour” and putting on various “masks and faces” in different situations in daily life. In “The Body Beautiful”, the frontal shot of Madge’s mastectomy scar challenges the dominant, restrictive, and superficial definition of beauty.

Hooks argues that Black women have developed an “oppositional gaze”, a way of looking “against the grain” to oppose gendered and racialised spectatorship. The film enacts this kind of “on guard” looking in which “cinematic visual delight

is the pleasure of interrogation”.³² A group of men playing pool at the cafe banter and comment on a newspaper photo: “Look at the tits on this one!”. Madge notices how this young black man looks and smiles provocatively at her daughter, a move that reminds her of the past. Ngozi glares at him. The scene turns into Madge’s sexual fantasy where she stands naked with him, touching and kissing each other. She reclaims “the right to be desired for my body and not in spite of it”. The camera concentrates on their touch as they gently stroke each other’s bodies. The film alternates between Madge’s dream set in draped, candle-lit scenery and Ngozi preparing for a photoshoot: a make-up artist highlights her breasts and applies ice on her nipples. The voice-over builds tension by bringing back memories from Madge’s surgery and old arguments. The two scenarios converge when, in an angry and rebellious outburst, Ngozi forces the man’s hand on her mother’s scar screaming “touch her!” She has shifted from playfulness to outrage and finally, exhaustion.

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The artist investigates these clashing looks even further as Ngozi looks at herself in the mirror and presses down her chest but cannot imagine what it would be like to have no breasts. “The Body Beautiful” insists on the political character of the gaze; as hooks asserts: “There is power in looking”.³³ Admiring her daughter’s body, Madge whispers: “This is our shared body, and this is our blood”. Throughout the film, mother and daughter come to see and recognise each other as women. As Ngozi comes to lie down with Madge, she admits: “If she hadn’t been my mother; if I hadn’t loved her or known her incredible strength; if I hadn’t come from inside that body that everyone wanted hidden away, then I too, would have turned away.” Their final embrace, especially the concluding overhead shot, can be seen as what hooks calls a “transgressive image” that transcends dualistic thinking and works as the starting point towards other ways of looking.³⁴ This time in broad daylight, Ngozi rests her head on Madge’s shoulder, her arm and leg enfold her mother. With this frame, the artist declares her inseparability

from her mother; their transformed gaze has brought them together. For the artist, there is honesty in that final, loving embrace: “They see each other as they are and are dealing with the world as it is, [while everything else] racism, sexism, ageism [is still] acknowledged”.³⁵

The film speaks to mothers and daughters and their complicated, changeable relationships; it speaks to women who refuse to be silenced, infantilised or objectified and that struggle to recognise the strength and beauty of their bodies.

Hip-hop artist and activist Akala has described the film's preceding decade, the 1980s, "as the most tumultuous [...] of Britain's domestic racial history".³⁶

His account starts with the 1981 New Cross fire and suspected racist arson attack, in which thirteen people died, and which led to a 20,000 black people demonstration. He notes how upheavals such as the 1984–85 miners' strikes and anti-apartheid resistance marked the decade. In 1981, the Brixton riots were provoked by the sus laws, which allowed making arrests based on the suspicion that people intended to commit a crime, as well as by Swamp 81, the racialised mass stop-and-search police operation. Akala recounts the police shooting and paralysing of Cherry Groce and the subsequent Brixton fires in 1985 and, only a week later, the death of Cynthia Jarret after a police raid, which caused the Broadwater Farm riots. Akala stresses that the 1980s uprisings and disturbances were widespread across the country. In his examination of Black British history, David Olusoga reflects that at the time, "'black' meant 'other', and 'black' was unquestionably the opposite of British. The phrase 'Black British' [...] spoke of an impossible duality".³⁷ Olusoga observes, for instance, that in the 1970s and 1980s, the politics of hate drove discussion among mainstream politicians about voluntary repatriation programmes aimed at non-white immigrants. Academic Maya Goodfellow notes that Margaret Thatcher's government reinforced an existing system of restrictive immigration policies.³⁸ According to Goodfellow, in the 1980s, the media constructed people of colour and especially black people as "the enemy within".³⁹ Her study concludes that Thatcher's strict border regime was the result of imperial legacies and political hostility enacted by both Labour and Conservative governments for decades. In her early films, Onwurah chose to concentrate on how her family lived through these turbulent times.

Like “The Body Beautiful”, Onwurah’s previous film “Coffee Coloured Children”, deals with the artist’s need to reclaim a sense of belonging to her mother. In this earlier work, she remembers that her mother would not let them help her clean the dog shit that racists smeared on their front door and shoved through their letterbox. Going through a series of family and school photos, Onwurah recounts that they felt strange as the first and only black children in the area. In this case, her brother Simon co-narrates, reflecting that “no one believed she was our mother and sometimes, I thought maybe she wasn’t”. For Onwurah, the process of making the film involved talking to her brother and realising that they had experienced many similar things that had remained unspoken as they tried to make sense of a world that didn’t make any.⁴⁰ The film shows Simon, both as a child and as an adult, strenuously scrubbing his skin with scouring powder in the bathtub, as he explains: “To make my skin go white, make the black go away. It was the only way I could think of to make her become my mother.” Throughout the film, the siblings deal with guilt and self-hatred. In Simon’s words:

“From the day we returned from Nigeria, we spent the remainder of our childhood, first scrubbing, then apologising, then fighting for our skin. It made me strong, but not strong enough.”

As a little girl wanting to become a princess, Ngozi dresses up, she applies thick layers of white powder on her face and puts on bright lipstick and a blonde wig. She twirls around hoping to magically become white while children’s voices chant racist nursery rhymes. By applying Vim and Domestos to her face or (as shown in close-up) harshly brushing the powders into his skin, the children strive to become white like their mother. “Coffee Coloured Children” deals with what media and cultural theorist Maxime Cervulle describes as the “polarisation of the

visible”, in which white operates as the “hyper(in) visible” norm that Ngozi and Simon stand out from.⁴¹ Delving into their experience of racism, the film refutes white hegemony’s invisibility. For Cervulle, the “polarisation of the visible [...] also involves analysing the distribution of the positions of subject and object of the gaze: Who has the right to look, at whom, and how? Who has the right to say what they see and how they see it?”⁴² These questions are crucial to think abouts for instance, another child asks Simon: “How come you’re brown if you’ve got a white ma?”

As a disorienting, provisional concept, intersectionality indicates the lack of adequate concepts to address the lived experience of simultaneous forms of oppression.

It reminds us that the task of articulating interconnections between different struggles still lies ahead.⁴³ Onwurah describes her relationship with feminism as “complicated and convoluted”; on several occasions, she has felt that she had to “to give up her blackness”, or that she was “not woman enough” to be in a female space.⁴⁴ According to Carastathis’ interpretation, intersectionality “reveals the inadequacies of categories of discrimination—as

well as of struggle—constructed using the logics of mutual exclusion”.⁴⁵ She conceptualises coalitions constituted by differences and internal and external power dynamics, as the basis of political alliances across identities.

Onwurah’s choice to focus on her family is significant in the sense of working through their trauma. During a conversation with director and screenwriter Jill Soloway at The New School in New York, hooks talked about who we are in relation to traumatic experiences and comments that the idea that “the personal is political” did not address this question profoundly enough.⁴⁶ hooks considers critical thinking and awareness as a way of “mapping out ways to survive”. She also reflects on recovery, the generational continuation of trauma, and how “childhood scripts” have played out in her life. In “Coffee Coloured Children”, Ngozi and Simon constantly wonder whether they live in a “melting pot or incinerator”. Darkened in grainy blue, the scenes in which as adults, Simon keeps scrubbing and Ngozi keeps spinning, suggest how these childhood memories kept reappearing in their lives. But then, Ngozi removes her costume in front of the mirror saying: “Domestos wouldn’t clean my skin because my skin wasn’t dirty. The real dirt I washed away. It took a while; it took a childhood.” Simon lets the powder dissolve in the bathtub; he washes off his self-hate in the sea as she does in the shower

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and a cascade. As a way of “exorcising the pain”, the siblings build a fire to burn the scouring powders and the white tulle dress. Onwurah mentioned that this “cathartic” moment had not been initially planned.⁴⁷ Ngozi throws in her wig; the little girl also throws it away. Speaking to herself as a child and to her unborn daughter, she vows: “I will not give my child to a world that does not deserve her.” During our conversation, she observed that “being biracial, you are waiting for the world to be the way it should be in order to be your full person”.⁴⁸ hooks urges us to think not of the “female gaze”, but the “visionary female gaze”.⁴⁹ In this sense, Onwurah’s films look into the future; she has made visible her mother’s one-breasted body, secured the inextricable bond between them, and imagined a world that would deserve her own daughter. Her work is liberating in actively rewriting her family’s story and telling not only what happened, but how she wanted things to be.

Developing a framework of analysis of Black Atlantic artists’ work, art historian and critic Kobena Mercer emphasises the need to move away from the pervading “dehistoricized way of seeing” that often concentrates on the issue of black artists’ visibility in the international art world.⁵⁰

Instead, he investigates the aesthetic and political significance of these practices and examines what they do as they become part of public life. Mercer considers the late twentieth-century breakthrough of black diaspora artists as an epic rupture and an epistemological turning point. He highlights that, beyond the question of black access to artistic and cultural resources, the critique of race and representation during the 1980s started to destabilise binary thinking and opened

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ways of understanding cross-cultural artistic practices. Mercer is mainly interested in the “arresting [quality of art] that eludes comprehension, [and underlines] art’s ability to undo our habits of seeing, thinking, and feeling”.⁵¹ In “The Body Beautiful”, Onwurah makes use of this disorienting ambiguity shifting between her mother’s older, “muted” body and her teenager self, working as a professional model. Ngozi confidently shares the runway with other black and white models, showcasing the latest fashion trends.

In the context of “multicultural normalization” and the “decoupling of political empowerment and cultural visibility”, the modelling sequence alludes to the marketisation of cultural difference.

Mercer addresses the problem of hypervisibility or hyperblackness in mainstream media, which, far from tackling social injustice, obscured increased inequalities. As a black diaspora artist, Onwurah inhabits the contradictions of post-imperial Britain. Ngozi’s modelling, in particular, places her at the crux of the growing visibility of black culture and persistent systemic racism.

In “New Ethnicities”, Stuart Hall examined black cultural politics and filmmakers’ strategies at the time.⁵² He identified a shift from “the struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself”, a move prompted by the need to overcome binary oppositions and reversal critical strategies.⁵³ In his conceptualisation, “relations of representation” refers to a critical positioning against the marginalisation and invisibility of the black experience within British culture. The challenge and resistance to the dominant regimes of representation concentrated on issues of fetishisation, objectification, and stereotypical portrayals.

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This approach was mainly concerned with “the question of access to the rights of representation” and the “contestation” of predominant black imagery.⁵⁴

The shift to a “politics of representation” arises from the recognition of “the immense diversity of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects” and the awareness that the central issue of race had to be addressed in relation and traversed by other dimensions such as class and gender.⁵⁵ Hall underlines that this repositioning has to do with understanding “the black experience as a *diaspora* experience” and entails a “contestation over what it means to be ‘British’”.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, an intersectional approach stresses the need “to inhabit sites of resistance based not solely on similarities but also on divergences, contradictions, and complicities”.⁵⁷ Carastathis problematises the notion of “identity”, stressing the need to recognise our different positions in respect to systems of oppression. Hall observed that the subject is forced to assume certain positions knowing that these are representations formed as exclusions, based on a perceived lack from the perspective of the Other.⁵⁸ In his view, it is crucial to consider whether individuals identify with them, “how they fashion, stylize, produce and ‘perform’ these positions”, and whether they engage in a constant process of struggling, resisting, and negotiating the rules.⁵⁹ Onwurah’s films engage with this process. In the closing scene of “The Body Beautiful”, in which Madge and Ngozi lie together in bed, the artist reflects:

A child is made in its parents’ image, but to a world that sees only in black and white, I was made only in the image of my father. Yet she has moulded me, created the curves and contours of my life, coloured the innermost details of my being; she has fought for me, protected me, with every pain and crooked bone in her body. She lives inside me and cannot be separated. I may not be reflected in her image, but my mother is mirrored in my soul. I am my mother’s daughter for the rest of my life.

This concluding statement encapsulates the film’s “imaginative rediscovery”. As Hall notes, this kind of practice is concerned not only with recovering or “unearthing” suppressed experiences but with “re-telling” the past and actively producing identity.⁶⁰

Fifteen years ago, Hall considered that “we [were] still living in the post-1980s, living its turbulent afterlife, with all its heated controversy of an unsettled history in which everything is still urgently at stake”.⁶¹ His words still ring true today. In a recent study on ethnicity, race and inequality in the UK, the editors point to “three key silences in the national (hi)story”: its entanglement in the broader global history of European slavery, colonisation and empire; the longer history of migration to Britain; and the “flattening” of the histories of black communities.⁶² As a Davis-Bonnick commented during our group conversation: “history makes it look like we popped out of nowhere one day”. The post-millennium has seen the further hardening of Britain’s borders under Theresa May’s “hostile environment” and the ensuing Windrush scandal in 2018. Analysis of the Grenfell Tower atrocity situates the fire within the longer history of structural violence underpinned by colonialism, racism, and xenophobia in Britain.⁶³ The literature highlights pervasive antisemitism and Islamophobia, the growing Europhobic and nativist sentiment stemming from Brexit, and the escalation of anti-immigrant and “asylophobic” violence all of which

amount to the current “toxic atmosphere”.⁶⁴ This year, health studies have pointed to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 among racial minorities.⁶⁵ A wave of Black Lives Matter protests was triggered by the police killing of George Floyd in the US raising awareness of the silenced record of police brutality and unaccountability in Britain as examined by filmmakers Ken Fero and Tariq Mehmood.⁶⁶ Activists toppled a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol which reignited the Oxford #Rhodesmustfall campaign and a wider call to decolonise universities including ongoing conversations at UAL about decolonising the arts curriculum, and the University’s commitment to anti-racism, which must be held to account.⁶⁷

At the moment of writing (December 2020), in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, and on the brink of Brexit, it seems like we are inhabiting that Thatcherite future; the outcome of what Hall described as a “regressive” or “reactionary” modernisation, based on the spirit of making Britain great again.⁶⁸

Onwurah's early films' reimagining of her relationship with her mother disorient the gaze and subvert the black and white divide between them. "The Body Beautiful" and "Coffee Coloured Children" re-tell her family's story and explore other ways of looking, thinking, and feeling about themselves and each other. As a provisional concept, intersectionality entails an "anticipatory promise": it points towards the possibility to transcend the dominant way of thinking and to bridge the gap between the present and the future, the status quo and transformative justice.⁶⁹ Following Carastathis, intersectionality's disorienting character calls for a perceptual-cognitive shift from colonial categorial thinking. Finally, it prompts us to envision a liberatory "politics of coalition" and interconnection that points towards decolonial "elsewheres" so urgently needed across the colonial divides.

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² Rasheed Araeen, “The Success and Failure of Black Art”, in “Third Text”, 18(2), (2004): 135–152, doi:10.1080/0952882042000199669.

³ W. Mignolo and R. Vázquez, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings”, in “Social Text”, (July 15, 2013), https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/. Mignolo’s and Vázquez’s use of “modernity/coloniality” signposts the conflict between modernity’s salvation narratives and the underlying exploitative logic of coloniality.

⁴ Rolando Vázquez, “Decolonial Aesthetics and the Museum”, interview with Rosa Wevers, in “Stedelijk Studies 8”, (2019), <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/decolonial-aesthetics-and-the-museum/>.

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Biography and credits

Ana González Rueda completed her PhD at the University of St Andrews in 2019 with a thesis entitled “Inherent Pedagogies: Critical Approaches to Exhibition Making in the 2000s”. In 2018-2019, Ana was awarded a Deviant Practice research grant at the Van Abbe museum to develop a project which introduced feminist materialist pedagogies to the dynamics of the museum’s contemporary art collection display. Ana also teaches at the School of Philosophy and Art History at University of Essex and is a Research Assistant for the EULAC Museums project (University of St Andrews) which focuses on community museology in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

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