Dislocation, Deconstruction and Difference: The Multifaceted Narratives of Isaac Julien

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DISLOCATION, DECONSTRUCTION AND DIFFERENCE: THE MULTIFACETED NARRATIVES OF ISAAC JULIEN

By

Tiffany A. Saulter

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DISLOCATION, DECONSTRUCTION AND DIFFERENCE: THE MULTIFACETED NARRATIVES OF ISAAC JULIEN

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In this thesis, I examine the work of contemporary video artist Isaac Julien and how he layers multiple narratives and uses non-linear storytelling to deconstruct master narratives and offer in its place alternative narratives that provide more questions than answers. I look particularly at four of his works: *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), *True North* (2004), *Baltimore* (2003) and *Looking and Langston* (1998) to analyze how they use historical, cultural and/or institutional critique to complicate the understandings of identity and the identity formation process for minority groups. Additionally, I examine how his creation of fractured viewing experiences and complex juxtapositions of conflicting representations help to flesh out these groups that have historically been represented as one-dimensional. I demonstrate the way that Isaac Julien’s use of the themes of identity formation and diaspora have moved from the personal to the universal in the wake of continued globalization. In addition, I show how the introduction of the female body has become a further tool to not only investigate gender roles, but also to act as an important part of his process of subverting master narratives by presenting marginalized alternative histories.
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To my dear friend, Alicia Hickman, thank you for always being a willing and encouraging reader and proofreader. Finally, thank you my undergraduate Professor Cyriaco Lopes, who taught me not only about the significance of creating art but also about the beauty and momentousness of Art History.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Visually stunning, grandiose in scale, personal yet universal: these are some of the things one encounters when viewing the work of Isaac Julien (b.1960). A British film artist of Caribbean descent, Julien’s films meditate on identity and all its complexities, focusing particularly on the way personal identity is created by an individual and how this process and its outcome are influenced by many factors, from racism and stereotyping to migration. It would be an oversight when examining Julien’s work to ignore the role that his ethnic background and sexual orientation play in the constructing the themes that he chooses to spotlight. His position as a member of the African diaspora plays an active part in his work, evidenced by the large number of his films that question the way the black community has been depicted in cinema and how they have been affected by immigration. Julien’s films also challenge the way that history has chosen to remember the contributions of the African diaspora.

His videos can be intensely personal, such as the three-screen projection Vagabondia (2000), which uses his mother as the film’s protagonist, or Looking for Langston (1983), in which Julien films his own body in a coffin as a stand in for Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes. However, this is not to say that Julien’s works are conceived without considering more universal themes, beyond that of the African diaspora or that he should be grouped under the essentialist category of a “black artist”. Instead, in this thesis I argue that we should look at the way that Julien draws upon his ethnic background in order to address more universal themes of movement and relocation.

As Julien’s work has progressed from his early single channel videos of the 1980s to his multiscreen projections of the 21st century, he has developed greater subtlety in the
way that he handles issues of ethnicity and gender. These latter films allow viewers to
draw their own conclusions from this work, an aspect of his films that is particularly
relevant to the postcolonial project that his work engages with. As a black British subject,
Julien speaks from a place as a member of a diasporic community within a former
colonial power (it is important to note that while Julien is able to speak from this
perspective, he is not speaking for this perspective), a position that adds richness and
authenticity to his storytelling abilities.

As an art historian, an African-American and a woman, my interest in Julien stems
from his engagement with the theme of “identity” and the way that he navigates between
the personal and the universal in a manner that actively denies labeling. In my work, my
intention is not only to add to the scholarship on Julien, but also to take part in furthering
the literature on the construction of the minority identity. I am interested in exploring the
complexity of what it means to be defined as “Other” in order to give the minority
individual a sense of complexity of identity that has often been denied him/her by
concepts of the margin and the center.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines identity as “[t]he sameness of a person or
thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition of being a single individual; the
fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else.” This definition not only
expresses identity by what it is, but also by what it is not, marking out difference in the
very definition of the self and how a binary system is used to distinguish between self and
Other when structuring an identity. Looking to postcolonial studies for a definition of
diasporic identity, one can see its multifarious nature, “the issue of identity in diaspora is

1 "identity, n.". OED Online, (Oxford University Press, September 2012)
seen more in the light of notions of hybridity, in which it is through that the diasporic individual marries idea from both country of origin and that of sojourn. As such, identity becomes a part of a political process, in the way that political theorist Michael Walzer argues when talking about Americans as “hyphenates”; they are politically engaged with the United States on one side of the hyphen and have their “spiritual life” from the other side of the hyphen.

This points to identity not as a fixed entity, defined by a single notion, but brings attention to the concept that identity as fluid.

It is within postcolonialism that we encounter the idea of the hybrid in identity. Postcolonialism is understood not as simply living in a world where colonialism no longer exists, but as actively working against the thought processes by which colonialism created, a project in which Julien is actively involved. As contemporary philosopher Eduardo Mendieta argues, “postcolonialism is less an ‘ism’ that describes an already past movement, but is more a series of philosophical issues that emerge from the ongoing process of decolonization in the midst of the global hegemony of Europe and the United States.” To dismantle these colonial ideas, Julien uses something of a deconstructionist method in his filmmaking and approach to history. Julien’s technique of displacing the centrality of a fixed narrative closely follows the literary technique of Jacques Derrida, which hypothesizes that the single-fixed idea does not exist but instead had been a system of “sign-substitutions” used to simulate a rigid concept. In place of a singular central

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5 Ibid, 726.
identity were multiple parts used to form the appearance of a solitary whole. Julien creates multiple meanings by showing alternative versions of narratives in his films, which expose the fallacy of the universal narrative.\footnote{Ibid., 287-293.}

Julien is also involved in a postmodern project which “aims at exposing how, in modern, liberal democracies, the construction of political identity and the operationalization of basic values take place through the deployment of conceptual binaries such as we/them…”\footnote{Stephen White, “Postmodernism and political philosophy,” in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online, 1998 ed.} The creation of these conceptual binaries is the creation of the Other, an individual or group who “may simply not measure up in terms of some scale of normality.”\footnote{Ibid.} Tying the “Other” to the concept of normality means that it is essentially marked out by difference. The socialized identity of self is already defined by what it is not and the postmodern idea of Other also ties it to political identity.

Beginning his work in the 1980s, Julien was something of a pioneer, making films about being black and gay in the United States and Britain. At the time, governmental funding for film and television projects done by blacks and other minority groups in Britain was still in its infancy.\footnote{Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “De Margin and De Center,” in The Film Art of Isaac Julien (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Bard College Publications, 2000), 64.} In his essay with well-known cultural critic and writer Kobena Mercer, “De Margin and De Center,” Julien’s paints a dismal picture of the funding resources available for movies and television shows created by black intellectuals in Britain, making his use of film (a more expensive format than video) as his primary medium that all the more noteworthy.\footnote{Ibid.} In his effort to further the creation and distribution of work created by black British citizens, Julien helped to a create
Sankofa, one of “the three black British film collectives operating in the 1980s”, during a politically tumultuous time that seemed determined to limit it.\textsuperscript{12}

Julien’s work ranges from the romanticized slide show/music video type used in \textit{This is Not an AIDS Advertisement} (1988), which explores the closely related categories of desire and shame, to poetic critiques of social and historical institutions as seen in \textit{The Attendant} (1993) and \textit{Looking for Langston} (1989). Julien often makes use of pre-existing historical narratives and institutional structures, such as the museum or the history of Harlem Renaissance, in order to subvert them. The running time for his work is typically between ten and twenty minutes (\textit{Ten Thousand Waves} produces a new and unusually long run time of forty-nine minutes to accompany the largest number of screens seen in Julien’s oeuvre). Julien frequently makes use of the multi-screen format for his installations, adding complexity to the films by literally scattering the story and storytelling device across a large, dark room. \textit{Ten Thousand Waves}, for example, uses as many as nine screens, which emphasizes the non-linearity of the storyline and complicates the viewing experience.\textsuperscript{13} Images in his works, particularly those created after 2000, regularly include vast interior spaces, like that of a museum, as in \textit{Baltimore} (2003) or expansive exterior spaces, such as the landscapes of Iceland or Greece in \textit{True North} (2004) and \textit{Western Union: Small Boats} (2007). The grand scale and number of screens used to project these images imparts a sense of the scale and history. These


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ten Thousand Waves} was shown on a different number of screens depending on the size limitations of the venue.
screens, across which various images are displayed simultaneously, allow the viewer to take a more active role in the viewing experience: the viewer chooses which version of the film he or she will see based on which screen is watched at any a given moment. It remains difficult to define these pieces as film, video or as a multi-screen projection, because Julien normally (but not always) transfers the film to video and then projects them onto screens in the museum.

I. Critical perspectives on Julien (1996-present)

Scholarly considerations of Julien’s work vary in approach from a biography-based methodology to a more iconological approach. Some focus on the aesthetics of Julien’s films while others labor to make them as autobiographical as possible. As such, these critiques are somewhat limited in the way they handle his work, making a new approach necessary in order to better address Julien’s multiple overarching themes.

Art historian David Deitcher and artist David Frankel discuss Julien in their book *The Film Art of Isaac Julien* (2000). Their analysis centers largely on Julien’s homosexuality and the way it is manifested within his art. By doing so, they create an essentialist of his work: Deitcher and Frankel use information from Julien’s personal life in order to fill in the gaps in the narratives that Julien purposely created in his films, robbing his work of its complexity. This biographical reading is mainly effective because of the limited, highly selective group of films they discuss: *Looking for Langston, The Attendant* and *The Long Road to Mazatlan* are all films that deal with problems of homophobia and homosexuality. This is not to say that their approach lacks any merit in their discussion of *Looking for Langston*. In this re-telling of the history of the Harlem Renaissance, Julien
posits a black homosexual presence by focusing on the figure of poet Langston Hughes and his assumed homosexuality. Deitcher and Frankel point to Julien’s choice to use his own body as a stand in for that of Langston Hughes’ during the wake scene in the film, making this project very personal and giving authority to Deitcher and Frankel’s biographical approach, at least for this work.

Prominent cultural critic Kobena Mercer and London-based film critic Chris Darke take a similar approach to Deitcher and Frankel in their book *Isaac Julien* (2001), choosing once again to focus on the artist’s sexuality, but allow some space for issues of ethnicity. Unlike Deitcher and Frankel, they place more emphasis on the meaning of the interactions between individuals of different ethnic groups within Julien’s work.

Julien’s *The Attendant* begins with the image of Francis Baird’s painting *Slaves on the Coast of Africa* (1833). Mercer and Darke refer to a visual overdetermining, an excess coming from the black figures’ position as Other (marked as different) and the problem with the need for the minority to act as a representative for all of his or her ethnic group. A similar notion of excess is seen in Deitcher and Frankel’s reading when they talk about the desire for the Other. This mark of difference makes the figure seem too present as the “mark” acts to bring the figure to the forefront. However, Deitcher and Frankel and Mercer and Darke start and finish with the bodies of the living and painted figures, ignoring the setting and its meaning.

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14 Baird’s painting, an oil on canvas, shows a group of slaves, some with weapons (are they complicit in the slave trade?) in the foreground while listening to a central white figure who is most likely in the act of buying or selling. Going further back into the pictorial space is shown a small group of, one holding the whip in, reading to strike the slave in front of him. On the right side of the canvas, more black figures are shown just beginning to enter the picture. The painting is showing multiple scenes at once that are understood as part of the slave trade.

Christina Sharpe, professor of American Studies at Tufts University, also analyzed *The Attendant*. However, unlike the previous authors who overlook the museum as a space of colonization, she explores the way that Julien’s work interacts directly with the film’s institutional setting, the Wilberforce museum. Her work is a close reading of Julien’s film and it represents more iconological analysis of his films. She describes in detail the visual construction of the scenes and how they function within the larger body of the film. She also focuses on the actions of the museum conservator, a disregarded character in the other discussions of the film, giving her more of a place and a sense of agency within the film, and making the film less of a male-dominated storyline in her interpretation.

By connecting the Wilberforce museum with *The Attendant*, and by emphasizing its existence as an antislavery museum, Sharpe makes it clear why Julien chose this museum for the film’s location. She also brings attention to *The Attendant’s* soundtrack, connecting the sounds of groans and whipping made by the main characters with those being made by exhibitions on lower floors of the museum. In the first floor of the Wilberforce is a replica of a slave ship in the middle passage, complete with an audio track that includes the sounds of whips and chains, linking the idea of pleasure derived from S&M activity showcased in the film on the ground floor to the relationship of the master and slave implied by the Baird painting and the slave ship, adding a sense of complexity to both relationships.

Mark Nash, professor of contemporary art at the Royal College of Art in London, contributes to the discussion of Julien’s work in his book *Screen Theory Culture* (1996). In his essay on Julien’s *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks* (1996), Nash switches back and forth between his own critical views of the work and Julien’s. Julien’s role in
the essay obviously lends authority. In a reverse of Deitcher and Frankel’s discussion on *The Attendant*, Nash and Julien focus more on the biography of the figure depicted in the work than on the film’s connection to Julien. It is a more content driven discussion, less focused on the life of the artist.

Nash also focuses heavily on Julien’s method of mixing documentary footage with newly created footage, like that used in *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks* (1996). The limited amount of available documentary footage of prominent philosopher, writer and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon gave Julien the opportunity to recreate historical events in the film, which he combined in a way that questioned the authenticity of the documentary footage.¹⁶ Mostly, Nash addresses about Julien from a distance, even though Julien is also an active player in constructing the essay. Nash’s discussions of Fanon and Julien’s stylistic technique are almost too straightforward. As if he is actively trying to work against doing any kind of personal reading of Julien’s work.

Paulette Gagnon, Director of the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal and editor of *Isaac Julien: Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal* (2005), emphasizes Julien’s use of history and how it ties into migration, location and memory. This technique allows her to discuss Julien’s engagement with the way Black diasporic communities are represented in history and culture, memory in general and the real versus the imagery, though she does end up overlooking gender and sexuality in her analysis.

Julien’s own writings emphasize his interest in a variety of themes. His essay with Kobena Mercer, “True Confessions” (1983), questions dialogues about representation. Particularly, Julien looks at the construction of masculinity and how its stereotypical

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, a noted black psychologist who was born in Martinique, but lived in France, is known for his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).
features, such as the mustache and work clothes, have been used by gay males to overcome stereotypes portraying them as “feminine.” In “De Margin and De Center” (1988), also co-written with Mercer, Julien examines marginality, which makes one simultaneously invisible (ignored) and too visible (overdetermined). In the article “Black Is, Black Ain’t”(1992), Julien labors to construct a black identity that is more complex than the type found in rap songs by artists like Ice-T and Ice Cube and movies such as New Jack City (1991) and Boyz N the Hood (1991). In terms of how Julien sees his work and audience, in his essay with Mark Nash “Only Angels Have Wings” (1998), Julien says “[a]s someone whose work contests positionings like ‘artist of color,’ I would be last to reinstitute them.”

Julien’s writings show an interest in complicating and broadening, such that a reading of his work based only on certain aspects of his biography or one that ignores it completely fall short of fully exploring the complexities of his films.

II. An alternative approach

By selecting four specific works by Julien, Ten Thousand Waves, Baltimore, True North and Looking for Langston, I will address the major thematic areas in his work, following in the spirit of Julien’s own writings by creating a more complex, richer view of his work. Though Julien most often works with issues that affect the African diaspora, he also considers the larger idea of the diaspora in installations such as Ten Thousand Waves (2010). Set in China, Ten Thousand Waves is Julien’s response to the deaths of twenty-three men and women from the Fujian Province of China in 2004, who worked as cockle-pickers and who drowned in their attempt to relocate to England. Using this

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18 A cockle is a small shellfish in the mollusk family. The migratory actions of the cockle-pickers continued a long-standing nomadic tradition of the province.
film, I will analyze how Julien uses the concepts of diaspora and national identity to create a dialogue about identity formation as a universal issue. *Ten Thousand Waves* takes Julien the furthest away from a connection to his own biography. As his most recent work, it also showcases how his use of his favored thematic areas and tropes has grown subtlety. *Ten Thousand Waves* allows us to see how Julien has changed in the use of representations and subject matter from his earlier works, like *Looking for Langston*, where he is quite literally part of the piece. It speaks not only to the trajectory of Julien’s work, but also to the way Julien is interacting with a more globalized world. *Ten Thousand Waves* shows Julien pushing his boundaries both personally and technically.

*Baltimore* takes place in the museum, a setting that Julien uses to construct an institutional critique. This work examines the role popular culture and museums play in creating and perpetuating stereotypes through quoting imagery from blaxploitation cinema as well as from various Baltimore institutions. Using this film and two other words by Julien, *Baadasssss Cinema* (2002) and *The Attendant*, I will analyze how he questions existing historical stereotypes. *Baltimore* is useful not only because it allows for a discussion of Julien’s often used method of critiquing the museum as an institution by using a museum as the film’s setting, but also because it confronts how African-Americans have been portrayed in the media, another frequent thematic area for Julien. Critiques of stereotypes perpetuated by cultural and social institutions happen across almost the entirety of Julien’s work. *Baltimore* more so than any of his other work directly confronts how popular culture/film has created and perpetuated stereotypes about African Americans, using the archetypes, soundtrack and figures from the institution.
itself to critique it. *Baltimore* is a prime example of Julian’s ability to intertwine institutional and cultural analysis through metacriticism and multilayered references.

My analysis of *True North* will look at the ways in which Julien’s work deals with historical constructions and collective memory. By investigating Julien’s altered version of Robert Peary and Matthew Henson’s stories of the discovery of the North Pole, I will examine how his work problematizes the use of a single dominant historical narrative, and how he opens up the possibility for women and minorities in places where their presence had been lacking or overlooked. The deconstruction of master narratives and the opening up of alternative histories is a major tool used by Julien in his work. *True North* offers a look at a historical critique by Julien using only history to critique itself. *Baltimore* does something similar using the museum to critique history, but it is through *True North* that we are able to see this metahistorical narrative. Through the story of the polar exploration and its ties to the American identification with scientific program, of the four films, it offers the most concrete look at how Julien deals with the complicated nature of identity formation.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, I will examine *Looking for Langston*, the film that first brought Julien to the attention of the artistic community. As the oldest of the four works, it permits one to look at the how his methods of critique have changed since his time in the late 1980s. From *Looking for Langston* to *Ten Thousand Waves*, the transition

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19 Collective memory is being used to mean type of socialized memory or history that is based in a collective ideology propagated within a given society. Referencing the work of philosopher, John Sutton, Marc Treib, professor of architecture at Berkley, argues that this a based on the concept that “one’s internal memory is partial and context-sensitive, and does not naturally retain information in distinct and unchanging form between experience and recollection, that one relies so pervasively and-in the main-successfully on external social and technological scaffolding” such that society is allowed to fill in our “memory gaps”. Marc Treib, *Spatial Recall: Memory in architecture and landscape* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), xii.
from personal to universal also indicates why a biographically based analysis is incomplete. Additionally, *Looking for Langston* allows for a consideration of how Julien handles the issue of sexuality in his work seen here through a visualization of a black gay romance, something not touched upon in the other three films.

Each one of these films is connected through thematic ties, such that though they may be non-linear and non-narrative, these themes create larger stories between the works as they are reflective of their date of creation and therefore as issues in a thematic area have changed, this is reflected in the film. In selecting these four films, they were chosen because they exemplified Julien’s themes and techniques: the diaspora, identity formation, institutional critique, cultural and historical critique, and multiple narratives. They were also chosen because, in addition to epitomizing these concepts and devices, they are also different from each other: Chinese history and cinema through *Ten Thousand Waves*, Afrofuturism and 1970s American Cinema and media ingrained stereotypes through *Baltimore*, Exploration narratives from *True North*, and the Harlem Renaissance and homosexuality through *Looking for Langston*. Subsequently, we are able to receive a more well rounded image of breadth of references and subject matter that really constitutes Julien’s body of work.

### III. Statement of Analytical Methodology

My analysis of Julien’s work will combine biographical, iconographic and aesthetic approaches in order to better understand the artist and the films he created. Building on the work of the authors discussed above, my examination of Julien’s films will analyze the larger thematic categories in Julien’s work in order to create a more complete
discussion of his oeuvre. I am interested in investigated how Julien creates connections between his various films by repeating certain themes, such as displacement, relocation and marginalization. Although Julien’s biography will be discussed, it is import to avoid essentializing the artist and his artist based on these factors. The purpose of using a thematic approach in part is to avoid an over emphasis on the artist’s biography. By quoting Frantz Fanon and Afrofuturism and visually referencing paintings like *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa*, Julien acknowledges that his preferred audience is an educated one able to make connections between his sources and his final product. Through conducting a visual analysis as well as an analysis of cultural and other references, connection to postcolonialism and postmodernism in Julien’s films, I will illuminate the way his use of the multiple in display and in histories deconstructs master narratives, fixed identities and institutions to show them the created nature of these entities that are often mistakenly accepted as fact without question.
Chapter 2: The Diaspora of Ten Thousand Waves: Continual Movement

*Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), Julien’s newest and most ambitious piece to date, makes use of nine separate installation screens spread across a large room as part of its storytelling device. The screens oscillate between displaying the same image and fracturing the storyline by displaying disparate images across the multiple screens. This style of exhibition encourages the viewer to quite literally alter their positions during the forty-nine minute runtime; the lack of seating also contributes to this forced movement on the part of the viewer. The positions of the screens also encourage visitor mobility as they overlap one another, so that one cannot view them all from one position, forcing the viewer to move if he or she would like to see the images on the other screens. The projection screens themselves are made of a semi-translucent material, further fracturing the viewing experience as depending on the viewer’s position in the room; they may see a “proper” front view of one projection while seeing a reversal of the same image on another.

The visuals are as beautiful as the manner in which the story is told. Julien takes full advantage of film camera’s ability to produce aesthetically pleasing images. The rooms shown in Shanghai’s Whampoa club\textsuperscript{20} (fig. 1 and 2) are full of bold colors: stark reds, gold, purple, blue, green and black. Julien’s images of Yishan Island\textsuperscript{21} are equally as beautiful and romanticize the mythic Chinese landscape through the use of the crisp visual quality of the film and through the paradisiacal type of experiences the workers are

\textsuperscript{20} The Whampoa Club is an upscale restaurant housed within Three on the Bund, a mixture of restaurant, upscale stores, art gallery and space. Three on a Bund’s website states: “The Whampoa Club strives to bridge the gap for its guests between China’s great culinary history and a desire to innovate,” reinforcing the tension between the traditional and the contemporary that is shown in *Ten Thousand Waves*. For further information about the Whampoa club and Three on a Bund, visit http://www.threeonthebund.com, accessed June 20, 2012.

\textsuperscript{21} Yishan Island is part of the Fujian province of China.
shown experiencing while in this landscape (fig. 3 and 4). By showing Yishan Island, the immigrants’ place of origin, as a scenic and peaceful paradise, he adds a level of complexity for the story by forcing us to ask why the immigrants would have chosen to leave such an idyllic place.

The film’s visual story takes place in two locations: on the coast of England and in mainland China. Julien mixes documentary footage with new footage, creating duality and tension by contrasting the old and new. Traditional China with its rolling hills and day laborers in the landscape of Yishan Island is paired with representations of contemporary film icon Maggie Cheung suspended in the air, playing the role of the goddess Mazu, against a green screen background.

Cheung’s presence as Mazu, a goddess who protects those who are at risk of drowning and those voyaging by water, alludes to more than Chinese folklore. She is connected to another type of Chinese storytelling, that of contemporary cinema as she is a well known international film star, due most recently to the international blockbuster *Hero* (2002). More importantly for Julien, Cheung also starred in *Center Stage* (1992), a film about the life of Ruan Lingyu, an actress from the 1930s who starred in film *The Goddess* (1934). By casting Cheung in his film, Julien bridges her appearance in *Ten Thousand Waves* with Chinese cinematic tradition of the 1930s by connecting Cheung’s Goddess with *The Goddess*. In his analysis of French film *Irma Vep* (1996), Peter X. Feng argues that Cheung “signifies Hong Kong, Chinese cinema, martial arts, and other

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23 Ibid., 10.
forms of non-French cultural production.”

She is being used in a similar manner in Julien’s film; it is her status as an icon of Chinese film that Julien makes use of in *Ten Thousand Waves*.

Julien continues to make connections between *Ten Thousand Waves* and Chinese culture. Juxtaposed with the images of Yishan Island is the imagery of the city of Shanghai as actress Zhao Tao navigates its scenery. She ambles by skyscrapers and she enters in visually stunning interiors such as the Whampoa Club at Three on the Bund (fig. 1 and 2). Wearing a dress with a mandarin collar, Tao alternates between walking through the streets of Shanghai and riding through the city on a trolley, a movement that mirrors the display on the other screens of black and white archival footage of intercity travel in China. These images are juxtaposed with representations of Chinese citizens marching through the streets with posters of Mao, contrasting scenes of the Cultural Revolution with the Western capitalist imagery of Shanghai’s skyscrapers. These sequences demonstrate a tension between contemporary and traditional China, the two timelines are allowed to exist simultaneously in *Ten Thousand Waves* and Tao acts as a bridge between them.

Actress Zhao Tao’s participation in the film also signals Julien’s interest in making connections with Chinese cinema. Tao acts as a stand in for Ruan Lingyu in film sequences that recreate the making of *The Goddess*; she also plays a “prostitute who lost a brother in the Morecambe Bay tragedy,” linking the contemporary tragic immigration attempt with Chinese cinematic history. Julien creates what Gao Shiming, Deputy

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Director of the Advanced School of Art and Humanities at China Art Academy has called “[a] representation of representations of Chinese culture [and] the resulting film is the product of a long-term dialogue between Isaac himself and the collaborators he encountered in China.”26 That Cheung and Tao are used to signify multiple aspects of Chinese history reinforces the complex, multifaceted nature of Chinese society and culture.

In addition to their connection to Chinese cinema, Cheung and Tao are used as goddess and prostitute to become almost a literal incarnation of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. This is particularly meaningful as the majority of the screen time is taken up by women, and by these two in particular. Cheung’s “Madonna” figure is draped in flowing white, acting and failing as a savior like figure for the immigrants from Yishan Island. Her failure is also a failure at fully embodying this concept of the Madonna. Tao’s role as the “whore” in the dichotomy is downplayed. Though her character is quite literally supposed to be a prostitute, outside of a few scenes of her and a couple of other women standing in a darkly lit alleyway, there’s no real signs of her profession. Julien sets them up to reference this well-known dichotomy, but undermines it by having neither Cheung nor Tao fulfill their role.

Julien uses the female body is our guide through Shanghai as Tao traverses the city on foot and by streetcar. Tao as flaneuse meanders through both cityscape and time. It is through her hotel room that the viewer, mirroring Tao’s own gaze, looks out her window onto the streets of Shanghai, allowing us to see contemporary China. At one point in the film, the camera rotates around Tao as she gazes up at some nearby buildings. Though her body is at the center of the shot, what we see most of is her surroundings. It is

emphasized here that we are seeing through/with her. She is both our point of view and subject to our voyeurism. In this work that takes Julien the furthest away from his own biography, he pushes still further away by using Tao as the way for the viewer to navigate the city. This female body becomes the prime manner for the viewer to navigate the narratives. Using Cheung and Tao in this way, Julien seems to be asserting the female as mobile. As a play against the traditional model of woman as sheltered and static, Julien’s female has a subtle power that we do not see reflected in the limited screen time of the male counterparts.

Chris Berry, professor of film and television studies at the University of London argues that

Jameson’s canonical account of postmodernism in capitalist countries argues that it is also marked by a falling away of realism and its replacement with nostalgic pastiche and spectacle. The temporality of Jameson’s nostalgic pastiche and spectacle is a certain kind of present tense, an in-the-now. Here, the past is no longer linked to the present as part of a teleological and linear progress of causes and effect. Instead, it is reified as an endless array of unconnected consumable signifiers, bundled together in various combination.27

These same words could be used to describe what one sees in *Ten Thousand Waves*. Julien interlaces past and present; prostitutes in traditional mandarin collar dresses are shown walking through the modern-day city. Screen images switch between Mazu hovering over pastoral landscapes and sleek steel and glass skyscrapers. Red rooms with long dining tables and ancient wall paintings are inhabited by a man in contemporary dress sitting across from a woman in a traditional mandarin collared dressed. Julien does not try to force these scenes to make sense together, but instead allows them to speak for themselves. The skyscrapers and Mazu act as a modern visual spectacle, while Yishan

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Island represents nostalgia for a simpler past. By highlighting the conflicting realities that coexist within the country, Julien places China within the realm of the postmodern in *Ten Thousand Waves*. He subverts Western perceptions of China that tend to ignore the advances of contemporary China in favor of identifying it solely by its traditional history. This traditional view has kept China from being seen as an equal, undercutting its participation in the contemporary global economy and culture.

Movement, immigration and diaspora are common themes in Julien’s work. The diaspora as illustrated in *Western Union: Small Boats* has already been discussed above and in *The Attendant* (1993), the diaspora is referenced through images of the slave trade. English Painter Francis A. Baird’s *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (1833) is used in the initial scenes of the film and it becomes the jumping off point for Julien’s tableaux vivants, which complicate the nature of the master/slave relationship. Similarly, *Paradise Omeros* (2002) depicts a negative result to the emigration of its main character, as endemic St. Lucia, which he leaves behind for London, becomes the focus of nostalgic desire.

In a number of Julien’s films, such as *Baltimore* and *Looking for Langston*, the results of the forced relocation of members of the African diaspora to the United States are on display. Julien’s film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks* (1996), tells the story of the influence of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a noted black psychiatrist and author of the highly influential work *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952). This film articulates Julien’s understanding of the psychological consequences of the scattering of individuals from Africa and its affect on their construction of identity.
*Ten Thousand Waves* therefore represents the artist’s continued engagement with the theme that was also present in Julien’s early body of work. The film moves outside of the African diaspora to create a discourse on the larger consequences of immigration, which are particularly relevant within today’s rampant globalization. However, where films like *The Attendant* only imply an economic aspect for the creation of diasporic communities due to slavery, *Ten Thousand Waves* is far more explicit in how economic systems such as capitalism play a pivotal role in migration.

In his essay “Shanghai Waves” (2010), Christopher Connery brings attention to China’s longstanding migratory tradition:

> “Southeast China’s Fujian province, home to the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers, has for centuries sent migrants and laborers to sea, first to Southeast Asia and South Asia, and more recently to Europe and the U.S. There are Fujianese nearly everywhere in the world, and the business of human trafficking has long been a lucrative one there.”

Connery’s observation acknowledges that the unsuccessful attempted immigration that initiated the creation of *Ten Thousand Waves* is part of a large history of diasporic activity that stretches back for centuries. The shift in concentration of immigration from Southern Asia to Europe emphasizes the more global nature of recent trade.

The concept of diaspora functions in Julien’s body of work as movement across global spaces where displacement creates communities beyond their place of origin. Julien does not differentiate between “optional” relocation, such as that shown *Ten Thousand Waves* and *Western Union: Small Boats* and the forced immigration of the slaves in *The Attendant*. Robin Cohen, Director of the International Migration Institute at the Oxford University, defines the term diaspora as meaning forcible “exile” and ties it to the process

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29 The economic necessity for the Fujian and Libyan immigrants’ actions may have made their movements more compulsory than consensual.
of colonization. He also suggests that groups can choose to define themselves as members of a diaspora as a way to indicate that they share a “collective identity,” even if their relocation process was neither forcible nor traumatic, illustrating that diaspora is a complex term with multiple meanings.\textsuperscript{30} Cohen carries this complexity further by listing five different types of diasporas: victim, labor, trade, imperial and cultural and by suggesting that a diasporic group can be more than one of the given types.\textsuperscript{31}

The type of movement of people highlighted in \textit{Ten Thousand Waves} is what Cohen would refer to as a labor diaspora. The immigration focused on in the film is based on economic considerations, which draws attention to the role that both economics and class play in creating diasporas. Julien’s work creates a dialogue between capitalism and xenophobia, demonstrating that they can exist concurrently, leading to serious social and health problems for contemporary immigrants.

The Fujian province’s long history of migration points to the fact that governmental attempts to dissuade individuals from relocating to their countries are as useless as they are xenophobic. The proliferation of Chinatowns in the nineteenth century in United States alone speaks to the large number of individuals of Chinese heritage living outside of China. Capitalism as a system supersedes these governmental efforts as competition within the marketplace leads to a need for cheaper labor, a function typically filled by immigrants.

In an essay entitled “Adrift and Exposed” by Iain Chambers for the catalog to Isaac Julien’s \textit{Western Union: Small Boats} (2007),” Chambers discusses the plight of the modern immigrant, particularly in terms of the ways in which immigration has become


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., x
such a politicized action.\textsuperscript{32} Like *Ten Thousand Waves*, *Western Union: Small Boats* is also a story of individuals who drowned during their immigration attempt. In this case, the immigration was from Libya to Turkey instead of from China to England. The parallels in the storyline of both films allow one to use Chambers’ discussion of the migratory actions taking place in *Western Union* to examine those in *Ten Thousand Waves*. In addition to similar storylines, the problems surrounding recent immigration are also shown within the context of tensions between the modern and the traditional in *Western Union* as they were in *Ten Thousand Waves*.

Chamber says of the immigrants,

[...]those who arrive seeking work and improved life prospects in the cities of the West have in a significant sense already arrived long before their departure from home in Africa, Asia or Latin America. They, too, are also modern subjects, subjected, as we all are, to the planetary political economy already foreseen by Marx 150 years ago. They, too, move in ‘scapes’ elaborated by capital, using the languages of a modernity that has become the modern world. In other words, this modernity is also theirs.\textsuperscript{33}

Chamber’s statement draws attention to the common perception that countries with large populations of emigrants leaving their home country are not as culturally advanced as the countries to which they migrate, fueling anti-immigration sentiment based around the idea of cultural inferiority. This is particularly relevant when one considers the way that countries on the Asian continent, specifically in this case how China, have largely been regarded. They have been subjected, as Chamber has claimed, to the same type of economic systems (and its problems) as Western cities. Chamber underscores immigration as a necessary part of the globalization process. Thus, by the immigrants

\textsuperscript{32} Ian Chambers is a professor of cultural and postcolonial studies at the Oriental University in Naples, Italy.

\textsuperscript{33} Iain Chambers, “Adrift and Exposed,” in *Western Union: Small Boats* (Warszawa : Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2009), 11.
taking part in the process, they are engaging in a crucial modern practice; their very participation in this “modern practice” belies their supposed cultural and economic “backwardness.”

China has been undergoing an economic reform since 1978.\textsuperscript{34} For members of the agrarian portion of China’s economic system, into which the cockle-pickers would fall, this has meant a gain in income based on a restructuring of the government production quota system that had limited the price for goods produced by farmers.\textsuperscript{35} In spite of the reforms, China’s government still maintains some control over the pricing of produce, allowing the market price to only account for 70\% of the price that farmers are allowed to charge for their goods.\textsuperscript{36} On the other side of China’s economic reform, the larger active participation with industrialization has led to a growth in urbanization and a lowering of available farmland, leading to lower production.\textsuperscript{37} In reaction to the growing urban wealth due to industrialization and the comparative poverty of rural area, China has enacted policies to regulate and discourage rural citizens from relocating to the urban centers.\textsuperscript{38} Faced with these realities, we find these twenty-three Fujian residents on England’s coast. This new country proves to be as unwelcoming culturally as the region that they are leaving is unwelcoming economically.

In his discussion of immigration, Chambers states that “[t]oday’s migratory movements – overwhelmingly from the impoverished south of the planet – propose an

\textsuperscript{36} Justin Yifu Lin, \textit{Demystifying the Chinese Economy}, 160.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 161.
Unauthorized globalization, a diverse worlding that has not sought our permission. By discussing the economic position of the immigrants, Chamber brings to light the part that class and privilege (first world versus third world) play in contemporary immigration, especially in reference to the idea that such movement requires permission from those holding power or economic advantage. Writing for The Guardian in 2006, Hsaio-Hung Pai, a freelance journalist from England, who often writes on topics pertaining to the migrant worker, says

Long before cockle picking became a job option, at least 70,000 unauthorized Chinese workers were already toiling away in food-processing chains, agriculture, catering and construction across Britain. These were made up of three groups: failed asylum seekers, destitute asylum seekers waiting for Home Office decisions, and migrants who were never known to the immigration authorities. Twenty of the 23 drowned cocklers were impoverished farmers and workers from Fujian province - the home of most Chinese workers who have fallen foul of New Labour’s immigration policy. With asylum rights curtailed and manual-labor migration discouraged, the workers resorted to cockling.

Pai’s article focuses on the impact of New Labour’s immigration policy on the safety conditions in seafood processing plants, whose labor is composed mostly of illegal immigrants. By making legal immigration more difficult to those seeking work within Britain, they have in effect led to a growth in the market of illegal immigration/importation of workers into places where safety regulations are less closely monitored.

The British business world’s active participation in the importation of cheap, illegal labor from China, something that benefits it much more than it does the immigrant, is an aspect that is not visualized in Ten Thousand Waves. In some ways, the subtlety of the work allows for these aspects of the larger story to go unnoticed because of Julien’s

39 Iain Chambers, “Adrift and Exposed,” in Western Union: Small Boats, 11.
approach to storytelling. This is problematic for those viewing the work outside of the United Kingdom or China where viewers would be less familiar with the Morecambe Bay tragedy and the criticism England has received in connection with it.

Pai’s article also emphasizes the economic necessity of migration. In the article, she explains that the agrarian jobs available to workers in the Fujian province offer little compensation. In Julien’s film, however, his day laborers do not appear to be troubled by their financial situations (fig. 5). The workers are shown sleeping and, as the title of the images say, dreaming. Their faces look peaceful as they lie in the shade; the sun creates a halo of light around the laborers, making them and their working conditions appear angelic and appealing. They seem more closely tied to the promise (and subsequent failure) brought by Mazu. As Jeffries says, “[a]ccording to myth, Mazu would assure the safety of seafaring folk as they struggled amid 10,000 waves. This failed, sad-eyed goddess becomes our spirit guide to Julien's vision of China.” Jeffries reminds us of Mazu’s failure both in reality and in Ten Thousand Waves. Is this scene suggesting the equivalent of the American Dream or is it the image of a dream denied? Cheung’s goddess’s humanity is shown not only through her failure but also through Julien’s revealing studio footage of Cheung attached to wires in midair in front of a green screen in Ten Thousand Waves, effectively breaking the fourth wall and displaying the constructedness of the film to the viewer.

42 The online Dictionary of Media and Communication, published by Oxford University defines the fourth wall as “[a] theatrical convention of an imaginary barrier that separates the performers on stage from the audience. It also applies to film and television where actors rarely look directly into the camera (see mode of address).” The fourth wall is broken by direct address to the audience though a variety of devices. “Fourth wall, n.” Dictionary of Media and Communication (Oxford University Press, 2011) accessed October 11, 2012.
Julien’s fluctuation between the rougher documentary footage and his own sleek cinematic creations, particularly in terms of the audio, can sometimes be jarring to the viewer. However, this can be useful when footage from the rescue attempts of the cockle pickers is shown on the screens. It helps remove the viewer from the otherwise cinematic like experience that makes them less active and instead asks them to consider what they are being shown.

The audio for the film *Ten Thousand Waves* makes use of the poetry of Wang Ping, a Chinese-American poet. Julien asked Ping to write a piece for the installation, a piece that would highlight the international implications of *Ten Thousand Waves*: how its story is much like that of those that have occurred and will occur. Writing for *The Guardian* in 2010, columnist Stuart Jeffries points to these specific lines as illuminating the universal roots of the film:

> We know the tolls: 23, Rockaway, NY; 58, Dover, England; 18, Shenzhen; 25, South Korea; and many more.
> We know the methods: walk, swim, fly, metal container, back of a lorry, ship's hold.
> We know how they died: starved, raped, dehydrated, drowned, suffocated, homesick, heartsick, worked to death, working to death.
> We know we may end in the same boat.\(^4^3\)

Ping’s straightforward poem starts like a newspaper article, presenting the sobering numbers of recent unsuccessful attempts to immigrate, making it clear that the Morecambe tragedy is a part of a larger pattern. Ping’s poem switches between

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
omniscient third-person narrative and a first person narrative that speaks in the voice of the cockle-pickers with reminisces on their hopes,

[w]e chose capitalism through great perils, All we want is a life like others,” and their loses and regrets, “Ten thousand waves, Wash me to the bay, My wife in the yam fields, gazing towards the sea, Who will unfold your fields, That feed our son, our aging parents? Ten thousand apologies.44

Each section of the poem is set off from the others by the name of one or more of the twenty-three victims, bringing the universal themes to an individual level. There is also a sense of nostalgia in the poem as it talks about yuanxiao dumplings and children on stilts. It is similar to the nostalgia that permeates Ten Thousand Waves. By focusing more on China than on England, the film and the poem feel a bit like a love letter to a place being left behind by the emigrants and a meditation on their experiences there.

The use of lingering shots of the Chinese landscape also creates a connection to China’s past. The sequences on Yishan Island tie the film to traditional Chinese landscape painting. The color palette used, crisp whites, subdued greens and blues, in these shots mirrors the muted palette of these works of art. Both the paintings and the film give importance to China’s landscape as a location. In an effort to offer more complexity to the experience of the Fujian immigrants, Julien’s meditation on the Chinese landscape references a style of painting known for its ties to the spiritual, one that allows the viewer of these landscapes to set aside their anxieties and seek sanctuary in this mystical space.45 This is precisely the experience the laborers are shown engaging in on Yishan Island in Ten Thousand Waves. The mountains and their surrounding valleys are shown as a place of refuge and rest, where the workers are watched and

44 Ibid.
45 Mae Anne Pang, Mountains and Streams (Melbourne, Victoria: National Gallery of Victoria, 2006), 16, 17.
seemingly guarded by Cheung’s Mazu. The hills in the background of these shots are tied ancient China’s understanding of its hills as the house of the gods and their representatives, making her appearance here extremely fitting and a continuation with a Chinese spiritual tradition.⁴⁶

Landscape painting became the most importance genre of painting in China starting in the eleventh century, one in which the court painters specialized, and it is difficult to see Julien’s reference of these works as arbitrary.⁴⁷ Instead, Julien is tapping into the way China worships its own landscape, not only as a source of income but, more importantly, as a place of leisure. It is not the aristocratic governmental employees or scholars, who one would assume would have the financial security to enjoy it, that Julien shows in the landscape, but the everyday worker relishing its benefits and spiritual protections. It intensifies the sense of what the emigrants stands to lose by relocating as well as acknowledges the rich artistic and spiritual history of China as a nation.

It is surprising that in a film about immigration, Julien does not focus on the place of relocation, which in this case is England, a former colonial power and consequently Julien’s own country. Instead, the film is set completely within China, only showing images of England through poor quality footage of its shores, creating a visual barrier for the viewer that mirrors the real-life barrier experienced by the immigrants denied entry. In essence, Julien denies the viewer the opportunity to travel with their gaze to a location where the immigrants were not permitted. In this way, it is the opposite of Western Union: Small Boats, where images of the Mediterranean are shown (fig.6 and 7). By using China as the primary visual location, China is presented as a place of both the

⁴⁷ Mae Anne Pang, Mountains and Streams, 16.
blissful fantasies of a traditional life style shown through the images of Yishan Island (fig. 3 and 4) and a place of contemporary progress and urban isolation through images of Shanghai (fig. 8).
Chapter 3: Deconstructing Visual Culture in Isaac Julien’s *Baltimore*

Julien uses his film *Baltimore* (2003) to navigate cinematic history and institutional histories in order to question generalizations about African-Americans in the media and in popular culture. By juxtaposing unusual literary traditions such as Afro-futurism with blaxploitation cinema, Julien undermines simplistic understandings of African-American culture. He also highlights institutions, such as museums, that perpetuate these myths in order to critique them.

With a running time of just eleven minutes, *Baltimore* fits within the more traditional timetable of Julien’s installations than *Ten Thousand Waves*. It also has more of a narrative flow than *Ten Thousand Waves*: the camera and viewer follow the main characters who wander in and out of the pictured spaces. *Baltimore* is a large scale three-channel installation projected directly onto the museum wall (though it has also been exhibited as a single channel projection).

*Baltimore* takes place in various locations throughout the city of Baltimore, Maryland, including the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, the Walters Art Museum, the George Peabody Library and the Contemporary Art Museum and in the streets of Baltimore. In addition to using ambient sounds of the city, Julien samples audio clips from popular blaxploitation films from the 1970s, including their sultry R&B soundtracks, an essential component of blaxploitation cinema. Two characters, director and actor Martin Van Peebles, a central figure in the history of blaxploitation cinema who portrays himself and Angela, portrayed by actress Vanessa Myrie, engage in what appears to be a game of cat and mouse throughout Baltimore. The audio samples, including those from Van Peebles’

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*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), help to create the retro ambience for *Baltimore*. Angela sports a large Afro and is dressed in all black (fig. 1), emphasizing the 1970s atmosphere. She carries around a gun which, while walking through the Great Blacks and Wax museum, she aims at several of the wax figures as well as the camera. Her apparel and her quick to fire attitude demonstrate that she is modeled after the likes of Cleopatra from *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and Coffy from *Coffy* (1973), a female federal detective and armed female vigilante respectively. Van Peebles’ presence is seemingly simpler to explain as he represents himself and his connection to blaxploitation cinema. His presence adds to the authenticity of the project and the tension of its narrative.

Julien’s choice to use Baltimore as the city to perform this institutional critique connects him with a notable installation that also took place in Baltimore, *Mining the Museum* (1992), by American artist Fred Wilson. In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson uses material from the Maryland Historical Society’s archives to create an installation that underlines the exclusionary collection practices of museums and institutional biases. Placing objects together in a manner that creates tension, like the Ku Klux Klan hood draped on the stroller, and playing audio clips asking about the identity and function of the slaves in the paintings on display, Wilson brings out uncomfortable possibilities from his source material. Through Audio material asking questions like “Am I your pet? Am I your friend? Am I your slave?” for a painting containing a small black child with a collar on his neck next to his Caucasian friend/master, Wilson is asking the viewer to honestly question and confront the history being illustrated by these works.

The fact that most of the available source material is family papers from prominent members of Baltimore society, that Wilson can find little more to represent Native

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49 Ibid.
Americans that some cigar store wooden status and a few photographs, that only one of the objects used had been on exhibit before, speaks profoundly to the collecting and display practices of the Maryland Historical Society.\textsuperscript{50} These objects form a literal maser narrative donated by former slave owners. Wilson’s goal, much like Julien’s is also to illuminate histories that have been taking place in the background. Though his objects are not as highly charged, Julien uses his camera to put the works in the museum in similar interaction with each other, also asking the viewer to rethink what is the meaning of the meaning of these works. These two installations indicate Baltimore as a site of contention. It’s from Wilson’s literal deconstruction of the master narrative that we see Julien pick up the master as dominant narrative concept in these Baltimore institutions.

In Julien’s metacritique, Van Peebles’ appearance is noteworthy because as actor Pam Grier states in Julien’s \textit{Baadasssss Cinema}, Julien’s 2002 documentary on the history and use of blaxploitation cinema, [w]e have to be very thoughtful of what we do and say on film. The stereotypes that we have are often what we perpetuated ourselves. I broke them but I also created some. Because everyone thought a black woman is a ‘whoop yo butt’ sister all the time. No, that’s not true. We create a lot of that mess ourselves.\textsuperscript{51}

Van Peebles as a director is therefore complicit in creating a cinema that helped to typecast African-Americans both on film and in Western culture. Julien uses him because of this connect to create a site of contention.

Looking to the institutions themselves, the Great Blacks in Wax Museum presents itself as a bit of an oddity. The phonetic rhyme in its name undermines the supposed

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson}, edited by Lisa G. Corrin (Baltimore, MD: The New Press), 11, 17, 51.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Baadasssss Cinema}, directed by Isaac Julien.
serious nature that the “museum” title suggests. Van Peebles character navigates through the wax figurines in the museum. These figurines symbolize the achievements of African-Americans in the United States. Wax versions of individuals such as Martin Luther King and Colin Powell are on display throughout the museum. However, there is a one-dimensionality of these figures chosen as worthy of display. They are presented more as ideals than as individuals, a point emphasized by the title “Great Blacks in Wax.” Though they are positive ideals, there is still a flatness stemming from their role as idolized hero that Julien emphasizes in the film. Van Peebles comes face to face with his own wax double in the museum, and it becomes impossible to tell the one from the other (fig. 2), pointing to the type of flatness that stereotyping creates by equating Van Peebles so easily with his double.

Angela’s experience with the museum is even more menacing than Van Peebles’ strange encounter. As she walks past a recreation of the interior of a space shuttle, complete with wax astronauts, Angela takes out her gun and tension builds as she moves the gun quickly from one direction, the camera following her quick movements with rapid pans of its own. It is implied that she hears Van Peebles’ character nearby as they stalk each other throughout the city. However, there is a logical disconnect at he is shown in the Peabody Library while she is in the Great Black in Wax Museum; they nonetheless move through these spaces as if they were interconnected.

Van Peebles’ and Angela’s journey through the various museums can be understood as journey through time. The characters navigate between the spaces of the Contemporary museum, the Great Blacks in Wax museum and the Walters Art Museum, going past the art of the Renaissance, to a mixture of political and popular culture figures and to
spectacular classical architecture. As Calvin Funk argues, “the movements of the two figures suggest a symbolic passage across time and space and through a succession of bygone representations of urban reality.” Juxtapositions and connection are created as the imagery shifts from the grimy streets of Baltimore to the static perfection of the museum. A connection is created through this technique between the less than ideal streets of Baltimore and a painting from the Italian Renaissance, *View of an Ideal City* (1500), bringing attention to the aesthetics of the urban environment and how it is depicted in imagery. The juxtapositions show the contrast between them, as does the movement from Baltimore’s streets with its dilapidated housing exteriors and older model cars to the pristine interiors of the various museums.

The museum interiors are lifeless, emphasized by the uncanny wax figures that demonstrate a semblance of life without actually containing its spark and its imperfections. This is sharply contrasted by Baltimore’s audio, where allusions to life and death situations are made in the clips from *Sweet Sweetback’s dialogue*. These institutional spaces are also aesthetically stylish. The shots in the Peabody Library show its elegant grand central hall with its superfluously tall ceiling and delicate architecture, which contrasts both the claustrophobic feel of the Great Blacks in Wax museum and its kitschy appeal as well as to Baltimore’s humble cityscape.

Taking a closer look at the way the characters are displayed, we see that Angela is shown as more than a simple Foxy Brown, Cleopatra Jones type. Although she may be clothed in a similar fashion to these Blaxploitation heroines, when she removes a gun from her thigh, she is shown to be at least partially mechanical; she is a cyborg. Her semi-

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53 Ibid.
mechanical manifestation complicates the narrative by connecting *Baltimore* to the tradition of Afro-futurism. Mark Dery, journalism professor at New York University who often writes on the topics of science fiction and technology and coined the term Afro-futurism in 1993, defines it as

> [s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture- and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-Futurism.\(^5\)

The second part of Dery’s definition closely mirrors Angela’s physicality in *Baltimore*.

Julien challenges preconceptions the viewer might have about Angela based on her attractive and normalized appearance by aligning it with science fiction tradition. This is not typical of African-American culture or literature, a fact acknowledged by Dery when he asks “why do so few African-Americans write science fiction?”\(^5\) While he defined the term Afro-futurism to bring attention to the presence of a specific sub-genre of fiction, Dery also recognizes its limited presence. By drawing on this unusual and over looked type of fiction by African-American writers, Julien creates a *punctum* through which one can see facets of African-American culture that stereotyping has worked to hide. He also creates a visual type for this genre that is considered primarily as a literary movement.

According to Hortense Spillers, professor of English at Vanderbilt University, “the melding of the familiar and the strange is not only the essence of the marvelous, but the very ground of the uncanny, which returns us to what we know in a way that we had not known and experienced before.”\(^5\) *Baltimore* uses this concept of the uncanny to force the

\(^5\) Ibid.
viewer to question what he or she is being presented with. Julien accomplishes this through his mix of the familiar in the use of popular icon Van Peebles and the 1970s blaxploitation audio clips as soundtrack for the film, and the unfamiliar and uncanny through Angela’s character, who at once is visually familiar through her stereotypical Afro clad 1970s type of the African-American female, and unfamiliar through her presence as a cyborg.

Van Peebles’ encounter with the wax figurine of himself is the very definition of the uncanny. When Julien’s camera pans out of its close-up to show the two stationary figures of Van Peebles, it concretely draws attention to the problem created by pigeonholing individuals based on their ethnicity (i.e. making them into lifeless figurines). While simultaneously he creates an eerie moment in which the viewer loses grasp of the supposed reality within the film’s universe. However, the viewer does have hints throughout the film that this world may not be our reality. The sky above Baltimore is shown throughout the film as a dark, unnatural shade of blue, particularly in the daytime scenes, as the clouds move across the sky at an unusual speed.

Continuing with the uncanny, Angela’s change from familiar to unfamiliar happens sporadically throughout Baltimore. Though she begins the film with an Afro and trench coat, which helps to articulate how the viewer should identify her, but she inexplicably loses the Afro as well as her coat, effectively removing the visual signs that place her as part of the 1970s timeframe in which majority of the blaxploitation films take place (fig. 3). In his discussion of blaxploitation films of the 1970s, writer David A. Bailey argues that "[d]espite their narrative, formal & stylistic differences, each film emphasizes the adornment of the black body through dress…offering forms of cultural camouflage that
are markers of different identifications & masquerade…”57 Bailey’s is addressing the
importance of stylization in blaxploitation cinema, something that Jim Brown, former
actor and producer of blaxploitation films, also brings attention to in Julien’s Baadassss
Cinema. The removal of Angela’s Afro and trench coat in Baltimore (which happens off
screen) simultaneously connects her with this concept and distances her from it. That she
is playing a type is exposed by the removal of her costume. Through the use of this bait
and switch technique, Julien allows the viewer to realize that their own expectations have
been based on pre-inscribed cultural signs that have blinded them to the true complexities
of the group or individuals being shown. Though Baltimore at first looks like it is part
of blaxploitation cinema, the use of this technique shows that initial looks can be deceiving.

Baltimore divides its screen time between the genders much more evenly than Ten
Thousand Waves, and also more evenly that would be expected from a Blaxploitation
film, where the male is typically dominant. Though they are given equal screen time, Van
Peebles is asked only to represent himself. Myrie represents both future and past; her
wardrobe ties her to the 1970s while her cyborg nature connects her to technology and the
future. Why is she able to symbolize both while Van Peebles while is fixed as a
representation of the past/himself? She is given much more fluidity than her male
counterpart.

Her characterization as aggressive and connection to technology through the removal
of the gun from her artificial thigh are much more closely aligned to the masculine than
the feminine. She has much more physicality in Baltimore; she goes around corners with
her gun aimed and ready to shoot if necessary. As a futuristic cyborg, she quite literally

The Black Arts Movement, David A. Bailey, Richard. J. Powell and Petrine Archer Straw (London:
Whitechapel Gallery, 2005), 31.
has the ability to travel between space and time in a way that Van Peebles cannot and at the climax of the film, makes an astounding leap into the air while he looks on from below. Once again the female becomes this place for variability, contradiction and movement in Julien’s work. It is a way of not only going against this model where women were not characterized as being able to have these qualities, but also asserting that they possess them more than their male counterparts. Julien seems to be arguing that women, at least in society, the ability to move in and out of roles more effectively.

Common understandings of blaxploitation cinema are also shown as being overly simplified, based on the way that it has quoted other cultural references outside of black popular culture. As Francis Gateward notes in “Wong Fei-Fung in Da House” (2010), there is visible influence of kung-fu films of the 1970s in blaxploitation films: “In Superfly (dir. Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972), for example, we see the main character Priest spending time in a martial arts studio, and in all of Pam Grier’s films she engages in hand-to-hand combat, a first for women in American action films.”58 It would also lead to films with a more overt connection, such as 1985’s The Last Dragon which deals with the issues of gang problems and family pride through the formula of a martial arts film, whose connection with contemporaneous Chinese filmmaking is emphasized by a scene of the protagonist and antagonist beginning a battle that would become the central point to the plotline during a showing of Enter the Dragon.

Throughout the film, the viewer sees Van Peebles and Angela in what is assumed to be a cat and mouse game. However, at the climax of the film when the two are finally

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seen across from each other in a large hall of the Peabody Library, the viewer’s expectations are subverted through the creation of an anticlimax. As Van Peebles’ footsteps are heard entering the hall, Angela unexpectedly jumps to the ceiling in a matrix style leap (calling upon the connection to Afro-futurism and Chinese martial arts films), remaining briefly suspended in the air, while Van Peebles acts as a fascinated onlooker. The tension is at its highest point for the brief seconds she is suspended in the air (fig. 4). Angela then proceeds to drop loudly but elegantly back to the floor, breaking the tension created by her ascent; she then turns and walks away, smiling. There is no sense of a resolution; the pursuit that appeared to be taking place completely dissolves as each character goes back out into the streets of Baltimore.

Julien creates the tension: Van Peebles versus his wax double, Van Peebles versus Angela, stereotypes versus individualization, but he does not attempt to resolve it. It is necessary for him to leave this narrative open-ended so that he does not become guilty of the same thing he is bringing attention to, the problematic nature of the single hegemonic narrative. Much like *Ten Thousand Waves*, Julien chooses to break the fourth wall by revealing the constructed nature of *Baltimore* through showing his filming setup in one of his long shots of the Great Blacks in Wax Museum.59 This helps to break the illusion of the filmed narrative and allows the viewer to retain a critical awareness with respect to the contents and object of the film.

Julien’s choice to have Angela and Van Peebles wander throughout a number of Baltimore’s cultural institutions is used to undermine the type of historical narratives

perpetuated by museum, essentially the construction of a divide between high and low forms of culture. 60 These three institutions have in common the role that they play in institutionalizing histories. 61 Much like Julien’s earlier film The Attendnt (1993), which also takes place in a museum interior, the setting is used to call attention to the space itself. In The Attendant, Julien uses Francis Baird’s oil on canvas painting Slaves on the West Coast of Africa (1883) as the starting point for the film and makes a connection between the film’s location, the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull, England (a museum devoted to the history of slavery, named after William Wilberforce, an abolitionist who worked to abolish slavery in England and Jamaica) and the storyline. The story line follows a sadomasochistic sexual affair takes place between the black museum guard and a white visitor. The whips and chains used by the visitor on the guard closely mirror the actions taking place in the painting (whipping of the slaves), thereby expanding and complicating the nature of the master/slave relationship from a simple question of forced labor to that of reciprocal pleasure and desire.

As noted by Christina Sharpe, professor of English at Tufts University, “in occupying the museum [in The Attendnt] Julien attempts to disrupt the traditional hierarchical

60 Marc Treib, professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkley says that buildings have the ability to act as “grand mnemonic devices” and Juhani Pallasmaa, professor of Architecture at the University of Technology in Helsinki, Finland, states that it does so by creating a visual representation of the past. Mark Treib, introduction to Spatial Recall: Memory in Architecture and Landscape, ed. Marc Treib (New York: Routledge, 2009), xii.


61 Janet Marstine, associate professor of art, music and design at Seton Hall University, argues that collecting practices gives us information about the ideology of “colonizer” saying that “as colonizing spaces, museums naturalize the category of ‘primitive,’ in which non-western cultures are in arrested development and frozen in time – metaphorically dead,” suggesting that exhibition displays of minority groups works to perpetuate stereotypes by not allowing for the visualization of community growth. Janet Marstine, introduction to New Museum Theory and Practice, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 14.
organization of museum space and its attempts to resolve the relationship between cultures and peoples in terms of positive and negative, presence and absence, high and low, art and artifact."62 A similar statement could be said about Julien’s use of the museum in *Baltimore*. Julien restages the wax figures, moving them from the Great Blacks in Wax Museum into the Walter Art Museum, thereby breaking down the barrier between these high and low art forms. Their presence in the Walter Museum also removes them from their position as “stand in” or role model and turns them into art objects.63

Julien’s “interventions” also help to activate the museum space. The museum has often been associated with death due to its removal of the object from its original context, stripping it of its function and energy, thereby perpetuating the idea of the museum as mausoleum.64 In Julien’s film *Vagabondia* (2000), choreographer Javier De Frutos dances through the Soane museum in London with a kind of irreverent jouissance, giving the museum a sense of energy that its formal appearance has traditionally lacked. Similarly, *The Attendant’s* tableaux vivants bring the paintings from the wall directly into the museum visitor’s space, again going against the idea of museum as mausoleum. *Baltimore* creates connections between different types of museums and shows the museums itself to be as an active space of contention (shown through the figures of Van Peebles and Angela),

63 The title of the museum “Great Blacks in Wax” gives the wax figures not only the function of acting as curiosities, but also as a type of role model. It is within the specific context of the Great Blacks in Wax museum and in Baltimore as a whole (with its largely poor African American community and high crime rates) that the figures are set up as a type of model to be followed. The individuals are memorialized as wax figures for their greatness and notoriety, which the title of the museum makes reference to and which the existence of this museum (using specifically black historical figures within the city of Baltimore) in its context presents as aspirational.
recontextualizing the works of art on the wall and inscribing them with renewed meaning.

In her discussion of *Vagabondia* (2000), Giuliana Bruno argues that by using the museum as a set, the viewer is “aware that a film set itself resembles an art installation, for it spatially creates imaginative worlds using the display of objects and carefully arranging them in space.”65 Considering that in many of Julien’s films, including *Baltimore*, the means of production are revealed, this statement takes on even more significance, as *Baltimore* becomes a set within a set or an installation within an installation. Julien’s frequent technique of displaying the film set or green screen during one of his works supports the conclusion he is making reference not only to the constructed nature of narrative told by a museum, but is also actively reminding the viewer that what they are watching is also a construction. Bruno claims that because of the similarities between the wax of the figures and the material of the filmstrip that the Great Blacks in Wax Museum essentially functions as a film itself within *Baltimore*.66 Examining the film in these terms, one does see that both Van Peebles and Angela (as a Foxy Brown type) operate as symbols of blaxploitation cinema, such that their wanderings in the Great Blacks in Wax act as critiques for cinematic history and cinematic types by placing type on top of type.

In his installation of *Baltimore* in various museums, Julien has chosen to include a series of photographs (images of statues and paintings from the Walter Museum as well as images of the wax figures) that intervene with the pre-existing museum installation. Installed in the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach in 2010, these photographs occupied a separate room from the screens on which the film was shown. Their unexpected

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66 Ibid.
presence amongst the Dutch paintings in the museum’s permanent collection, with no explanation of why they were placed there, formed continuity between film and display setting, emphasized the sense of cultural critique and disrupted the flow of the original museum’s installation.

Julien’s juxtaposition of different types of text from museums to filmic and literary texts makes the viewing experience of his film a continually surprising experience. The use of bad special effects adds a sense of camp to the film, which connects it with the campiness of the Star Wars series and other science fiction. The presence of African-Americans is underdeveloped in the sci-fi genre and Julien presents Angela as a sci-fi heroine without question or hesitation. Her constant fluctuating between woman from outer space and 1970s “bad mama jama” keeps the viewer guessing about her identity through the course of Baltimore. It makes the viewing experience refreshing by showing multidimensional characters and in using an original characterization for a group (African-Americans) where the visual has grown accustomed to tired stereotypes.

Through Baltimore’s deconstruction of the tropes of blaxploitation cinema and the museum, Julien subverts the stereotypes of the black community in the media and society. Van Peebles’ and Angela’s characters begin the film dressed and acting in a manner that would lead the viewer to expect the story to resolve itself in a manner that is typical to that of blaxploitation films. Instead, it brings up an unexpected subject by connecting to Afro-futurism and creating uncertainty in the validity of the one-dimensional stereotypes that, in some ways, blaxploitation helped to create. By deconstructing these cultural types, Julien complicates the definition of African-American culture and reminds one of the complexities of an identity based on multiples.
Chapter 4: True North as Historical Fallacy

*True North* follows Julien’s favored model of large-scale three-channel projection displayed directly on the museum’s wall. Unlike *Baltimore*, however, it does not have a fixed, linear narrative; rather the story unfolds in a more fluid and organic manner. The fourteen-minute film is presented mostly in color with a few short sequences in black and white. *True North* tells the story of explorer Robert Peary and his African-American assistant Matthew Henson and their voyage to the North Pole, a journey that culminated in Peary being recognized as the first man to reach the North Pole. Peary’s narrative of the journey from 1910, written at the expense of Henson’s contributions, has been accepted as the dominant and authoritative history. In 1912, Hensen published *A Negro explorer at the North Pole*, his own account of the expedition which places more emphasis on his role as well as the one their Inuit guides played in the exploration, thereby undermining Peary’s contribution to the overall success of the mission.67

In *True North*, a film that was co-produced with the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, Julien engages with the history of this twentieth-century American exploration in a poetic way that chooses not to depend on one previous historical account of the North Pole discovery over the other. Instead, it opens up a dialogue about race, gender and national identity by allowing the images on the screen to speak for themselves in place of presenting an authoritative narrative, permitting for only sporadic narration so that his work might raise as many questions as it might answer.

Julien displays the frozen landscape through slow moving and static shots that contain nothing but scenery; this is set off by an instrumental soundtrack. The viewer is forced to

consider the land and experiences a prolonged visual interaction with it. This is a contrast to the way that the first explorers may see each individual part of the landscape as their goals were based more on dominating the land than communing with it. The images subvert one’s expectations of the difficulties involved in the trek to the North Pole. Instead of the cold, harsh, forbidding landscape one expects from the Arctic, Julien’s images are highly romanticized and are connected to the concept of the sublime associated with American landscape painting from the nineteenth century (fig. 13). Like American landscape paintings, much of Julien’s North Pole is shown as devoid of human presence (though he does later bring in the Inuit presence to show the landscape as less “virgin”), focusing instead on its vast emptiness; large imposing icebergs are set against snow covered mountains, bulky blocks of black ice that seem to grow right out of the ground’s icy surface. It does not feel accidental that images that act as propaganda for a westward expansion by illustrating pristine and unoccupied landscapes are being produced at the same time that Manifest Destiny took its hold on the United States.

The landscape is allowed to act as another character; it takes a more active role in *True North* than in the tradition of American landscape painting. It can be dangerous as well as act as a playground. By showing the landscape in different ways, Julien allows it to present itself as multifaceted. This activity of the Polar landscape somewhat separates *True North* from the tradition of landscape painting in that in those paintings the landscape is typically being acted upon in order to use it as a tool for nationalistic

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propaganda. John Gast’s 1872 painting *Westward Ho! (American Progress)* ties a title about progress with images of it: “[t]he Goddess of Liberty floats through the sky, carrying a book of laws and linking the continent with a telegraph wire.” The painting is very straightforward in declaring the virtue of American westward expansion. The romanticized western landscape with its large and lightly colored open expanses of land and mountains is contrasted with the crowded foreground that the figures inhabit. The virtue of expansion also shown in more subtle ways in paintings like Thomas Cole’s *River in the Catskills* (1843) where the “future lies over the horizon,” where a farmer stands in one area that has yet to be developed while he stares out over it towards the farm houses on a more pastoral part of land. Julien simultaneously makes reference to this period in American history and distances himself from its propagandistic tradition by activating the landscape.

Julien not only romanticizes the nature of the Polar landscape, he also removes the deadly connotations of its extreme weather conditions. Vanessa Myrie, the actress Julien casting the role of Henson, plays in the snow, an unlikely action considering the reality of the North Pole’s climate (fig. 14). This action brings an element of fantasy to *True North* that may remove the viewer from the film and cause him/her to question the authenticity of what is being shown. This becomes an important part of the viewer’s critical analysis of the Polar exploration, something that Julien is actively trying to have the audience produce.

Julien’s work consistently engages with history; we have already seen this in the way that Ten Thousand Waves reconstructs the events of the Morecombe Bay drownings, but does not try to become a documentary. As he consistently does throughout his body of work, Julien is dismantling the hegemonic narrative used by institutions (in this case by history itself) and our collective memory of the events in True North by demonstrating that narratives created by differing viewpoints are as valid as and perhaps even more compelling than the dominant accounts. In True North, the official narrative is one that gives all credit to Robert Peary for the successful North Pole exploration; the contributions of his minority assistants are mostly invisible, and they are presented more as laborers than as meaningful participants. Julien says of True North, “[t]he idea of the hierarchical aspect of thinking, that ideas and theories belong to one group of people and actions to another – that whole idea is at work in this piece.” Julien emphasizes here the divide between intellectual and manual labor, one that in True North is drawn on racial lines and creates class distinctions and explains the lack of recognition that Henson received for his part in the North Pole exploration.

Julien’s work “raises the question of identity in regard to the individual, societies, and peoples. In a sense, memory measures itself against the past and, consequently, against history, whether to draw inspiration from them or to conjure them in the present.” In this quote, Gagnon’s argument that history is an essential part of memory aligns closely with the way that Julien subverts the collective memory of the North Pole expedition by altering its history. Julien’s work broadens our understandings of past events by inserting

71 Paul Gagnon, Isaac Julien: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (Montreal, Canada: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2005), 86.
72 Ibid., 75
little known histories or alternative versions and inserts presences, such as Henson, the Inuit and women, that were not allowed to take part in the original narratives.

The story of the discovery of the North Pole, like Manifest Destiny and American landscape painting is tied to the national identity of the United States. In Lisa Bloom’s essay “True North: Isaac Julien’s Aesthetic wager,” she claims that the weight Peary gave to the polar exploration was due its connection with American identity, “[t]hat is, what it meant to be American at that historical moment was tied into a belief in technology and science.” Just as Manifest Destiny involved pushing geographical and ideological boundaries, explorations of this type pushed scientific boundaries. Equally, if not more important, was its symbolic significance to the identity of a relatively new country that was just beginning to carve out its own identity, one that in this case was tied to land. What it meant to be an American was directly tied to geographical and scientific progress of which the North Pole discovery was both.

What then does it signify that Peary’s narrative, the accepted narrative, ignored any part Henson played in the geographical and scientific advancement made as part of this expedition? Essentially, it removed Henson’s ability to have or formulate an identity as an American; he was prohibited from participating in the collective creation of an American identity that was tied to this type of scientific advancement. In terms of landscape, the Inuit are tied to the arctic region, which Peary and Henson are attempting to dominate, while Peary is tied to the conquering country, the United States through his involvement in expansion. As Sarah Phillips Casteel has suggested:

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73 Ibid., 43.
Julien introduces a nonwhite presence into the arctic wilderness to test the viewer’s assumptions regarding who ‘belongs’ in this setting. Neither white nor indigenous, the explorer becomes a third term in the installation’s meditation on identity. The introduction of the third term of blackness against the arctic backdrop destabilizes binary formulations and challenges the easy equation of blackness with the Other, instead presenting a fluid and relational set of interdependent identities.74

Within the binary system that functions as part of society as well as history, this third position in which Julien situates Henson is a place of non-existence. Also significant is his complication of the idea of the “other.” Inside the binary system of self versus “other,” there is not a possibility for a third option. However, by separating Henson from Peary as well as the Inuit, Julien is able to create this possibility that illustrates the problematic colonial concept of “other,” which would by its very nature not allow for flexibility. Myrie’s presence in the film emphasizes this third time. Her presence helps to distance True North from Peary and Henson’s discovery narratives as well as introducing the question of gender to the reconstruction. Myrie’s participation in True North brings attention to women’s omission from discussions of discovery and exploration.75

In an effort to further disassociate True North from the imperialistic account given by Peary, he (as well as Frederick Cook, the other major explorer involved in North Pole explorations) is completely left out of Julien’s retelling, with only Henson and the Inuit making an appearance on the screen. This removal of Peary as the leader of the group allows Julien to subtly substitute Henson as the oppressive figure. Through this, Julien is able to problematize Henson’s relationship with the Inuit. In Henson’s version of events, he is able to become friendly with his guides and to learn their language. He and the Inuit

74 Maryse Condé, “Landscape and indigeneity in the installation art of Isaac Julien and Jin-me Yoo,” Second arrivals, 177.
guides contribute the most to the success of the expedition by saving Peary’s life multiple times on the journey. Instead, Julien shows Henson being saved by the guides.\footnote{Maryse Condé, “Landscape and indigeneity in the installation art of Isaac Julien and Jin-me Yoo,” \textit{Second arrivals}, 181.} Julien is in effect allowing for the possibility that a colonized people can also act as colonizers. Casteel straightforwardly calls attention to Henson’s possible complicated role in the imperial conquest:

\textit{True North} does not support Henson’s claim in his autobiography to an easy identification and solidarity between black and Inuit…Julien challenges such claims through his visually jarring juxtapositions of black and Inuit figures in \textit{True North}, which generate a sense of tension rather than solidarity. Instead of celebrating the heroic exploits of Matthew Henson, Julien chooses instead to raise questions regarding the implications for the contemporary diasporic artist of perpetuating narratives of colonial exploration, even when their subject is black rather than white. Diasporic appropriations of the exploration narrative are, Julien suggests, no less subject to critique and interrogation than are their Euro-American counterparts.\footnote{Ibid.}

Julien is not only permitting Henson to act as imperialist, but also allowing for colonized peoples at large and more specifically for himself to be capable of imperialism. He is careful therefore to create discussion by opening up the possibility for multiple historical narratives instead of providing exacts answers in the way that he chooses to use the material of the North Pole exploration.

It is important to emphasize the term multiple here. In his book \textit{North Pole Legacy: Black, White & Eskimo} (1991), S. Allen Counter, professor of neuroscience at Harvard University, retraces Peary and Henson’s steps on the North Pole expedition in an effort to find offspring of the two men that resulted from their interaction with the indigenous women and to connect these offspring with their families in the United States. Counter also attempts to substantiate the claim Henson made that he had a closer relationship with

\footnote{Ibid.}
the Inuit guides than Peary or his other assistants.\footnote{S. Allen Counter, \textit{North Pole Legacy: Black, White & Eskimo} (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) 24.} Counter’s success at establishing bonds between the Inuit offspring of Peary and Henson and their American relatives varies vastly in its success rate from family to family. For all intents and purposes, confirms Henson’s story by presenting Peary’s family as apathetic and unkind, and by extension Peary himself.\footnote{Ibid., 78.} Conversely, Henson’s family welcomes the connection with open arms and they therefore establish themselves and Henson as better people.\footnote{Ibid., 102.}

In addition to the difficulty of the task that Counter chose to undertake, Counter’s publication seems to privilege one portrayal over another, effectively continuing the proliferation of a single hegemonic narrative that validates one individual’s account at the expense of the others, even if it is Henson’s account. \textit{True North}, by contrast, allows for a greater variety of individual interpretations by destroying the fixed narrative, which is aided by Julien’s signature multi-screen installation technique that helps to fracture the story. Counter’s claims are made more problematic by the lack of DNA to substantiate it. It ends up more as an assertion than a fact, and Counter uses the Inuit more as tools to prove his hypothesis about Peary and Henson instead of being truly treated as individuals.

Continuing his theme of disrupting traditional fixed narratives, even the choice of title \textit{True North} is significant in terms of fixed meanings as well. It alludes both to “true north” as a directional location on the compass as well as to the concept of scientific fact.\footnote{Lisa Bloom, “True North: Isaac Julien’s Aesthetic Wager,” in \textit{Isaac Julien: True North and Fantôme Afrique}, 42, 43.} Yet the North Pole exists in a kind of “nonplace,” never commanding any fixed location. Instead, it is a “shifting pack of sea ice some 6.5 to 10 feet (2 to 3 meters)
This shifting, “nonplace” seems like an ideal location in many ways to create a dialogue about non-fixed narratives and fluid identities. By calling into question the story to which the title refers, Julien destabilizes the authority of scientific fact by bringing it into the same realm of “constructedness” as any other type of intrinsic knowledge.

Julien’s gesturing toward the invented nature of the histories of the discovery of the North Pole takes on more significance because of the fact that the pole is this “shifting pack of sea ice.” Lauri Firstenberg, who curated the exhibition of *True North* at the MAK Center of Art and Architecture in Los Angeles as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, notes that Julien’s heavy use of stylization allow him to transform “this found environment into a field of fantasy.”

The fantasy aspect of *True North* is specifically relevant because the North Pole is scientifically defined as a location on a compass, as a combination of positions of longitude and latitude, making its exploration all but impossible if not futile. Julien filmed *True North* in Northern Sweden and Iceland, as the North Pole is neither a landmass nor an accessible location. What Julien is showing the viewer in *True North* is essentially an imperialist fantasy. In it, “the sheer compelling attraction of the North Pole is foregrounded instead of the driving anxiety and the competition you get in the white male narrative from the period.”

*True North* points to is more about what the colonial desire symbolized by the Polar exploration than by what the actuality of the North Pole was. Lisa Bloom sums this idea up nicely,

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For the polar explorers, the North Pole is perceivable only through scientific instruments. Nothing can be observed. The redundancy of the eye with a sighting of the people can only be technological, not personal...In Julien’s version you can’t separate out the questions of beauty and the raw lust for power and dominion since the sheer beauty of the film calls attention to itself as a lavishly produced technological product.  

Julien’s version of the Polar exploration privileges the visual aspects of the journey. His installation is as much about the state of mind of explorers and imperialists as it is about the North Pole. However, technology is not completely removed from the narrative, as it is a necessary means of production for the film itself, underlining the importance technology plays in dominating these iconic spaces.

Lisa Bloom, writer on the subjects of visual culture and its interaction with ethnicity, is the author of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (1993), a book that attempts to give women a more active role in polar expeditions and showcase the contributions that they made to these explorations. Bloom has written multiple essays on Julien’s *True North* and her colleague, Firstenberg, goes as far as to say that *True North* was “heavily influenced” by Bloom’s *Gender on Ice*. Bloom’s book however, goes far outside of the scope of *True North*, spending a large number of its pages analyzing the part the National Geographic Society (and its popular magazine) played in the construction of the polar myth and in the identity formation of the United States in the early twentieth century. Notwithstanding questions of the validity of Firstenberg’s claim, Bloom’s participation in writing about *True North* and the overlap in subject matter, makes a dialogue between *True North* and *Gender on Ice* a useful one. Bloom notes that like the United States, Britain was also actively involved in the race to discover the

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86 Ibid., 3w-4w
87 Lauri Firstenberg, in *Isaac Julien: True North* (Los Angeles: MAK, 2005), 5, 1w
poles. This could account for both Julien’s interest in the particular subject matter as a citizen of a colonial power himself as well as for Myrie’s, another British subject, presence in the film.

In discussing how the North Pole was seen by these western powers, Bloom talks about the North Pole as an empty space: “it literalized the colonial fantasy of a tabula rasa where people, history, and culture vanish.” This is shown in Julien’s film through the shots of the vast landscape, which are often shown as unpopulated. The lack of individuals “indigenous” to the North Pole did not however remove discussions of imperialism, which Bloom notes makes an appearance in exploration narratives through “reducing the vital participation of Inuit men and women to subordinate ‘narrative bearers’ images as either ‘primitive’ or ‘unspoiled’ figures.” Through the Inuit (as well as Henson) and the sled dogs, Bloom points to Peary’s characterization of them as tools, ones that he is able to successfully utilize for his “scientific: expedition. The Inuit are actually shown in True North in their capacity as “tools.” They do not materialize in the film until Myrie falls in the snow out of exhaustion, and they are able to rescue her. However, the understanding of the Inuit as ‘unspoiled’ that Bloom argues is Peary’s view of them, is brought into question through Julie use of the triptych screens where Myrie’s ice covered face is shown in between two images of the faces of the guides. Myrie looks out at the viewer, with a cold and stressed expression on her face, while the guides to do the same, creating a tension by their juxtaposition and their visible amount of discomfort next to one another. By doing so, Julien is able to critique perceptions of the

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89 Ibid., 2
90 Ibid., 3.
91 Ibid., 62, 94
explorer/guide relationship, similar to the manner in which Bloom does. The Inuit are allowed to stay on screen past the time of their “usefulness”, removing them as tools and asserting by their cold gaze and the tension it creates that they might not have been the willing and enthusiastic participants we were lead to believe they were.

Though Bloom critiques Julien’s “limited” discussion of gender in *True North*, just by being in the film, Myrie is able to signify women’s active roles in explorations in a subtle way that challenges both Bloom’s critique and the narratives of Peary and Henson, as they both overlook women’s participation in order to create an account that privileges their own part in the journey. Her presence as a female in the film is complex. Though she is used to replace Henson, he is not removed completely as she recites lines from his account of the polar expedition. What does it mean for her to “embody” him? She is a device that not only asks questions about the idea of gender performance, but also about authorship and

As in *Ten Thousand Waves* and *Baltimore*, Marie as a woman is used to represent past and present. In her interaction with the arctic landscape as playground, Myrie references the supposed connection of women to the natural world. In her role as the explorer, she aligns the female with progress and science. In Bloom’s book, Peary’s wife functions more as a caretaker than a scientist on the trip. Julien decides to take this a step further from the historical account by giving Myrie *the* central role instead of choosing to only acknowledge that a woman would have been part of the expedition. As the only figure besides the male Inuit guides, this difference in gender between Myrie and the guides helps to heighten the tension them. Her inclusion over that of a male actor serves to add another alternative narrative to that of Peary, Henson and the Inuit’s.
Myrie’s not only takes on the part of Henson, but she also appears in the film as a spirit like figure in a white dress, a Spector or goddess walking the halls of what appears to be an oversized igloo. She is shown washing her hands in a sink, an action that this does not match up with the Polar narrative as it is unlikely that a sizeable igloo in the region surrounding the North Pole would have had running water, especially not in 1909. Near the end of the film, she stands on the shore surrounded by what appears to be small black rocks, contrasting her white dress with the natural landscape (much like her all black fur wardrobe contrasts the ice when she is Henson). Myrie is again connected to nature as she is often displayed with large waterfalls filling the other two of the three film screens and is inappropriately dressed considering the severity of the weather at the North Pole (she is also seen holding chunks of ice and rubbing them back and forth repeatedly with her bare hands). As Myrie fluctuates between the two roles, she acknowledges her ability, and women’s in general, to have this type of fluidity and function in these multiple positions simultaneously.

Though often displayed on its own, True North is sometimes paired with two other films, Fantôme Afrique and Western Union: Small Boats, which all focus on journeys and movement in diasporic terms.92 In 2009, Julien produced a photographic series entitled True South which, similar to True North, “[t]he landscape he wishes to portray combines a pictorial, utopian romanticism with the haunting, coalescing of the different histories.”93 Of this series, which acts as a complement to True North, Julien says, “[w]hen I went to New Zealand, I thought of this idea of geographical polar opposites. The name True

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South came to mind as a mirror image of True North. New Zealand is completely
different and it's about as close to Antarctica as you can get.94 We once again have these
differing stories that connect in an unexpected manner and draw attention to the critical
danger of implementing manufactured divides. Julien is also playing with our concept of
opposites. To choose a southernmost landmass, True South would be showing images of
Antarctica, not New Zealand. However, this would create a visual continuity between the
images of Antarctica and those in True North. Instead, the images of True South display
large expanses of sand and sky as well as pristine beaches (fig. 15). The juxtaposition of
the two pieces demonstrates the fallacy of this diametrically opposed landscape existing
at the bottom of the world, using True North to set up a binary system in which these two
function together.

The film world created in True North offers the viewer a new account of the Polar
expedition by substitution, alteration and expansion. By placing Henson at the center of
the story, Julien is able to bring attention to his often obscured role in assisting Peary. By
replacing Peary with Henson, Julien is making Hensen equally complicit in downplaying
the Inuit guides’ importance to the success of the exploration by making his narrative
central and also by creating the onscreen tension between Henson and the Inuit. He is
also asserting the concept that the marginalized are able act as colonizer in spite of being
defined as “other.” He is using this technique here of widen the understandings that one
sees used in his large body of work to question the idea of a single authorial truth.
Henson is now able have multiple identifiers, both positive and negative, as part of his
characterization; the one-dimensional has become three-dimensional.

94Stephen Jewel, “Mirror images in Tuhoe Land,” The New Zealand Herald (28 Feb 2009),
November 10, 2011).
Chapter 5: Looking for Langston; Representations of a Culture and the Work of Isaac Julien

Turning back to look at the film that brought Julien to the attention of the international artistic community, *Looking for Langston* (1989), the beginnings of the complex storytelling devices that unfold in his ambitious works for the 21st century are shown in their infancy. As this “first look” at Julien, it provides a way to examine not only the themes Julien was tackling in the late 1980s, but also as a device to analyze his larger body of work in the way that it has both held to the ideas shown in *Looking for Langston* and expanded beyond them. In the film, Julien examines the portrayal of the black male gay community, a now familiar trope of his, using Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes as his starting point. The film focuses on the theme of representation by spending most of its time in a 1920s style nightclub, where the men are allowed to act out their desires without interference or censure. This black and white film (a nod to the interracial gay community Julien shows in his film) puts brazenly before the viewer a reality that lacked adequate visualization before, namely a favorable and erotic black gay relationship. This film takes on the theme of representation, or its lack, for both the African diaspora as well as the homosexual community.

*Looking for Langston*, a black and white film with a runtime of 40 minutes, is comprised of a mixture of documentary footage and new footage, providing a stark visual contrast between the grainy historical footage and the crispness of the film created by Julien. The completely isolated nature of the indoor nightclub that Julien uses as the setting acts as something of a parallel to the hidden sexual practices that it depicts (the nightclub visitors disappear as soon as the club doors are open; what is being shown only exists behind closed doors). The aesthetics of *Looking for Langston* are somewhat over
the top, aligning them with camp sensibilities; in part of the film, scantily clad angels dressed with s&m like leather straps going across their chests and leather pants hold vigil over the wake from an interior balcony (fig. 16). One cannot help but be reminded of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of naked black male bodies as Julien spends much of the time of the film focusing on the well-muscled bodies of the actors. These images also bring to mind Kenneth Anger’s camp sensation Scorpio Rising (1964) with its similarly leather clad bikers who are shown as both hypermasculine and homoerotic. The film is as much a meditation of Hughes as it is on the bodies of the actors, involving slow pans up the backside of a nude male as he lies in bed with his lover. From this early stage in his career, Julien is already using what is somewhat of a signature for him: blending fictional and historical text and visuals to create a new, more open and inclusive story that inserts a marginalized person directly into the center of the prevailing narrative.

The sensuality of Looking for Langston is an important part of its construction. The poetry by Hughes, Essex Hemphill and Bruce Nugent is often highly sexual. The evocative nature of the film is more important than creating a documentary like narrative of Hughes’s life. The sensuality of the poetry is coupled with images lingering over the male nude bodies to present something that is both celebratory of the homosexual relationships shown on screen and somber as Hemphill’s poetry reminds us of the potential danger of the sexual contact. Much like Julien’s earlier This is Not an AIDS Advertisement (1987), it oscillates between mournful, slow moving images with an accompanying somber soundtrack and lively dance sequences. Looking for Langston goes back and forth between slow paced erotic melancholy and the upbeat jazz of the twenties with images of men in suits “cutting a rug” in the nightclub. These
juxtapositions in Julien’s film showcase the multidimensionality of the group to which he refers, subverting yet again simplistic identifications of a minority group.

Julien creates his film as if it were a fantasy, an aspect that is emphasized by the non-linearity of the film as well as its brief diversions into an almost empty field where a tuxedo clad man walks purposefully up to a tall, muscular nude man by the name of Beauty. The leather bound, winged angels overlooking this scene add to this sense of unreality. The dream-like nature of Looking for Langston questions whether these events have any basis in history or if the film is acting as a kind of wish fulfillment. Yet the scenes are no less meaningful even if they are only projected hopes instead of reality.

David Deitcher, an art historian and critic argues that Julien’s interest in creating this film that came out of “the need, that is, to find one’s own experience reflected in an admired part of the past. In this case in the esteemed poet and the vaunted cultural tradition to which he belonged.” What Deitcher’s statement points to is the innate human need for representation. This is particularly relevant in light of the trouble Looking for Langston encountered when making its U.S. debut. The Hughes estate threatened to sue if Julien persisted on using Hughes’s writing as part of the film’s audio. In response to this, three places within Looking for Langston were shown without soundtrack. In an unexpected way, these removed sound clips were able to add further meaning to the film, “…the almost complete absence of Hughes’s voice from the final American cut of the film, inadvertently produced a poignant symbol for the poet’s own silence during his lifetime regarding the much-disputed matter of his sexuality.” In addition to tying the

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96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 12.
creation of the film to Hughes’s own life, it also says something about the time period of Looking for Langston’s creation that positing an alternative reading of Hughes’s sexuality would be so openly opposed by those left in charge of the writer’s work.

In Looking for Langston, Julien chooses to emphasize items that are often used as negatives when describing black men such as his shots that linger on large, full lips and outside from the intellectualism of the poetry, centering on the physical qualities of the individuals shown on screen. As Kobena Mercer, a prominent cultural critic suggests, “Julien takes the artistic risk of replicating the stereotype of the ‘thick-lipped Negro’ in order to revalorize that which has historically been devalorized as emblematic of the other’s ugliness.”98 Mercer’s essay is a reconsideration of an earlier discussion on photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Through this rethinking of his earlier work, Mercer comes to the conclusion that instead of simply fetishizing the black male nude body and perpetuating the overemphasis that has been placed on the black male phallus, the context in which Mapplethorpe created these images allows them to act as subversions of Western standards of beauty.99 It is within this same reworking of Mapplethorpe that Mercer chooses to discuss Looking for Langston. The negative ways that black males have been portrayed are undermined in the way that Julien portrays them in Looking for Langston. Though the black male as hypersexualized being is a much overused trope, it is the equation of the black male body as attractive that is original to the late 1980s.

Though the landscape used here is that of the black male body versus the landscape as scenery in Ten Thousand Waves, Baltimore and True North, Looking for Langston shows an early example of Julien’s meditation on landscapes. The way the camera moves up

and across the bodies of his actors replicates the manner in which the camera considers the exteriors and interiors of Shanghai, the labyrinthine quality of the “Blacks in Wax” museum in Baltimore and the treacherous, but stunning snow caps of his fabricated North Pole. As I argued in the previous section on True North, landscape acts not only as a part of the mise en scène, but also as an active participant in the narrative. The black nude bodies in Looking for Langston are presented to give visual pleasure but there is also an implied scene of activity based on the subject matter of the film as well as their disappearance at the end. These bodies can move and do; they move against the social norms and sexual rules of the Hughes’ 1920s and Julien’s 1960s.

The opening sequence of Looking for Langston connects the film intensely personal for the artist. Julien is shown laying in an open casket, acting as a placeholder for Hughes, whose life the film acts as a type of contemplation on. It is one of the few times Julien uses his own body within one of his films. It is clear from here on that the longings presented in this non-narrative, not truly biographical account of Hughes are as much Hughes’s longings as Julien’s. It was only a year earlier in 1988 that a group of lesbians rappelled “from the public gallery onto the floor of the House of Lords in 1988 during the debate on Section 28 of the Local Government Bill (which forbade the ‘intentional promotion of homosexuality’…and which became law shortly afterwards).”100 It is a longing for a place where, like the interior of the nightclub in Looking for Langston, one can be oneself without the fear or retribution.

Looking back to Ten Thousand Waves, where the two female figures of Cheung and Tao are main representational forces, we see how far from this point where Julien is using

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100 Cherry Smyth, “We're here, we're queer and we're not going catalogue shopping,” A Queer Romance (London: Routledge, 1995), 222.
his own body as a representation he has moved. Not only that but *Looking for Langston* has no female figure anyway during the film, whereas *Ten Thousand Waves* is almost completely dominated by women. This happens as well in *True North* though, since Myrie is reciting lines directly from Henson’s exploration account, there’s still a sense of a male presence even when it is not shown on screen. In *Baltimore*, the gender balance is at its most even, though Myrie’s character As he has continued to work and as can be seen in these later three films, his sexuality and masculinity become less of a focus and then not at all when we arrive at *Ten Thousand Waves*. The real paradigm shift that is seen from *Looking for Langston* to *Ten Thousand Waves* is in focus moving from male dominate to female and from this niche (symbolized by the closed club) to the larger and more collective. It is a reflection of Julien’s recognition of the growing importance of discourse on globalization and immigration as well as a recognition that the introduction of the female as a third term to his narrative layering enlarges the number of alternative narratives and also disconnects it from being centered around a binary construction. The female in his films is given a lot of mobility, flexibility and power. In return, she offers this device to further deconstruct these problematic master narratives.

There is no true “Langston” character in Julien’s film, allowing it to have wider significance beyond a biography as well as not pigeonholing a definitive identity for Hughes within Julien’s film. Instead, the artist shows a larger picture of what he imagines Harlem society to have been like in the 1920s (or possibly what he hoped it was like) Julien also creates an image of black homosexuality that is positive as well as normalizing. As Mercer says “…his [Julien’s] film refuses, through its dialogic strategy, to essentialize Hughes into a black gay cultural icon. This strategy focuses on the
question of power at issue in the ability to make and wield representations.” Mercer’s statement gives more meaning to the scenes showing campy angels holding up large pictures of Hughes, that this action is not simply about memorializing the writer but about having the means to represent him.

At the end of Looking of Langston, a large group of white men are shown at the door to the club carrying torches and attempting to break their way into the club. These scenes are interspersed with those of the men in the club dancing and the leather clad angels laughing at the group of men outside from their place in the club’s rafters. The dancing begins to get more frenetic as the knocking on the doors continues. After a few minutes, the torch-wielding crowd successfully breaks open the doors. However, when they charge into the club, they find it empty. This ending emphasizes Looking for Langston as fantasy. As the title of the piece alludes to, it is about finding and recreating what might have occurred and Julien chooses to look more in the realm of imagination than in reality.

In saying that Looking for Langston provides favorable or positive images of homosexuality, it is not to say that it is a simplistic characterization of homosexuality. Hemphill’s allusions to sexually transmitted disease in his poetry that is used as part of the film’s soundtrack, in addition to the overall introspective and somber tone of the film, remind one of the realities behind Julien’s fantastical film. The use of black and white for the film’s color scheme only helps to emphasize this. In the end, now that the means of representation are available to create a picture of black homosexuality, Julien takes care that the representation remains complex and that by posing the film as a consideration instead of as a definitive narrative, he continues to widen a dialog that had previously one-sided and riddled with stereotypes.

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This imaginative use of reality and fiction co-mingling to destabilize is the quintessential device through Julien’s *oeuvre*. In *Looking for Langston*, the break between the reality and fiction is blatant, shown through the opening of a door as the barrier between the two. In the film, we saw the original motivating factors of personal visual representation for the use of this device, which have now become the personal as universal in his later films. As Julien’s work has progressed, this distinction has become subtler and harder to define. In *Baltimore*, Julien never seems to create a division between imagination and realism, showing the museum and history as institutions that can contain as much fact as fiction. *True North* draws similar conclusions; the history of the center becomes indelibly tangled with the history of the margins through the fusion of Peary’s, Henson’s and a created third party narrative. Past, present and myth combine in *Ten Thousand Waves* in a way that pushes the mythic history and symbolically full landscape of the Fujian province against the cold reality of Shanghai, mirroring and emphasizing the boundary created by immigration practices between China and England.

Throughout Julien’s *oeuvre* one sees a continuity of themes which are becoming only more important with time as globalization leads to continued immigration and as post-colonialism allows for a larger number of differing viewpoints to begin to receive equal recognition. These films, with *Ten Thousand Waves, Baltimore, True North* and *Looking for Langston* used to show how these substantial themes come to function within the them, make use Julien’s personal history as a black British male as their starting point, but come to articulate larger cultural and societal issues. His multi-screen format creates installations that allow the viewer to interactive with the narrative by compelling him or her to edit the material that he or she is seeing instead of receiving a finished product.
The multiple is present not only in the number of screens, but also in the numerous quotations from history, visual culture and other fields Julien uses in his films. In *Baltimore*, we see Mr. Van Peebles come in direct contact with his doppelganger (as multiple) and witnessed the tension/instability this interaction created. It is a mirror of the tension produced by Julien’s use of multiple historical narratives in a single film. This technique expands the possible understandings of the narratives, not only acknowledging divergent historical voices but working to create them as well. By engaging with this contemporary postcolonial project, Julian cinematic and storytelling devices work to dismantle the hierarchy between histories told by the center and those told from the margins. His films blur the lines of this dichotomy, pointing to the constructed nature of the margin and center. Through this, the tropes that have been used to create this dichotomy are similarly deconstructed. Julien does not fix a new, singular narrative in their place, but as shown by *Baltimore, Ten Thousand Waves, True North* and *Looking for Langston*, leaves these stories in loosely intertwined pieces through his use of non-linear structure. What Julien creates by this is not only a new, more complex narrative but also, and possibly more importantly, a new comprehension of the multifaceted character of minority identity that has been kept one-dimensional for far too long by the dominant discourse.
Bibliography


Appendix

Single channel films:

Who Killed Colin Roach (1983) 45 mins., color Super 8, Video Transfer
Territories (1984) 25 mins., color 16mm
The Passion of Remembrance (1986) 95 mins., color 16mm
This is Not an AIDS Advertisement (1987) 14 mins., color Super-9, video transfer
Looking for Langston (1989) 40 mins., black and white 16mm
Young Soul Rebels (1991) 105 mins., color 35mm
The Attendant (1993) 10 mins. color 35mm
The Darker Side of Black (1994) 59 mins., color 16mm
Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask (1996) 73 mins, color 35mm
BaadAsssss Cinema (2002) 56 mins., color digital video
Derek (2008) 78 mins., color digital video

Installations:

That Rush (1995) 7 mins., color 16mm, video transfer
Trussed (1996) 10 mins., black and white 16 mm, video transfer
Fanon S.A. 1997 (1997) 12 mins., black and white/color 16 mm, video transfer
Three (1999), 20 mins., sepia/color 16mm, video transfer
The Conservator’s Dream (1999) 4 mins., sepia/color 16mm, video transfer
Long Road to Mazatlán (1999), 20 mins., sepia/color 16mm, video transfer
Vagabondia (2000) 7 mins, color 16mm, video transfer
Paradise Omeros (2002) 20 mins., black and white/color 16mm, dvd transfer
Lost Boundaries (2003) 4 mins., color super 8, dvd transfer
Baltimore (2003), 11 mins., black and white/color 16mm, dvd transfer
Encore II, (2004) 3 mins., color super-8, dvd transfer
True North (2004) 14 mins., black &white/color 16 mm, dvd transfer
Fantome Afrique (2005) 17 mins., color 16mm, dvd transfer
Fantome Creole (2005) 23 mins., color 16mm, dvd transfer
Dungeness (2008) 10 mins., color digital video
Whampoa Club
Still from *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm

Glass House, Prism
Still from *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm
Yishan Island, Mist
Still from Ten Thousand Waves, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm

Mazu, Silence
Still from Ten Thousand Waves, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm
(Fig. 5)

_Yishan Island, Dreaming_
Still from _Ten Thousand Waves_, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm

(Fig. 6)

Still from _Western Union: Small Boats_, 2007
18 min, Color 35 mm
Still from *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007
18 min, Color 35 mm

*Glass House*
Still from *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010
49 mins, Color 35 mm
Angela in Black
Still from Baltimore, 2003
11 min, Black & White/Color 16mm

Déjà Vu
Still from Baltimore, 2003
11 min, Black & White/Color 16mm
Still from *Baltimore*, 2003
11 min, Black & White/Color 16mm

Still from *Baltimore*, 2003
11 min, Black & White/Color 16mm
Still from *True North*, 2004
14 min, Black & White/Color 16mm
Dreaming Red, 2009
True South photographic series
Color print on lightbox
5 ft x 4 ft
Edition of 10
(Fig. 16)

Still from *Looking for Langston*, 1989
40 min., Black & White 16mm