

**ZEITGEIST**

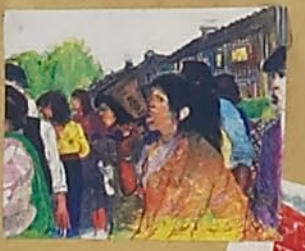
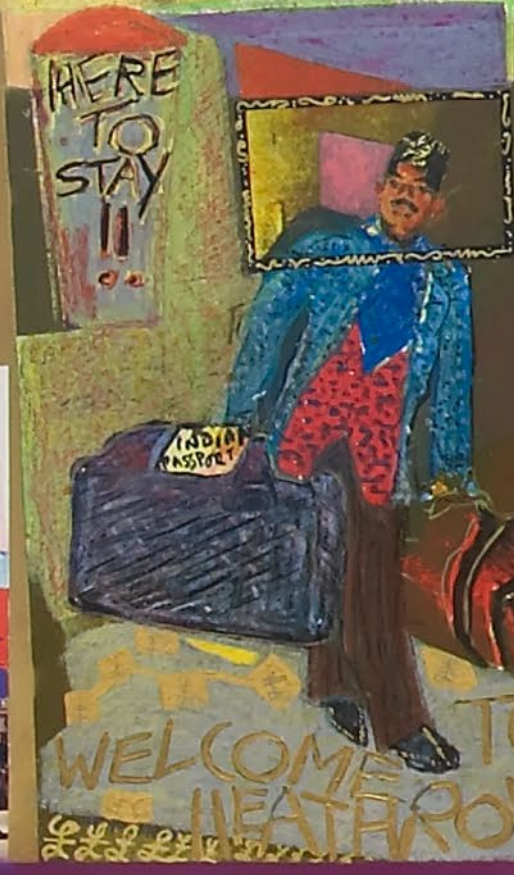
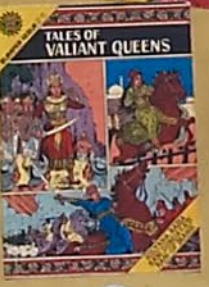
**ASHWANI SHARMA**

This essay is dedicated to my beautiful son Kashif Sharma-Patel who helped in writing and editing the text when I was faltering.

Thanks to the editors Nick Aikens and Elizabeth Robles for their patience and support.



Chila Kumari Burman, *Convenience Not Love*, 1985. Colour silk screen and laser print diptych. 86.4 x 264.2cm. Courtesy Jane Beckett © Chila Kumari Burman





Said Adrus, *Zeitgeist*, 1982. Silkscreen print. Framed 68 x 59cm.  
Courtesy the artist © Said Adrus



**The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.<sup>1</sup>**

**– Fred Moten**

**...art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art ... it criticizes society by merely existing.<sup>2</sup>**

**– Theodor Adorno**

**Radical alterity – the wholly other– must be thought and must be thought through imaging... the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible.<sup>3</sup>**

**– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

### **Out of Time**

***The Place Is Here* exhibition is an invitation to time travel back to the 1980s, the ‘critical decade’ when ‘Black British art’ as a movement emerged. The uncanny experience of viewing the exhibition is that while it focuses on a tumultuous historical period of racial strife, it also appears to speak to the present over 30 years later. It’s as if the artworks are the ones that are travelling in time. This essay examines this temporal displacement through the aesthetics and ethico-politics of 1980s Black British art in terms of the ongoing crisis of race, nation and global capitalism from the vantage point of the present. This is done by undertaking conceptual, somewhat speculative ‘close readings’ of three artworks in the exhibition by noted diasporic South Asian artists: Said Adrus’s *Zeitgeist* (1982-3), Chila Kumari Burman’s *Convenience, Not Love* (1986-7) and Pratibha Parmar’s *Sari Red* (1988).**

The focus on specific artworks is a risky endeavour given that 1980s Black British art tends to be understood as the periodisation of a body of work that coheres around a set of political aesthetics that circumscribe the 'critical decade'. While there are dominant formal tendencies in 1980s Black British art – for instance the significance of montage – the essay's engagement with these artworks revisits the aesthetics of Black British art in relation to diasporic Asian cultures. The focus in particular is directed towards how these works open up multiple postcolonial histories, temporalities and cultural translations, deconstructing any essentialist or totalising idea of Black British art.

The artworks are addressed in a critical juxtaposition to one another in order to consider the spatio-temporal aesthetics and their entanglements in the racial, class and gendered violence in the (trans)national circuits of capital and culture in the 1980s and the present. Black British art history conceived temporally as 'future-anterior' draws attention to the disjunctive relationship of the past to the present. Hal Foster has posited:

... (a) temporal model of the avant-garde in which the future-anterior tense of deferred action – the *will-have-been* – replaces the stable, self-contained temporality of the 'past', 'present' and 'future' tenses... The future-anterior thus marks the temporality of an avant-garde that is never fully present to itself because it will never have fully taken place in the first instance.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 225-6.

<sup>3</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 97-8.

<sup>4</sup>Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (eds), *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), p. 69.

Similarly the 'deferred action' of 1980s Black British art is always open to re-articulations in the future. In the case of Asian British art this temporal displacement revisits the cultural racism and contemporary orientalism that continue to fetishise 'Asian culture' as an ambivalent object – phobic and desired – within an ahistorical racial whiteness. The drive to render 'Asian culture' as a knowable epistemological object is resisted by the artworks through their aesthetic experimentations that attempt to undo the representational logics of neo-orientalist racialisation.

This essay also refuses to represent or fix cultural meanings. Rather, it presents an ethical reading practice of 'desedimentation' that resists interpretations, characteristic in the study of black art, which reduce the artworks to their representational content or aim to 'reflect' the sociopolitical and historical context, invariably for a national(ist) or Eurocentric 'gaze'.<sup>5</sup> The refusal is also an attempt to (self-)reflect on the critic as a 'native informant', a position in which especially the diasporic critic is located as providing some sort of 'authentic' interpretation.<sup>6</sup> An ethical reading practice is one where the 'radical alterity' of 'Asianness' is engendered and not presented as a mirror image or 'other' of the investigating subject. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's epigraph argues: 'radical alterity – the wholly other – must be thought and must be thought through imaging ... the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible.'<sup>7</sup>

The artworks in themselves, given their proximity to ethnic Otherness offer an affective (im)possible experience of alterity, as an intervention in and beyond the historical conjuncture. These works are always 'out of time' in which the disjunctive socio-temporality effectively 'create' the social worlds that are critiqued.

Critical Black art can be considered here as ‘autonomous art’ in a manner conceived by Theodor W. Adorno: ‘art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art ... it criticises society by merely existing.’<sup>8</sup> The existence of these independent artworks in the 1980s is a testament to the necessity of social critique of race, identity and nation. The social is inscribed in the artwork in the form of its deconstructive political aesthetics in relation to ongoing sociopolitical antagonisms.<sup>9</sup>

This focus on specific works also avoids the reductive tendency to label quite diverse artistic practices and works solely within racial or ethnic categories. By paying attention to the works’ formal elements, the question of the racial or cultural dimension is not imposed from the ‘outside’ onto the art. This is not to say that Black art is not black, but that the blackness of Black art is contingent on the artwork and not solely determined by the ethnicity or gender of the artist or the thematic content of the work. In this respect the artworks are performative and not simply representative, bringing into crisis the dominant language of race and ethnicity. The performative aspect of the works is particularly pertinent given that in the 1980s in the United Kingdom the idea of Black was a political ‘master signifier’ for people of colour (especially of African-Caribbean, African and South Asian heritage). This designation is not widely used now, and black tends to be solely used for people of the African diaspora or heritage. This does raise problems in the naming of historical works that were considered politically Black but now are not interpreted through the prism of blackness. The consequence of this

<sup>8</sup> The critical notion of ‘desedimentation’ is explained in detail in Nahum Chandler, *X - The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) for a detailed tracking of the ‘native informant’ in European philosophy and thought.

<sup>7</sup> Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 225-6.

<sup>9</sup> This focus on aesthetics is also risky given it could reproduce forms of art history and ‘art for art’s sake’ historically decontextualised readings. The attempt here is to pay attention to the formal aesthetic properties of the artworks, something which can be marginalised in readings of the works that focus on the politics of the race in relation to representation and the social. There is an ambivalence in the development of cultural studies towards a focus on aesthetics. Here I

consider its necessity in the relation to Black and postcolonial art given their critique of the social order.

<sup>10</sup> See the influential article by Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in *JCA Documents 7: Black Film, British Cinema*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988) on the significance and risks of a shift to ethnicity and cultural identity in theorising Black culture.

<sup>11</sup> See Chandler, *X*.

displacement is that historical artworks from diasporic Asians tend to be marginalised and/or made invisible in the discourses of contemporary Black British art. The performativity of cultural forms questions the fixing of categories across time and space without paying attention to the socio-historical context in which the work was produced.

The future-anterior temporality of Black British art does not by definition limit the meaning of the work to a specific period of time, or to an essentialist idea of identity – it is open to futural and retrospective recodings of blackness. The notion of UK political Blackness requires a detailed consideration of the longer histories of colonialism, especially forms of collective decolonial struggles in the twentieth century. Political Blackness emerged in the articulation of anti-racism and cultural politics during the late 1970s and 1980s to counter both the racist state and capitalism. Since then Black as a political collectivity has been critiqued and displaced by various attempts to mobilise a diversity of (multi) cultural identities.<sup>10</sup>

Nahum Chandler argues for the (para) ontological difference between black people and blackness.<sup>11</sup> For him, while there is a historical relationship between blackness and people racialised as black, they are not the same. This allows for blackness to be ‘beyond’, not reducible to the racist ontology of black people in the West:

Blackness indeed is produced through a dialectic between racial capitalism and the black radical tradition. ... Its formation is also the production of internal difference, or the relationship between the expanding interconnections of the singular experiences of colonized peoples. What the black radical tradition is, is a constant differentiation, or

heterogeneity produced alongside the expansion of racial capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

Diasporic Asian British cultures interconnect with the Black Atlantic as a rhizomatic network of collective aesthetic struggle, as well as in the shifting cartographies of postcolonial Afro-Asian culture and politics in contemporary transnational globalism, especially in relation to the Global South. The notion of diasporic aesthetics complicates ideas of home and draws attention to the multiple entangled, syncretic histories that are not neatly framed by historical ideas of Black British art. Examples include the entangled diasporas of Islamic, Muslim or Arab culture; Asians from Africa; or those from East Asia, et cetera. It is these multiple sites that the artworks examined are transversing and recoding. The significance of Black political aesthetics has been to challenge racial and cultural boundaries and locate 1980s Black British art in global as well as national discourses. The history of twentieth-century international Modernism(s) and its relationship to formal experimentations in anti-imperial culture provide necessary genealogies for Black British art. A history in which the notions of blackness are bought into critical dialogue with ideas of subalternity as developed in postcolonial studies requires a rethinking in relation to emergent forms of cultural politics and decolonisation.<sup>13</sup>

### Still Life

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. ... For every image of the past that is

<sup>12</sup> See Black Study Group (London), 'The Movement of Black Thought - Study Notes', *darkmatter*, no. 10, September 2015, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2015/09/29/the-movement-of-black-thought-study-notes/>, (accessed 10 September 2018). This provides an outline of some of the recent developments in contemporary black thought.

<sup>13</sup> The 'Annotating Art's Histories' book series examine the global histories of postcolonial, Modernist and Black art. For example, these two both edited by Kobena Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (London/Cambridge, MA: Iniva/MIT Press, 2007) and *Discrepant Abstraction* (London/Cambridge, MA: Iniva/MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 247.

not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.<sup>14</sup>

– Walter Benjamin

A yellowish gold tint covers a monochrome black-and-white print for *Zeitgeist* (1982-3), an artwork by Said Adrus. The silk-screened newspaper photograph captures the police in a scene of urban disorder. The print presents police figures, in dark silhouettes, who appear at once apprehensively hiding behind their riot shields and ready for an ongoing battle. By repurposing the Pop art techniques of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, the photograph becomes an aesthetic object stripped of the immediacy of news discourses and presented in the contemplative viewing spaces of the art gallery.

*Zeitgeist* is an iconic image of 1980s racial discord and urban 'riots' across various British cities. While these 'riots' do not explain the sociopolitical conditions of the wider racial discontent of the 1980s they were important catalysts in the demand for political and cultural representation for social justice. The civil uprisings punctuate the racial turmoil and social anger of the 1980s and are key references for many of the works in the *The Place Is Here* exhibition. For instance, Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and Vanley Burke's photographs of the civil disorder in Birmingham. Although Adrus's *Zeitgeist* is a relatively diminutive artwork, it indexes a trace that runs through the exhibition. By presenting a decontextualised scene of urban conflict, the image crosses space and time to invoke scenes of rioting in postcolonial Britain from the 1958 Notting Hill riots to the 2011 Bradford Riots and the 2013 London riots. The work presents a 'primal scene' of the crisis of race relations

and an act of remembering, countering the nation's post-racial amnesia.

***Zeitgeist* reverberates across time and space as a dialectical image. Walter Benjamin's notion of dialectical images address the history and memory of racial antagonism in and after its time. According to Peter Osborne:**

**Benjamin's dialectical images are constellations of the 'then' and the 'now', which, in the hermetic enclosure of their internal relations, mirror the structure of history as a whole, viewed from the standpoint of its end. As such, they are not so much allegorical in their semantic structure, as of the nature of theological symbols: *images* of redemption. Each image, in its totalized if temporary self-sufficiency, reflects the structure of the yet-to-be-completed whole...<sup>15</sup>**

**Black British history is a fractured array of images, texts and sounds. For Benjamin the empty time of continuous history (past, present, future) needs to be 'ruptured' by the flash of the past as an image - remembering the 'tradition of the oppressed' as the failed, forgotten struggles of the past. To remember the past is to open up another time in the now, what Benjamin calls the 'Now-Time' of the dialectical image.<sup>16</sup> The yellowish gold tint acts as a self-referencing of the work as an aesthetic object in the 'Now-Time' of the scene of civil disorder for the future, against the disposable immediacy of newspaper images purporting to be evidential 'truth' of racial criminality. In Adrus's piece, the violent history of**

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**race relations is indexed in the photographic 'Now-Time'. The police in conflict with urban youth are suspended in a dialectical constellation, articulating the histories of civil uprisings, urban conflicts and state oppression. *Zeitgeist* is the aesthetic recomposition of the 1970s 'Policing the Crisis'<sup>17</sup> - the racial 'moral panic' - that led to the authoritarian populism of the Thatcher government, the underlying 'political unconscious' countered by many works in the exhibition.**

**In the 1980s, Adrus's practice addressed social injustice through the violent graphic combination of text, image and media across histories and contemporary culture.<sup>18</sup> The work of the dialectical image in a flash, is a reminder of the history of state violence and racism always in a future tense. It acts as a counter-memory, an interruption in official narratives of race relations, dislocating and repeating the event of the riots.**

**1980s Black British art invites a constant re-evaluation of the politics of black art across historical times. David Scott's idea of the 'problem space' offers a productive way of thinking about historical change and problem solving:**

**...the 'problem-space' is first of all a conjunctural space, a historically constituted discursive space. This discursive conjuncture is defined by a complex of questions and answers - or better, a complex of statements, propositions, resolutions and arguments offered in answer to largely implicit questions or problems. Or to put this another way, these statements and so on are moves in a field or space of argument, and to understand them requires reconstructing that space of problems that elicited them.<sup>19</sup>**

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 145.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', pp. 245-5.

The image of the civil disturbances distils the ‘problem space’ of racial antagonism between the state and the urban everyday. Its unsettling of time poses a set of open-ended questions about the veracity of the image, its valorisation of conflict dislocated across time and space, acting as the (im)possible racial ontology of the urban social order. *Zeitgeist* is a witnessing against violence in the form of an intervention that dialectically marks the racial ordering of the nation. This reframes Kobena Mercer’s contention that 1980s Black art was a form of ‘problem solving’ to one where the works reconstruct the space of the problem, as done by *Zeitgeist*.<sup>20</sup>

### Swarming

...if there is any fear that it might be **SWAMPED** people are going to react and be rather **HOSTILE** to those coming in...

– Margaret Thatcher

In contrast to Adrus’s muted monochromatic photographic mise-en-scène, a riot of colours, figures and photographs are dispersed across the two-screen print by Chila Kumari Burman, *Convenience, Not Love* (1986-7). The comically attired figure of Thatcher as John Bull with a fragment of her notorious ‘Swamping’ speech in a speech bubble next to the British passport is juxtaposed with images of passports from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, arranged among a plethora of photographs, colourful prints and iconography of subcontinental migrants. The chaotic collage disrupts the state formation of British identity signified by the UK passport with an excess of ‘diasporic Asianness’. This excess is rendered by the multitude of family snaps,

<sup>17</sup> This is a reference to the classic study, John Clarke, Charles Critcher, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts (eds), *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan Press 1978).

<sup>18</sup> See Eddie George, *Black Artists in British Art: A History from 1950 to the Present* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 91-104 for an overview of Said Adrus’s historical work.

<sup>19</sup> ‘David Scott by Stuart Hall’, *Bomb*, 1 January 2005, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/david-scott/>, (accessed 1 August 2018).

<sup>20</sup> See Kobena Mercer, ‘Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness’, *The Third Text Reader: On Art Culture and Theory*, eds Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt and Ziauddin Sardar (London: Routledge, 2010).

which constitute a quotidian, working-class archive, presenting a subterranean history of the Asian migrant everyday. The piece is an act of remembrance, working against the ‘forgetting’ of histories of working-class Asian immigration.

This ‘aesthetic excess’ satirically repurposes Thatcher’s swamping metaphor in terms of the sheer disordered diffusion of the imagery; swamping in the artwork eludes to ‘swarming’. While a problematic metaphor used to describe the movement of contemporary migrants especially refugees, ‘swarming’ also presents unmappable migrant movements inducing crisis in the British national imaginary. The diptych is less about being British, than the transformation of the nation as a ‘diaspora space’ as conceptualised by Avtar Brah:

Diaspora space as a conceptual category is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’.<sup>21</sup>

‘Diaspora space’ as a site for the antagonistic entanglements is presented in *Convenience* through the messy, smudged Urdu inscriptions across the (pre-EU) British passport – an object of ambivalence in the lives of post-war migrants. The Urdu script reads: ‘you allowed us to come here on false promises. We come here full of hope and destiny. You have no mercy. We will struggle and survive. Long live. Long Live. Long live.’ The Urdu is an untranslated movement of culture inside of – but not available in – English. It is an excess, an alterity that defines the diasporic syncretic forms and spaces.

The notion of the diaspora space can be productively reframed through Scott's idea of the 'problem space'. Diaspora space is the materialisation of the 'problem space' of 1980s social life with the struggle against nationalism, cultural racism and free market economics being inscribed in the chromatic diffusion of Burman's artwork as an incalculable problematic. The bricolage of multiple passports aesthetically deconstructs ideas of monocultural nationalism and the fixity of borders of identity and culture.

This artwork's temporal structure resonates with the so-called current migration crisis in the West. The canvas acts as archival document, an act of cultural memory of the longer histories of authoritarian populism and anti-migrant rhetoric. The dialectical image repeats and anticipates the racial 'imaginary' of Brexit and the contemporary entanglements of nationalism and migration. The barbed wire and gas-masked police in the collage make a fitting allegory of the violence of borders and the policing of the nation-state across time and space.

This work needs to be considered in context with Burman's preoccupations with femininity, cultural identity and working-class culture. In her idiom of a reconfigured, diasporic, Pop art aesthetic, she reimagines forms of social life in which the ordinariness of the Asian gendered body is rendered as a 'utopian spectacle of multi-colour', as a (feminist) counterpoint to culturally racist figurations of integration and assimilation. The collage is a social form of aesthetic resistance and/as pleasure that travels in time and space – a fugitive aesthetics of sociality that is never at home.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities*, (London: Routledge 1996), p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> See Lynda Nead, *Chilla Kumari Burman: Beyond Two Cultures* (London: Kala Press, 1995) for a detailed examination of Burman's early work.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 40.

For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of the world.<sup>23</sup>

– Jacques Derrida

A red sari fluttering in the wind with an eerie dramatic sound dissolves to a bright red title caption, which then cuts to splatterings of red paint on a brick wall begins Pratibha Parmar's 1988 short film, *Sari Red*. Blood runs through it as a repetitive marker of the intimate relationship between life, violence and death for Asians in Britain. Red is a sign of life and celebration in South Asian culture as well as of fear and danger.

The film, a memorial to the racially motivated 1985 killing of Kalbinder Kaur Hayre, creates an elegiac tone though the superimposition of the scenes of young Asian women's everyday through complex audio-visual poetics. The film arrests time, slowing down the sequencing of images, producing affective intensification of loss and the racist violence immanent to working-class migrant life. The superimposition of diverse images characteristic of 1980s video art invokes the multiple temporalities of space-time inhabited by migrants. From a contemporary perspective, the grainy dissolves of images of saris and the burning Union Jack formulate a counter-memory that is both unreducible and beyond Britishness. The use of footage and iconography of subcontinental culture and religion makes connections across continents and histories. The edited scenes from the classic 1971 Indian film *Pakeezah* about the tragic figure of a Muslim dancer/courtesan, is a coded address of the histories and memories of the diaspora, as well as a counter-memory to violence in the life worlds of working-class Asian women. The violent, racialised 'ungendering'

of women's bodies are 'queered' in everyday private spaces of pleasure and hope, disrupting the racial scopoc regime and the normative designation of Asian women as passive victims and/or desired objects.<sup>24</sup> The intimacy of Asian women's embodied relations and sensual sociality is the site of collective loss and aestheticised feminist resistance.

It's the mourning, better named melancholia, as incomplete mourning that gives the film its affective and critical force. Mourning is here a site of resistance against the erasure of migrant lives. The present is haunted by the largely invisible fear of the everyday with the police indifferent if not culpable in racist violence. The soundtrack and voice-over further dislocate the time and space of the killing of Kalbinder Kaur Hayre as a singular death and a repetitive event in the lives of diasporic Asian women against racial patriarchy and exploitations under capitalist economies.

*Sari Red* is a dialectical text that offers the potential of redemption and hope for a future open to new possibilities; the migrant archive can then be rethought from the position of the future to come. A montage of urban space and saris become the site: a dreamscape and set of images for a redemptive rereading of the past in the present. The film resonates in its creative approach with the work of the 1980s Black film workshops such as Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa Film and Video, with the reworking of archives, memory and histories through the poiesis of the essay-film. The affective poetics is produced through the 'cutting up' of montage blocks of image and sound. As Fred Moten argues, 'the

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cut' in montage is a critical technique and form of thought in the aesthetic practice of radical black culture; it is an aesthetic practice that deconstructs the difference between the universal and the particular – universal Western history and the particularity of black culture:

Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself. That space is the site of, ensemble: the improvisation of singularity and totality and through their opposition. ■

The montage sequences in *Sari Red* act as an improvisational decontextualising and re-articulating of the archival image. They attempt in the space/ instant of the cut, to invoke the collective subjectivity of diasporic figures. The montage cut is one of disjunctive reconstruction. The singular death is also a testament to Asian lives, to each woman's life, premature death always immanent due to decades of racist and patriarchal violence. The dense, haunting audio-visual poetics 'overwhelm' the time of history and entangle the private domestic everyday of Asian women's lives to the (hidden) intimacies and utopian joys of gendered, queered, British and Asian diasporic spaces and times as radical alterity between the particular and the universal.

### Radical Alterity

It may seem paradoxical that it is the autonomous formation of these artworks that makes an ethico-aesthetic political resistance and hope possible. The racial imaginary and social formation of these works are singular interventions in Asian/Black culture: they transverse and reimagine culture, community, class, gender and sexuality across multiple times and places.

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed conceptualisation of 'ungendering', see Hortense Spillers, "'Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 203-9.

<sup>25</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, p. 89.

**The aesthetic reconfiguration of the past, present and future invents new ways of imaging Asianness and/or as blackness. They also point to the crucial necessity of autonomous experimental poetics and self-organised cultural projects that emerged in the 1980s, antagonistic to the appropriations and commodifications of racial capitalism and nationalism.**

**In the contemporary ‘problem space’ of virulent nationalism and xenophobia and the racialised fetishisation of ethnic otherness that circulates in the libidinal economy of multicultural Britishness, these artworks offer a set of critical poetics that interrupt the historicism of nationalism, state-sanctioned and everyday violence of racial capitalism. The desire for Asian/Black as an epistemological object of certainty is ensued by the incalculable utopian ‘aesthetic excess’ of these works that bring to crisis the representational logics of race and realism. An ethical reading, one of ‘non-mastery’ of the native informant, is one of speculation and openness in which the categories of ethnicity and culture are undone by positing Asian and/or/as black culture as unstable markers of collective difference and alterity against Eurocentric universality.**

**The future of black art is always open to re-articulation of the fractured memories of racial violence, as well as the cultural imaginaries that interrupt any notion of the past as past. Against an understanding of *The Place Is Here* exhibition as a form of archival ‘retromania’, a nostalgia for a time gone by, or for the institutionalisation into orthodox art history, these works are accented to an unpredictable future. The ‘incalculable’ diasporic forms**

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**challenge the stability of a racialised postcolonial nation and put pressure on the conceptual frames that are being mobilised in comprehending the complex flows of people, culture and ideas. The innovations of 1980s aesthetics are at once of a time past, and that which still pose a differing set of questions and resistances in the present, contesting the (inter)national narratives of racial progress for an ethico-politics of radical alterity and hope.**

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