

MASCULINITY AND WHITENESS IN TRACEY MOFFATT'S *HEAVEN*.

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ABSTRACT

In her short experimental film, *Heaven*(1997), Moffatt takes up the art of beach-side peering, traditionally privileged as a white, male preoccupation. Using a low-tech, hand-held camera technique, Moffatt goes "hunting" for surfers caught in the awkward act of changing out of their wetsuits, towels modestly wrapped around their waists. As such *Heaven* registers the disavowed voyeurism latent in the home video genre as well as early ethnographic documentary. Indeed the mock-ethnographic feel of the video is enhanced by an intermittent soundtrack of Tibetan chanting and tribal drumming, which silences the animated dialogue between film maker and her subjects – as if to further inscribe the work's obsession with "looking". What I am interested in exploring in this paper is the way in which *Heaven* "makes whiteness strange" by reversing the hierarchies of scrutiny implicit in indigenous and non-indigenous relations. While the film takes pleasure in the ironic "whiteness" of heaven, a place of earthly angels, stripped of their clothes or wetsuits, it nevertheless subtly discloses the political unconscious of white ethnicity, primarily its disavowed eroticism, at the expense of the racial other. As such *Heaven* can be seen as subversive ethnographic practice that redefines the "looking relations" and libidinal desires between raced and gendered subjects within visual culture. Hence, I want to argue that Moffatt represents whiteness not simply in terms of cultural domination but as a complex landscape of changing subject positions, social relations, affects and desires.

PAPER

While Indigenous women's experiences of colonisation have been articulated largely through autobiographical modes of storytelling and representation, the scrutiny of "whiteness" by indigenous writers and artists has perhaps only recently become the subject of more systematic theoretical analysis. In *Talking Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that central to the disempowering effect of many non-indigenous texts is the way in which Aboriginal people are never "knowers" but always the "known". This level of scrutiny, in always "knowing" the racial other, has served to make whiteness both always inevitable and necessarily absent. What I am interested in exploring in this essay is the way in which Tracey Moffatt's experimental video *Heaven* "makes whiteness strange" by reversing the hierarchies of scrutiny implicit in indigenous and nonindigenous relations. It seems to me that *Heaven* both elucidates and problematises many of the central concerns within "whiteness studies" at the same time refusing what Kobena Mercer has defined as the burden of representation for black artists; that is the desire to make art that speaks for and on behalf of a monolithic indigenous culture. Therefore, I want to argue, that Moffatt redefines whiteness not simply in terms of cultural domination or oppression but as a complex landscape of changing subject positions, social relations and desires.

To date Moffatt's work has produced a portrait of Australian life that fuses personal memory and experience with a larger historical scope. What distinguishes the work is its conscious reflection on how particular kinds of stories get told at the expense of others. Rather than giving us the "truth" of the past, Moffatt creates socially inscribed visual narratives that reflect what is missing or repressed in the cultural imaginary. In mining the emotional capacities of popular visual mediums such as film, video and photography, as well as the historical effects of these visual technologies in producing particular kinds of identities and social relations, Moffatt's work has been centrally preoccupied with the disavowed eroticism implicit in historical representation of indigenous subjects. As such, Moffatt's images invariably capture the everyday sensuality and sexuality of the body, pointing to the affective connections and disconnections between black and white bodies. In the familial drama played out in her short film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), a black daughter nurses her dying white mother in an isolated homestead, inter-cut with flashbacks of the daughter's abandonment as a child. While on one level the film hints at the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, the narrative is haunted by the universal themes of loss and abandonment, love and loyalty, as well as racial inter-dependence. In re-imagining the power relations between a white mother and her adopted black daughter, Moffatt's film discloses the cultural anxieties and emotional bonds that inform the intimate relationships between black and white Australians.

In *Heaven*, Moffatt takes up the art of beach-side peering, traditionally privileged as a white, male preoccupation. Using a low-tech, hand-held camera technique, Moffatt goes "hunting" for surfers caught in the awkward act of changing out of their wetsuits, towels modestly wrapped around their waists. As such *Heaven* registers the disavowed voyeurism latent in the home video genre as well as early ethnographic documentary. An intermittent soundtrack of Tibetan chanting and tribal drumming, which silences the animated dialogue between filmmaker and her subjects – as if to reinforce the work's obsession with "looking" – further enhances the mock-ethnographic feel of the video. As the objects of her gaze, Moffatt's subjects are caught in a moment of powerlessness, whereby their strutting performances and attempts at bravado disclose a deeper unease about the exposure of their naked

bodies before the camera. Encouraging her subjects to play up to the camera, egging them on in their exhibitionistic display of masculinity, Moffatt presents their changing routine as an urban erotic war dance, ironically registering the hierarchies of cultural difference that have produced the erotically fetishised body of the indigenous other. Cloaked in his black wetsuit, Moffatt's tribal surfer also uncannily evokes the minstrel tradition in early American popular culture, whereby the blackface performances of white men discloses the sexual fetishisation of the black, male body. Here the reminder of racial fetishism, a process of disavowal implicated in regimes of the visual, discloses the dual strategy of "both representing and not-representing the tabooed, dangerous or forbidden object of pleasure and desire" (Hall, 1997: 268). As Kobena Mercer suggests "white ethnicity constitutes an "unknown" in contemporary cultural theory – a dark continent that has not yet been explored" (1994: 217). In this context Moffatt's representation of the black bodied white surfer unfolds a complex intercorporeality that has shaped the cultural identity of both indigenous and non-indigenous subjects. It also highlights white ethnicity's disavowal of the corporeal at the expense of an anthropological investment in the labelling and categorization of the black body. In her "humble" home video, Moffatt transforms the visual codes that have traditionally defined men as connoisseurs of looking and women as their preening objects of visual gratification. "Lovingly" compiling his image as a serialized and exoticized figure for display and consumption, Moffatt makes visible the white heterosexual male body in a way that unmasks the enigma of whiteness as it has come to be constituted in the relations between indigenous and non-indigenous subjects.

In taking up a pleasurable viewing position, Moffatt returns the gaze, highlighting the absence of indigenous female viewing positions in the history of Australian visual culture. In a way then, *Heaven* performs a strange kind of inversion of cultural shame; replacing the shame that has cloaked the black body of indigenous culture (a shame often painfully registered in autobiographical accounts of indigenous women's experience of colonisation) with the white male body's own performance of shame. In this way, the video's title seems to function as an ironic reflection of the ethereal and transcendent nature of the white body; its heavenly status conferred through a conscious abjection of the black body. In exploring the enigma of white heterosexual male culture Moffatt makes "whiteness strange" and in the process disrupts the cultural authority historically located in the colonial gaze.

While the project of making "whiteness strange" lies at the core of the field of "whiteness studies", what Moffatt's work unfolds is a complex dynamic of shame and desire in the intimate relations of indigenous and non-indigenous subjects. In his introduction to *White*, Richard Dyer asserts that "[a]ll concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality"(20) Therefore, he argues, the conceptual understandings of race have come to be categorised through genealogical as well as biological definitions: firstly through the idea of origins and bloodlines and secondly through detailed classification of individual bodies. While a genealogical understanding of the white race sought to define particular characteristics inherent in the lineage of whites, a biological approach produced a countervailing discourse that moved toward the racial categorisation and pathologisation of non-whites. Dyer writes:

Biological concepts of race appear more stable and grounded than genealogical ones, especially in the scientific age, yet they actually created problems for the representation of white people. On the one hand they reinforced the inescapable corporeality of non-white peoples, while leaving the corporeality of whites uncertain...(24).

This uncertainty spills out into an anxiety which manifests itself in terms of the unrepresentability of the white race so that the distinguishing feature of whites came to be defined through the unseen qualities of "spirit" and "genetically conceptualised intelligence" According to Dyer,

what makes whites different, and at times uneasily locatable in terms of race, is their embodiment, their closeness to the pure spirit that was made flesh in Jesus, their spirit of mastery over their and other bodies, in short the potential to transcend their raced bodies"(24-25).

While the historical power of whiteness stems from the imperial spread of Christianity with its largely dualistic conception of mind and body, the evacuation of the white body and its replacement with "spirit" relegated desire and the corporeal to the "dark" underside of its cultural consciousness. As such desire became one of the "dark" sins against which pure white spirit must assert itself. Such a disavowal of the body meant that representation of the white body came to be defined through the paradox of visibility and invisibility (Dyer, 39) In other words, whiteness itself is a curiously empty construct, which needs to be constantly reinforced through a series of visual representations that artificially ensure the dominance of a white social power structure. One of the strengths of Dyer's analysis for my reading is his emphasis on the ways in which the institutionalization of technology, particularly visual technology, is racist.

Through its historical referencing of visual cultural artifacts and forms, (ethnographic film in *Heaven*, portrait and landscape painting in *Nice Coloured Girls* and early cinema in *Night Cries*) Moffatt's work continually reminds us of the impact of racial stereotypes on our collective consciousness. In dwelling on the erotic and familial relations between indigenous and non-indigenous subjects in the past and in the present, Moffatt discloses the precarious and mythical basis of the biological and genealogical constructions of whiteness: because bloodlines were disturbed and biological accounts of race reveal an intense fascination/desire for the other. In *Heaven*, Moffatt takes as her focus the everyday eroticism of the body as well as the everyday connections *between* bodies. While Moffatt's scrutiny of the eroticism of everyday rituals serves to dislodge the racial narratives that represent the indigenous female subject as "exotic" and sexually available for consumption by colonial male subjects, it also hints at the disavowed eroticism expressed in the colonial scrutiny of the indigenous body, particularly its desire to measure, classify and photograph the black body, a body always imagined as abject and other, as uncivilised and unproductive at the same time intensely desirable. In *Heaven*, the wetsuit, the protective black skin of the surfer, functions as a tropological marker for the disavowed racial body. As such the video ironises whiteness as the racial identity that constitutes itself through its disavowed otherness. The intense scrutiny of Moffatt's ethnographic gaze as she films and contemplates this peculiarly beachside ritual serves as a reminder of the colonial gaze of white male anthropologists who documented the naked and semi-naked bodies of indigenous subjects. The "scientific" obsession with documenting the racialised body reveals what Stuart Hall has called an "alibi" for the voyeuristic pleasure in looking at the sexualised body of the other, a pleasure that exposes the illicitness of desire within white ethnic culture:

Ethnology, science, the search for anatomical evidence here play the role as the "cover", the disavowal which allows the illicit desire to operate. It allows a double focus to be maintained – looking and not looking – an ambivalent desire to be satisfied. What is declared to be different, hideous, "primitive", deformed, is at the same time being obsessively enjoyed and lingered over *because* it is strange, "different", exotic. (268)

If whiteness has become so normalised to the point of invisibility, Moffatt's project here seems to cut across its very inscrutability by making it strange. In exposing the fragility of her subject's egos, emotions and identifications as they participate in and perform the rituals of surfing culture, Moffatt draws attention to the precarious cultural power invested in masculinity. In making whiteness strange, Moffatt makes visible the white heterosexual male body, "lovingly" compiling his image as a serialised and exoticised figure for display and consumption. While the film takes pleasure in the ironic "whiteness" of heaven, a place of earthly angels, stripped of their clothes or wetsuits, it nevertheless subtly discloses the political unconscious of white ethnicity, primarily its disavowed eroticism at the expense of the racial other. As such *Heaven* can be seen as subversive ethnographic practice that redefines the "looking relations" and libidinal desires between filmmakers and those being filmed. While Moffatt's idea of heaven may be a tanned muscly surfer caught in a state of undress, beneath the wry audacity of her gaze lurks the darkness of white shame implicit in the disavowed eroticism central to the anthropological "study" of indigenous culture as well as the implicit shame of the naked white body that has served to define the very terms of racial difference.

But finally what are we to make of the voyeuristic humour of the video? In his discussion of Primo Levi's account of his experience of Auschwitz in *If This is a Man*, Adam Phillips notes that what is striking about Levi's initial impressions of the concentration camp is his inability to believe that what he experiences could be in anyway true. In search of an explanation for the unbearable and unfathomable logic of cruelty that is Auschwitz, Levi concludes that it must be some of kind of joke (Phillips, 2002:36). What Phillips uncovers in his reading of Levi's initial response that he and all the others in the camp are being laughed at, is the way in which humour or mockery reveals an absurd kind of truth:

The absurd truth that comedy uncovers... is not that really we are undignified and far from important (let alone self-important) in the larger scheme of things. It is simply that we are always other than what we want to be; that we don't look the same as we look to ourselves. For mockery to work, something about a person has to be exposed, usually something they would prefer to conceal from themselves and others because it is at odds with the person they would rather be... (37)

In *Heaven*, humour uncovers the absurd logic of whiteness; its capacity to convey both an all-encompassing presence as well as its complete absence as an identifiable racial category. Although shame continually threatens to disrupt the humour of her video, at its core *Heaven* is also a shamelessly indulgent performance of flirting. While shame is grounded in an overt corporeal materiality, flirting is invariably grounded in an economy of superficiality and uncertainty. As Jacqueline Rose suggests: "Shame has a visceral quality.... People turn red with shame, are "flooded" by shame, as though shame – rather like the sexuality it can also cow into submission – brings the body too close to the surface..." (2003:1). Flirting, on the other hand, signals no immediate corporeal marker. Its manifestations lie in the more performative pleasures of curiosity, of tentative and playful manoeuvres. Rather than solely

ground the erotic display of her masculine bodies in shame, Moffatt creates a playfully uncertain intimacy between herself and her subjects, which underscores what Adam Phillips defines as flirtation's capacity to sustain a wilfully uncommitted kind of pleasure and interest. He writes:

The generosity of flirtation is in its implicit wish to sustain the life of desire; and often by blurring, or putting into question the boundary between sex and sexualization. Flirting creates the uncertainty it is also trying to control; and so can make us wonder which ways of knowing, or being known, sustain our interest, our excitement, in other people (1994, xvii-xviii).

In sustaining "the life of desire" between her raced and sexed subjects, Moffatt reveals the fantastic and ordinary trajectories of intercultural desire. That is, her flirtatious performance releases the anthropological gaze from its erotic disavowal or what we might call the shameful sexuality it has attempted to cow into submission — to use Rose's phrase. In exploring the uncertainties of intimacy between indigenous and nonindigenous subjects, Moffatt's work discloses the pleasures and curiosities implicit in the history of colonial and postcolonial relations in a way that moves beyond the reified cultural scripts of oppression that have long ceased to sustain our interest, or our excitement.

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