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DisOrientations: Thinking through Lines of Desire in the Visual Artwork of Jordache A. Ellapen

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Abstract

This article examines the artwork series *Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy* (2011–2016) by South African Indian film studies scholar Jordache A. Ellapen. Ellapen's work stages intimate photographic portrayals of queer bodies-of-colour, overlaid on family album photographs and Indenture and apartheid documents categorising bodies, along with images of objects and landscapes. This visual cartography speaks of bodies at the intersection of race-gender-sexuality-class-nationalism-(religio-)ethnicities and the complicated subjectivities it renders. The work looks at Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation and José Estaban Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" to follow the lines of Ellapen's work and the ways its stagings make one aware of one's own disOrientations, as well as how it disidentifies with the naturalised performativities of dominant identity constructions. The article proposes that allowing oneself to follow such lines of desire permits one to find proximity to identities that are positioned as Othered and rather reflect the complex formations of the everyday.

Keywords: Jordache A. Ellapen; South African Indian; *Queering the Archive*; queer bodies-of-colour; sexual orientation; desire; performative photographic stagings; disOrientation

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The Power of the Erotic
for JORDACHE, by Betty Govinden[1]

From Deep within your loins
Rises a power
Beyond words and thoughts
the dead habit of decorum,
Beyond the empty and hollow and plastic—
The pornography of sensation.

You rail against the reins of Reason
and Rationality
Cutting the life-blood,
The air we breathe …
You rail against the life of dead surfaces
and gloss
The travesty of freedom

You rail against the hollow men
And women
On the pyre of ascetic
self-immolation
Denying the cosmic lifeforce
The muse and music of the universe

The poem above is the first half of a 2016 creative response by literary scholar and poet Betty (Devarakshanam) Govinden to the body of artwork entitled *Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy* (2011–2018) by film scholar Jordache A. Ellapen. While there is a significant age gap between these two creatives, they share a South African Indian[2] locationality and positionality—both (like myself) were raised in KwaZulu-Natal and are influenced by black-African feminists and critical race theorists, using both theory and practice to convey the complexities of being part of an Indian diaspora.[3] In this poem, Govinden uses black feminist work on the erotic (particularly the work of African

1 Unpublished poem presented at the opening of the exhibition *Re-membering: Memory, Intimacy, Archive*, KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery, Durban, August 15, 2017.

2 In this text I employ the official South African racial categorisations in capitalisation: White, Black, Indian, Coloured, and Chinese, whereas the usage of "black" is meant to denote "blackness" (or "brownness") as a politically affirmative political allegiance in preference to terminology such as "non-white" (but also in relation to the South African category of "previously disadvantaged", which incorporates Black, Indian, Coloured, and Chinese citizens). Where "whiteness" is spoken about as an abstract ideological positioning, it is kept in lowercase.

3 Ellapen perhaps follows Govinden (2008, 49) in his ideas of "diaspora" as not a romanticised harkening back to an Indian motherland, but rather a "politics of location" in which the "positionalities of peoples of Indian origin are inflected by very different histories and any present affiliations should also focus on present and future challenges." I think all three of us are very firm in the groundedness of our African identities and affiliations, while also being aware of our Indian roots, British and European colonialisations, and American influences, which lead to particular formations of cultural identities when coupled with religious, class, and educational backgrounds.

American Audre Lorde on the power of the erotic) to recast the homo-eroticism in Ellapen's work as power—creative, life-giving, and sustaining power, a power that infuses our very being, wrenching back the erotic from the two-dimensional superficiality of pornography and sex, of glossy magazines, from Western rational sexual conservative thought and Indian ascetic denialism. For, indeed, Ellapen's first foray into the visual arts in this series troubles many orientations and perspectives through the lens of the South African Indian queer erotic body.[4]

Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy comprises approximately fifteen digital photographic prints and the short feature video *cane/cain* (2011). The photographic prints show a montage of naked Black, brown, and White male bodies facing towards or away from each other, sometimes in moments of passionate homo-erotic intimacy, which is given added weight by the fairly large size of some of these prints (199.9 cm x 100 cm). These staged images are overlaid on family album studio portraits or spliced with images of Indian pass documents and archival images of Indentured Indians,[5] as well as images of sugar cane, mangoes, or the Indian ocean (see figures 1–7).

At this point, this article should perhaps refer back to some point of origination, which in this case should start with how Ellapen realised he was gay and came out to his family, which is no small feat in South African Indian communities. Except Ellapen has no "coming out" story.[6] He knew he was gay as a young boy, and so perhaps did his family and peers at school, even though no one discussed it. He's not an effeminate or "macho" guy; instead, he comes across as just another Indian man from Tongaat, which probably lends itself to more stereotypes than does his gayness. (Durban Indians would sometimes mock Tongaat Indians for being more naïve, because Tongaat was a much smaller farming community about an hour away from Durban.) For Ellapen himself, it

4 It is to be noted that various traditional cultures in India have references to homosexual sex acts (seen in various temples across India) and that gender fluidity was not only accommodated within society, but stemmed also from religious accommodations. See Tharoor (2018).

5 After the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, other forms of labour systems were instituted, including the British Indian Indenture system from the 1830s, in which Indians were moved from India to various parts of the world (including the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa) to work on tea and sugar plantations, in coal mines, and on railroads. Indians first came to South Africa in small numbers as slaves via the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and many became incorporated into the local Cape Town populations), while the 1860 British Indenture System moved a significant number of Indians to what was then the Natal province (now KwaZulu-Natal), which resulted in entire communities of Indian areas. Poor Indians who came to Natal under the Indenture System were in bondage for seven years to their respective owners/plantations, but were often still so poor after seven years that they continued in their contracts for another seven years. The British Indian Indenture System was finally ended in 1917, owing to pressure from Indian nationalists. The longer history of Indians in South Africa via the Cape is not often acknowledged, with commemorations focusing on the 1860 date. For histories of Indian Indenture in South Africa, see Bhana and Brain (1990), Desai (1996), Martin (1999), Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000), Govinden (2008), and Desai and Vahed (2010).

6 All autobiographical information used in this article was provided by Ellapen during a Skype interview on February 13, 2017.

is not gayness that is the acceptance story, but rather that of being an Indian growing up in apartheid South Africa.

It is hard to believe, but it was possible back then to grow up—in a country with a seventy per cent Black South African population—in a completely Indian environment, unaware of the segregationist policies of the Afrikaner government that ranked Indians below the White colonialists, and higher than Coloured and Black South Africans. It was also possible to grow up in such a community and know of the basics of the British Indenture System that transported poor Indians to South Africa in the 1860s to work on the sugar plantations when the Black Zulu population revolted—the replacement of one poor community with another setting up lasting suspicion and fraught relations. We learnt nothing of the horrors of the Indenture System at school, nor of the mass activisms against restrictive racial laws by these poor Indians; instead, we learnt about "free" passenger Indians who came as doctors, lawyers, and tradesmen and who settled between Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. The most prominent figure among them was, of course, Mahatma Gandhi.[7] Much local history and knowledge remains in the province of oral tales, jokes, and myths. Therefore, to grow up as an Indian in South Africa from Indentured ancestors is to have grown up in a vacuum of one's history, cut off from the motherland and often from one's indigenous languages, and in a precarious relationship with your adopted country, in which the majority of the population is defined as a colour (Black, White, Coloured), but you are labelled a foreigner: Indian.

7 Govinden (2008, 21), a well-respected scholar, notes her own deficient history in this regard: "Having passed through the apartheid educational system in South Africa, I was deprived of an inclusive and critical education in Indian history and literature, and in literary criticism from a post-colonist perspective. Sensitive to apartheid's ethnocentric categorisings, I myself eschewed, in past decades, any serious study of Indian writings and history." When I was ten years old (Grade 5), in an all-Indian primary school in the 1980s, we learnt of Gandhi and the notion of *Satyagraha* (passive resistance). In history classes at high school between 1990 and 1991, we learnt of the British Indian Indenture System only in relation to how it moved Indians to South Africa. The focus was on Mahatma Gandhi and the passive resistance movement. I did not learn the names of major Indian activists in the various South African protests nor of Indian participation in the anti-apartheid movement. (We did, however, learn extensively of Afrikaner history.) My parents, who had to leave school at ages eight years and ten years old, could not tell us of these details, but did pass on oral narratives of the suffering of Indians under the Indenture System and the antagonisms set up between Blacks and Indians by White colonists in Natal. In writing this article I asked my niece (who is in her third year of university) and my nephew (who is in Matric) what they had learnt of South African Indian history. Their responses were as porous as mine, and neither can say much besides Gandhi or of any nuance of the Indenture System. My nephew said that his history classes focused on anti-apartheid history, with an erasure of South African Indian participation. Thus, despite the extensive South African Indian scholarship that there is in various South African archives, this has not filtered down to the teaching of these knowledges to most South African Indians. Part of this vacuum has served to ground Indian identity within South Africa and refute any Indian nationalism, but, given the continued precarity of South African Indians in the country, it is important for all South Africans to know of this history. This should encompass not only the differences between passenger Indians and merchant/professional Indians who arrived in South Africa, but the continued immigration of South Asians to South Africa (and the class differences that have ensued).



Figure 1: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Family Portrait IV, Plantation Memories* (2018). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 54.9 cm x 109.2 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).



Figure 2: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Family Portrait I, Chennai/Tongaat* (2017). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 199.9 cm x 100 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).



Figure 3: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Feeling Brown II: Charous and Cane* (2016). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 54.9 cm x 117.3 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).

If we want a beginning to Ellapen's story, it is the family album that provides one. Ellapen talks of becoming interested in his family images as a film student, particularly because of the fact that this historical record starts off with a number of black-and-white photographic studio images of Indian folk whom nobody in his family knows. See, for instance, his work *Family Portrait IV, Plantation Memories* (2018) (Figure 1) and *Family Portrait I, Chennai/Tongaat* (2017) (Figure 2). These people could be his distant family, but their names have been lost, like the ancestors cut off forever by an ocean and the lack of funds over 150 years. But it is also the lines of their bodies, as they stand together in a huddled mass (reminiscent of the kind of huddling one would find on passenger ships), pushed together by the studio photographer as he tries to get them all in the frame, that tell us they are intimate family, irrespective of whether they share blood relations. Ellapen (2022, 103) says of this tactile subject-forming experiencing through the photographic medium:

> I remember how family members touched and engaged with the photographs; how they held them in their hands as they traced the figure of a cousin, parent, uncle or friend who had become distant with the passage of time. This intimate archive, an "archive of feeling"—to evoke Ann Cvetkovich (2003)—allowed me to access an alternative understanding of Indianness in South Africa. This archive—the family archive—reveals a history of the indenture experience, which has been strategically rendered invisible and irrelevant to contemporary South Africa. Scholars of family photography argue that the family photo album functions as a visual genealogical map, a "compass, for we seek from it our own historical orientation" (Nair 2020: 28).

In other black-and-white photographs we see stylish Indian men posing in the fashionable garb of the day (Figure 3). It is these photographs that raised questions in Ellapen's mind about the relationship between these men. He knows them as friends

and uncles of the family but, inspired by his own narrative, in which his queerness is never spoken about but not hidden either (much like the Indian Indenture narratives), Ellapen began wondering about the possibility of intimate gaps between the bodies of these men.

In these staged photographic studio portraits, the lines of the bodies are composed into some kind of symmetry by the photographer: tallest persons on the side, with descending heights towards the person seated in the middle of the frame on the chair; one person seated and another standing next to him, with his arm draped on the chair to allow the eye to move from one to the other by following the arm; the trio closely grouped (see Figures 4 and 5). These body lines tell us something about body-kin relationalities, too, with men at the back and women at the front with children; friends trying to capture their coolness; lovers posed awkwardly next to each other; portraits of self with the latest hairstyles (Figures 1, 2, 4, and 6). These visual artefacts can be viewed as conveying the "straightness" of heterosexual family relationships—mother, father, children, and grandparents—and yet, in the styling and composition, there are also orientations that do not adhere to the heteronormative. These are the lines of "uncles", "aunts", "cousins", and "friends", whose lineage and acquaintance can never be coherently explained but are, nonetheless, given legitimation through this naming.



Figure 4: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Brownflesh II* (2017). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 100 cm x 66.6 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).

During the installation of the exhibition *Queering the Archive* at the KwaZulu-Natal Society for the Arts (KZNSA) Gallery in Durban in 2017, in the hours before the opening we aimed a yellow light at Ellapen's work *Brownflesh II* (Figure 4), which brought out the beautiful warm brown tones of the two male bodies in three poses: closely facing each other (as if "sizing" each other), facing away from each other, and embracing each other in the moment before their lips touch. We then decided to aim a

cold white light towards the work as well and I will never forget the moment that took my breath away, as the silver-toned archival images of Ellapen's male ancestors, posed in groups of two, came leaping out of the background. It quite literally captured what Ellapen had been wrestling with: trying to find the unspeakable in lives that came before, that continue to haunt us until someone acknowledges them. Jasbir Puar (2007, xxi), in *Terrorist Assemblages*, thinks of temporalities through space-time as a kind of haunting, which she regards as "also a methodological approach that keeps an eye out for shadows, ephemera, energies, ethereal forces, textures, spirit, sensations." By layering his images in this way, Ellapen allows the past in, not as a linearity leading into the present and the future, but as an ever-present that disrupts the orientation of the family album.



Figure 5: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Family Portrait II, Sugarcane Coolies* (2017). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 54.9 cm x 109 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).

In her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Sara Ahmed interrogates the notion of "orientation", which has become acceptable lingo in the language of sexuality. Pulling apart the various metonyms that "orientation" comes to stand for—direction, geography, lines, migration, destination, gravitation—Ahmed (2006, 2) questions,

> What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as orientated? What difference does it make "what" or "who" we are orientated toward in the very direction of our desire? If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with. After all, queer geographers have shown us how spaces are sexualized ...

Ahmed here uses the body and its basic system of desiring as a locus from which to begin her relationality interrogations, for the body is a mash of determinants, including

the biological, psychological, emotional and socio-economic-cultural-political histories, but it has also become one of the determinants of societal discourses, as elucidated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 11, 29) in *Epistemology of the Closet*:

> In arguing that homo/heterosexual definition has been a presiding master term of the past century, one that has the same, primary importance for all modern Western identity and social organization (and not merely for homosexual identity and culture) as do the more traditionally visible cruxes of gender, class, and race … . I would say, true to quite a range of contemporary worldviews and intuitions to find that sex/sexuality *does* tend to represent the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being.



Figure 6: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Brownflesh I* (2016). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 54.9 cm x various widths (Image courtesy of the artist).

This body is relational to the space and time it inhabits; it moves in, and with, other bodies, objects, and the environment and therefore shows, in Ahmed's (2006, 4) words, "how 'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device". At the core of Ahmed's and Kosofsky's discourse is the idea that orientation is not simply given, but is a series of structuring structures that brings us into (heteronormative) alignment, agreement, and a sense of order and familiarity: "Familiarity is what is, as it were, given, and which in being given 'gives' the body the capacity to be orientated in this way or in that. The question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (Ahmed 2006, 7). Relationally, at least since the start of the twentieth century in the West (and its extensions into the Empire's colonies), homosexuality has been set up as a binary to heterosexuality (Kosofsky 1990).

The private family space (as an extension of the public governing system) is, of course, one of these structuring institutions that orientates us and devises what is *familiar* and aligns us with larger national or religious doctrines. According to Ahmed, how we are orientated shows how our bodies line up, or are made to line us up, and what lines we follow—until we don't. Cultural productions are full of narratives in which the sense of the familiar can become unfamiliar, in which people no longer feel at home and become disorientated, where the family line is no longer straight but cuts across, where lineage is no longer assuredly directional. This could be the story of a feminist. Or a queer. Or a story of questioning race, religion, ethnicity, or class. It could be a migration story.

For Ellapen, all of these story lines intersect. As a South African Indian queer-of-colour, his story is one which sees the intersection of all these elements of geography (southern Africa), race (Indian), class (Indentured and middle class), religio-ethnicity (Christian Tamil), and migration (family migration under colonialism and his own migration to the USA and Canada). None of these categories seemingly sit well together and, yet, as reality does, it creates complex individuals and societies whose habitual conflicts are perfectly "normal" in real life, as reflected in the naming of "South African Indian". This gives an idea of how geo-specificity comes to impinge on race-class-ethnicity to create configurations of national identities. The geo-specificity allows the differentiation of Indians across the diaspora and even within Africa, where migrant Indians have ambiguous relationships with indigenous populations, as well as with the motherland.

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One wonders what it is like to grow up in a family where you don't have to hide your sexuality, but where it is also never discussed (Sedgwick [1990, 22] speaks of gayness as "the open secret"). Ellapen says he never had this discussion with his family, because the straight children never had to go to parents and confess their "straightness", so why should he? Ellapen's definitional struggle lay, instead, with race. He says from as young as he can remember, race was his main trauma. Being a dark-skinned Indian boy from Tongaat meant that, even during his youth, Ellapen attempted to lighten his skin with skin-whitening creams. This testifies to the insidiousness of White supremacy conditioning even in segregated communities (added to the history of colourism within Indian communities that prizes fair skin as opposed to dark skin).[8]

8 The issue of colourism and racism has a long, contentious history within the Indian sub-continent. While some see colourism as a sub-category of racism, others note pre-colonial Indian colourisms in traditional texts as well as popular myths (not tied strictly to caste either) upon which British colonial racism sedimented. Nina Kullrich (2022) argues that the white/black binary is less useful than a fairness/darkness binary, while Marium Javaid Bajwa, Imke von Maur, and Achim Stephan (2023) note the continuing devastating effects of colourism on Indian communities. While the caste system did not take hold in South African Indian communities, colourism was and is still a strong feature, with Indian traditional ideas that value fair skin finding a home alongside South Africa's colonial and apartheid racism.

University studies in Johannesburg offered Ellapen some important avenues: he was able to start exploring his sexuality; he began interacting with other racial groups; he gave up his studies in medicine for a degree in the dramatic arts; and he became aware of critical race, black feminist, and queer studies, which gave him a language for the personal conflicts he was dealing with.

Ellapen says he was bothered by the hierarchies of desire in the gay clubs he went to in Johannesburg, which was limited to young Indian men and older White men, with very few Black and Coloured men in these settings. He often felt that he did not connect with these Indian queers, who disavowed their "Indianness" but whose dynamic with Whiteness still seemed informed by a kind of Orientalist exotic. At the same time, Ellapen felt alienated from queer visuality, which was limited to White representations, lacking Black and brown bodies. Where were the images of people who looked like him? Ellapen could not separate the racial and class politics of South African post-apartheid society from his desiring. What happens when queer lines do not line up with other forms of dominant queerness? What does it mean to be marginalised multiple times, even within marginalised communities? What kind of aesthetics could attend to his life at the intersection of so many categories?

During his postgraduate studies in the USA, a teaching assignment allowed Ellapen to make a short feature film. Ellapen says he knew he wanted his film to be about desire and eroticism, to portray people who looked like him, to have naked brown bodies in a sex scene shot in Fordsburg (a predominantly "Indian" area in the Johannesburg city centre), and to show subtle racisms, homophobia, and xenophobia. In the film *cane/cain* (2011), two young men of Asian descent find refuge with each other during the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The violence was chiefly reported as attacks against black African migrants which included shop looting and burning, as well as the harassment and killing of black Africans, but less attention was given to Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Chinese migrants affected by the wave of xenophobic attacks. In *cane/cain*, a young Pakistani man is given shelter by a young South African Indian shopkeeper during this violence. The South African attends to the migrant and, in doing so, they have a sexual encounter. What happens thereafter is unclear.

We can read that the South African Indian shopkeeper's family history of migration allows him to help another Asian migrant (the Biblical murderous Cain, after all, asks God if he is his brother's keeper). Ellapen's Christian commentary is a reminder that, indeed, we are our brother's keeper, but in a subtle scene in the shop he shows the hypocrisy of whom we label as "kin" and which family lines count. In a fleeting scene, a silent Black South African woman is treated callously by her South African Indian shopkeeper employer. This reminds us of the limitations of his empathy, which extends to bodies that look like him and who have similar histories and lineage, but is not for everyone. It also powerfully communicates the history of antagonism that British and Dutch colonialism structured between local Black and Indian populations and the racism

that continues unabated between these communities.[9] It is a reminder of the multi-level oppressions that exist within marginalised communities. Moreover, in a world where even desire and its expression can be violent and dehumanising, Ellapen's *cane/cain* uses the power of the erotic as a means to connect with a fellow human being in a violent setting. In this it reminds us again of Audre Lorde's powerful recuperation of the power of the erotic in her text "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider* ([1984] 2000) as well as her novel *Zami* (1982), in which she recounts coming into her power as an African American lesbian.

A few years ago, my widowed sister, with four children, revealed in a public Facebook spat with someone that she was lesbian and didn't care what anyone thought. Family members began writing to me: Did I see the post, did I know, what did I think? My response was one line: People need to stop surveilling women's bodies, and what my sister does with her body is none of my business. Even with this "liberal" attitude, watching *cane/cain* as a South African Indian cis-gendered visual artist, I realised how this must be one of the first homosexual sex scenes I have seen involving Indian men's bodies. (Bollywood and the kama sutra have idealised images of ideal bodies that one cannot relate to in the everyday.) I felt the scene was a bit awkward and came a little out of nowhere: How do two men figure out so quickly that the other is sexually attracted to them and that sex, therefore, is permissible?

That was my biggest issue with the first season of the US TV series *The L Word* (Chaiken, Abbot, and Greenberg 2004–2009), as I felt it seemed to perpetuate popular culture stereotypes prevalent among hetero-folks like myself, namely that gay people simply got together and had sex within a short time and that sex orgies were normal.

9 In 1949, an incident where an Indian shopkeeper beat a Black worker in the Durban city centre resulted in riots between the two ethnicities. This was further stoked by White Durbanites who were running an anti-Indian programme campaign, accusing the Indians of taking over businesses but also of sexual transgressivity. The police did little to end the violence (Meer 1960). In 1960, Black women protests against the Durban beer halls in Cato Manor and the destruction of their homes and beer businesses by White policemen also saw opportunistic violence by a minority of persons being directed against fellow neighbours in the multi-ethnic district (Meer 1960). In July 2021, riots again began as groups of Blacks stormed Indian households in Phoenix, Durban. This sparked riots across many spaces in Durban and Johannesburg, with businesses being burnt and wares being taken—this coming more than a year into the Covid-19 pandemic and with the stark inequalities among the majority of South Africans deepening. Of concern is that the news media did not report on these private home invasions (which happened across various neighbourhoods in Durban), but only on businesses and malls being ransacked, and did not link this to a larger anti-Indian rhetoric being promoted by politicans such as the Economic Freedom Fighters' Julius Malema or Black First Land First's leader Andile Mngxitama. Investigations were also done into a purported attempted coup against the African National Congress (ANC) government, as electricity, gas depots, and even community radio stations were burned and major highways blocked. (It should be noted, though, that the KwaZulu-Natal province has a continuous history of political assassinations and unrest, where trucks are set alight in protest against African foreign nationals being employed.)

There was no anxiety of whether the person was attracted to them or not, or figuring out how to "make a move on someone", being shy or body conscious, and so forth.

Once *cane/cain* became committed to memory, I began wondering if the video was awkward or if the awkwardness resided in me, *was me*. The image of the two bodies on the bed, lining up horizontally in desire, was "out of line" even for a liberal like me. This scene would have been completely acceptable in a heterosexual encounter (the jarring frames read as "experimental") and yet, lovingly staged, Ellapen's homo-erotic lines disOrientated me as a former colonised apartheid subject. Ellapen (2022, 106) says of these scenes:

> The assemblages, particularly the scenes of sex as art, reflect my desire to feel for and to feel with, across our differences; this is a praxis of care. The scenes of sex as art opens a space to re-imagine the erotic (queer erotics) as a site of disruption, a disruption of the normative racial order of colonial apartheid. These scenes offer an aesthetic of intimacy and connection in a context where these racialized bodies were never meant to feel for, feel with and feel together.

Therein lies the power of the work: to normalise representations of the multiply "Othered", but also to visibilise one's own biases. This work, among a number of others, has made me think through how one comes to approximate with positionalities (pun intended). Positions that stand "close to" or "against" anything are not innate. Instead, we are born into families and societies that have positions for and against something. In the essay "We-All-Fall-Down: Thinking through Lines of Proximity and Ubuntu as Decolonizing Praxis in South African Museum Re-Presentations" (Khan 2020), I speak about how my lower-class upbringing helped me identify with the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and #Shackeville movements[10] in South Africa in the last decade. My experiences of similar struggles moved me closer to the cause of the protestors, as I understood some of what they were going through. In another essay, "In-Memorium/Memento Mori: How Narrativisation and 'Lines of Proximity' Shift Thinking on Gendered Violence" (Khan 2023), I hypothesise whether creative productions can be used as technologies of abuse by creative practitioners that strategically move audiences away from victims towards abusers who, sometimes, have more access to public narration and its dissemination. With Ellapen's work, I wonder about how the ability to feel proximity to someone in following their lines of desire allows for a productive disOrientation.

These homo-erotic lines are a feature throughout Ellapen's digitally montaged photographs, which emerged subsequent to *cane/cain*. Although inspired by the black-

10 The #RhodesMustFall movement took place over 2015 as University of Cape Town students protested in order to remove the statue of the colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from their campus. #FeesMustFall refers to the student protests that took place in October–November 2015 and again in September–November 2016 at public universities across South Africa, calling for the suspension of university fee increases, for free access to higher education, for decolonised curricula, and for an end to the outsourcing of university support staff.

and-white family album photographs, the short film doesn't feature these images, instead using the gaps between bodies to tell the story of imagined agentic desire in private spaces. The "out-thereness" of gayness is evidenced directly in the home space in *cane/cain*, making one wonder about the unrelated aunts or uncles who lived with each other until death. Ahmed's phenomenology makes you consider lines—blood lines, lifelines, parallel lines, vertical lines, horizontal lines, diagonal lines—relationally. How are people made straight? In Ellapen's work, the lines of his naked, racially assembled bodies help us follow a dialogue between them that allows for desire, but also very simply shows how positionality evidences visual hierarchies. For instance, a brown body behind a White body shows how White bodies are structured pre-eminently, with our gaze trained to look at them in familiarity before going to the brown body behind, almost as if it is a shadow (Figures 5, 6, and 7). A Black naked body seen frontally allows us to linger over it and also consume it in familiar ways, perhaps confirming certain stereotypes we hold (Figure 6). But then Ellapen's bodies also stand facing each other in what should seem like male confrontation and assessment; however, instead, when fuelled by desire, this positioning allows them to gaze at each other, in their nakedness, removed from social *accoutrements*, locked in this need for recognition in the eternity of these still images (Figure 4). What could at other times be seen as an oppositional gaze becomes, in this paralleling, seductive. As the lines begin to bend, the shape of homo-erotic desire is allowed to manifest between these bodies as they kiss, caress, touch, and even rest with each other. Desiring, in Ellapen's homo-eroticism, manages to fend off machoism through a delicate intimacy and vulnerability staged between the various bodies on display and the archival images of male homosociality and a feminised centre. (The latter is both the strong presence of Ellapen's mother, whom he refers to often in his writing, and the ways in which Indian men have been feminised under colonialism.)

This is just the first layer of Ellapen's photographs. These studio stagings of homo-eroticism are in conversation with the black-and-white and colour studio portraits from his family album, with archival images of pass documents of Indentured Indians (and, thus, with the pass laws and protests affecting Indians under colonialism and apartheid) (Figure 1). Among these are also stereotypical images associated with Indians: mangoes, sugar cane, and the Indian Ocean. Jennifer González (2008, 5), in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, says that our proximity to objects can result in in them becoming a metonymy for our subjectivities:

> The visual discourse of race involves a conceptual and categorical slippage between the body as object and the body as subject. A parallel slippage occurs when the material culture of everyday life, such as artifacts collected in museums of art and anthropology or forms of commodity production and consumption, participate in the construction of race discourse by supporting processes of subjection. … Just as living humans can be conflated with material culture, so material culture can acquire the racial status of humans. Objects, in other words, can become epidermalized.

Objects like mangoes and sugar cane (and the Indian Ocean, along with saris, samoosas, the kama sutra, and tea) have become stereotypically epidermalised with Indians globally. But far from just using these to "stand in" for Indianness, one can read deeper into them. The warm Indian Ocean is also known as the "kala pani" or "dark waters", referring to it being a deathbed for all those who died on board the Indenture ships that went to Africa and the West Indies, and to the poor conditions that many were escaping in India, only to be thrown into slave conditions on foreign shores. The Indian Ocean is as treacherous as it is sustaining. The sugar cane plant, which provides sweetness across the world, hides the difficult labour that goes into its planting and harvesting and the making of cane spirits—a local alcohol which has caused misery in many Indian households. Likewise, the humble fruit that is the mango is loaded with symbolism. In Indian cultures, we eat it not only when it is ripe and sweet, but equally so when it is green and just slightly starting to ripen. We pickle it or eat it raw with chilli powder and salt sprinkled on it (sometimes, older women would take a woman's craving for this as a sign of pregnancy). The sweetness of the mango and the saltiness of the spice and salt causes an instant contraction of the sides of one's tongue: an appropriate metaphor for the survival strategies of our Indian ancestors, but also speaking to the ambiguities and contradictions of our lives and our open secrets.

In this melange of images, we can find evidence of what Ahmed (2006, 58) talks about as the work of queer phenomenology and her questioning of orientations:

> Orientations shape what bodies do, while bodies are shaped by orientations they already have, as effects of the work that must take place for a body to arrive where it does. Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain "objects" in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with.

By carefully selecting his range of object choices—be it physical objects, kinship, or sexual desire—Ellapen manages to show another level of disOrientation: his disidentification with Orientalist discourse and stereotypes into his careful arrangement of everything within the photographic studio space and the two-dimensional pictorial space. In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said ([1978] 2003) discusses how the sexuality of Orientals (covering a vast surface of the earth, from the Middle to the Far East) is framed in failed ways—that is, as not "measuring up" to the white colonist's masculinity, as being excessive, through notions of "perversity" (paedophilia and bestiality). The Orient, like Africa, is the repository of Western Enlightenment man's sexual repression, a stereotype of sexual deviance, too-muchness, difference, and lack. (Frantz Fanon [(1952) 2008], in *Black Skin, White Masks*, argues that in the European mind, the black man moves from having a big penis to being the penis.) According to Sedgwick (1990, 29), following Foucauldian studies on the history of Western sexuality, all of human sexuality is marked by its excessiveness because it is not limited to procreation activities, but homosexuality is still seen as even more excessive. This is further exacerbated by the stereotype that homosexual men might unearth the latent

homosexuality in straight men.[11] How does one deal with one's own image of queerness when one is subsumed by violent stereotypes of the Oriental, African, queer, and migrant Otherness in the USA and Canada? For Ellapen it is to not only visualise his own desires, but to weave the complexities that reside between race-class-gender-sexuality-(religio-)ethnicity-nationality and how identities are forged in this assemblage rather than through a picking apart of these categories.

In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 185) proposes the idea of disidentification with regard to being interpellated by injurious social categories:

> Disidentification is a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been "spoiled" in the majoritarian public sphere. This management is a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self.

Muñoz looks at a number of queer performances in the US where subjectivities are grafted at the nexus of various categories that render them as Others, and where performance is used to visibilise these and to forcefully dis-identify with them, while also negotiating their realities.

Ellapen's *Queering Africa, Queering Picasso* (2015) (Figure 7) is a good example of this. Ellapen stages four bodies of various hues in reference to the Pablo Picasso painting titled *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). *Les Demoiselles* became hailed for its Cubist break with mimetic perspective, harnessing African masks as a Modernist vehicle for the multiple viewpoints that Picasso played with simultaneously in his splicing up of the bodies of the prostitutes. In Ellapen's work, three of the four figures stare at the camera, looking back at the viewers. Unlike Picasso's work, their nakedness and sexuality are neither aggressive nor repulsive, but beautifully lit, carefully draped by cloth or covered by African masks. The bodies all subtly touch and connect and lead the eye through the picture, recreating, in the coding of Western pictorial convention, the public display of homo-eroticism that has been hidden in the West since the volcanic burial of Pompei and Heraculaneum.

The central figure of Ellapen's *Queering Africa* reminds me of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c.1492).[12] Da Vinci's man, measured in his square and circle, refers to a set of measurements using the body itself to measure other parts relationally. For

11 Sedgewick (1990, 19–20) speaks of this as "homosexual panic", which has been used a defence by homophobic individuals in cases of violence against homosexuals.

12 In da Vinci's notes it is called "The Proportions of the Human Figure after Vitruvius", according to Frank Zöllner's (2015) book *Leonardo*. Also see a description of the measurements in Richman-Abdou and Stewart (2023).

"realistic" drawing and painting of the human body, artists still use such modes of measurement. The queer body is, in this instance, not a measurement of Otherness, but a symbol of humanness. Homosexuality here can be likened to the overloaded signifiers of the African/black body. Fanon ([1952] 2008) observes that white Western reactions to the epidermalised black body regard it not as "human", but instead as something entirely different, that the scopic visual regime registers it as a "new genus".[13] Sedgewick (1990, 9), too, notes that Michel Foucault, in examining twentieth-century discourses, finds homosexuality separated into a "new genus": "at the same time as it continues to be true—becomes increasingly true—that, for a crucial strain of Western discourse, in Foucault's words 'the homosexual was now a species'."



Figure 7: Jordache A. Ellapen, *Queering Africa, Queering Picasso* (2015). Digital pigment print on Fine Art Baryta, 58.5 cm x 83.3 cm (Image courtesy of the artist).

13 "I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!" (Fanon [1952] 2008, 87).

Ellapen's Vitruvian men in *Queering Africa, Queering Picasso* expose the multiple oppressions queer bodies-of-colour are subjected to, while at the same time showing private hidden or invisibilised visualities that are not "Other," not "excessive," not deviant, not dominant, but rather foundational. To view them as such requires a decolonising perspective—that is, seeing Africa as the cradle of all humankind, sexuality as a biological imperative, race as a construction, and realist and abstract art as belonging to cultures across the world and not just to Western art movements. Unlike Picasso's work, which was revolutionary in Europe for its lack of pictorial spatial depth, Ellapen's *Queering Africa, Queering Picasso* creates space for homo-eroticism. His carefully positioned Indian body is at the front in a three-quarter pose, which angles his body in such a way that it reads as sculptural and, therefore, three-dimensional, refusing flattening. This is also enhanced by the theatrical black box space within which the figures are photographed—they seem to emerge from the space; they contemplate, desire, and rest with each other. Each image looks like it could be a still from a play, clearly harkening to the performance of identity and its constituents and to the fact that we are re-made in the (re)iteration of such (this space is also a private space that is opened up to the public).

Muñoz harnesses performance studies theorist Richard Schechner's two modalities of performance, namely "performances of transportation" and "performances of transformation". The first, explains Muñoz (1999, 196), relates to the theatre, where "performances of transportation move the spectator from the space of the ordinary world to a performative realm" and the spectator returns to their ordinary world in a similar place to where they started. Performances of transformation (which relate to rituals), says Muñoz (1999, 196–197), "do not merely 'mark' a change, they effect a change through the performative act". Muñoz believes that the queer performances they have studied (and watched since they were a little boy), have the capacity for both. I can attest to such an understanding of the transformative possibilities of creative productions in my own life.

Ellapen, too, believes in such potential. While he understands how the use of the African mask harkens to generalising, essentialist, homogenous tropes of "Africa" and "blackness", he was influenced by the kinds of visual desires evoked by the bodies and masks in the works of photographers Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Robert Mapplethorpe.[14] In his own work, Ellapen uses the "masking" signifier to relate it to intersectional matrices of oppression. The mask, of course, conceals and reveals as its bearer chooses, but in terms of the chosen African masks, it is also a conduit for something larger than the performer/wearer: that something larger is aimed not just at the singular performer, but at the community who bears witness to the performance (we are exposed daily to a plethora of performances as participants and viewers). Ellapen says he struggled with

14 Ellapen acknowledges how problematic Mapplethorpe's work can be in the way it reduces black bodies to sexualised objects, but he says it was also one of his initial introductions to the possibility of seeing bodies-of-colour as desirable. Likewise, Muñoz (1999) recuperates readings of Mapplethorpe's through the slipperiness of the politics of desire.

how to show that contemporary Africans were not just "Black" but Indian, White, and Chinese, and he chose the masks of "Africanness" to show this political positioning and allegiance. At the same time, one sees an Indian elephant statue replete with bananas, strawberries, apples, and coconuts, in a kind of offering to deities which perhaps also hints at the very different histories of sexuality and sexual practices in India that have been suppressed by colonial rule. Ellapen's work is a like a scholar—let's take perhaps Sigmund Freud in this case—theorising on a history of (homo)sexuality surrounded by a multiplicity of object relations (various masks, cloths, fruit, sculptures, bodies). The scholar uses his own body as a starting point (to draw on a metaphor from Ahmed) and, sitting at his desk, surrounded by African, Western, and European objects, directs his line of thought and extends the reach of his body towards other objects, spaces, times, places, and people. In doing so, Ellapen disOrients orientation as any singular thing, showing orientation, lines, and desire as assemblages that do not waiver in their multiplicity, but rather are reflective of the human condition.

In this he follows Puar's idea of queerness as assemblage. Puar prefers the term "assemblage" to "intersectionality", as she says that this latter concept still seems to denote race-gender-class-sexuality-ethnicity-nationalities as separate categories that can be pulled apart and examined at will. This is contrary to the foundational impulse of intersectionality, namely that these categories are intertwined in ways that can't be dealt with separately.[15] Instead, Puar (2007, 205) posits:

> Queerness as an assemblage moves away from excavation work, deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects, and, instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of which queerness importantly is and does), it underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations. This foregrounding of assemblage enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects and effects to each other.

Puar's (2007, 211) idea of queer assemblage as "a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks" is the kind of visuality that Ellapen is striving for in his search for a queer diasporic aesthetic: one that layers, blends, bleeds; that superimposes and juxtaposes narratives and visual styles; that finds a way for a haunting of the past-in-the-present and open secrets; and that presents a conceptual challenge for linear, singular stories. Sedgwick (1990, 22) says that "it's only by being shameless about the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative."

To see Ellapen's work, however, as just a commentary on homosexuality is to entirely miss the point of his interrogation. As he deals with his assemblage of inseparable social

15 See Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989 defining article, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." (These notions can also be found in Audre Lorde's, bell hooks', and Patricia Hill Collins' work of the same era, but Crenshaw showing this failure of single-axis frameworks in legal case studies gave it a different weighting.)

configurations that make up who Jordache A. Ellapen has come to be, and the life he lives in the spaces and places he has/does, his injunction is not to simplistically accept *any* "straight lines", because, as Ahmed (2006, 9–10) reminds us, "[t]hose who are 'in place' also must arrive; they must get 'here,' but their arrival is more easily forgotten, or is not even noticed." DisOrientation, therefore, is not to be avoided as we question the naturalness of the world at stake, how we built the worlds we did, and also how we can make worlds anew. To do so is an exercise of world-making, according to Muñoz (1999, 200):

> This building takes place *in the future and in the present*, which is to say that disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present. … Our charge as spectators and actors is to continue to disidentify with this world until we achieve new ones.

In a world currently riddled with faux nativist and white supremacy claims, with the continued suppression of various indigenous, migrant, feminist, and gay identities and histories, Ellapen's work is a blueprint for how affective intersectionalities—the in-betweenness of fixed labelling that renders us—are not only the reality that we live, but the kind of futurities we want to imagine and bring into existence. Moreover, like the theories of intersectionality, critical race, decoloniality, Orientalism, black African postcolonialist feminisms, and queer theories, Ellapen fundamentally understands that the work of the imagination, and the cultural narrative forms that emanate from it, creates our proximity to the realities that we manifest through such performative transportations, even as we continue to struggle with phallogocentric languaging and structuring structures that permeate discourses and our everyday lives. Thus, Ellapen's works harnesses the potential of creative visuality that is able to create a multiplicity of simultaneous timeframes and (de)codings that actively intervene in the archive of South African Indians, queer studies, and South African visual culture. What is more, it also foregrounds a historical record of love and desire that is complicated and seduces us into not just following configurations of desire as they bend (and they always have in a country in which White supremacists tried to contain such), but asks us to stand in proximity to the kinds of people we want to be.

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