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Diasporic Memory is Recherche rather than Recuperation

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Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by,
and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.

Stuart Hall

In this day and age, it is increasingly necessary to recognize the importance of cultural memory in minority rights struggles. Questions of how cultural memory is implicated in the construction of identities and diasporic re-presentations of self must be central to any resistance against dominant cultures' mis-representation of Other. As immigrants, our memories of home and who and what we were and could become are crucial, especially in the wake of the identity disorienting consequences of a rapidly changing postmodern landscape. In forming our diasporic memories, we must first recognize that memory is not set or carefully preserved in time waiting for its easy retrieval. It is rather a phenomenon that must be researched, constructed, and re-presented. The re-presentation of our cultural memories is significant to our struggle for voice because "...all representation –whether in language, narrative, image, or recorded sound- is based on memory. Re-presentation always comes after, even though some media will try to provide us with the delusion of pure essence" (Huyssen 1995: 2).

Looking specifically at re-presentation as constructed memory, we find that more and more there is a growing need for critical media literacy, which includes the creation of alternative media representations. Although we, as audiences, are most probably jaded by the constant production, distribution, and our consumption of cinematic imagery, we are not necessarily

literate in this media and how it affects power struggles, daily social practices, and identity construction. Douglas Kellner (1995) passionately argues for the development of media literacy mainly because of the pedagogical nature of media culture that either induces individuals to conform to established organization of mainstream society or provides a resource for the successful empowerment of individuals (and most importantly collectives) against that society. Media literacy is an important project. It is the development of a critical understanding of media manifestations, for example, determining and documenting what kinds of social insights media imagery provides, how it may reproduce and/or contest dominant ideologies, and (in the latter case) how this imagery may be used to “critically read the world”¹ (Freire, 1973).

It is to this end that I will provide a critical analysis of the film “Woman on Top,” as a form of research or *recherché* that provides a rationale for critical media literacy and the creation of alternative media representation. An example of which I will show today in the shape of a documentary sketch called “Diasporic Memory *Recherché*.” Through the haze of my cinematic fatigue, caused mainly by the fact that I am often forced to be a voyeur, looking into white social practices and beliefs (as cinematically re-presented), I want to critically look at how “Woman on Top” as a media artifact represents: 1) Women of African descent; a group that is often absent or misrepresented in both written and cinematic media (hence my voyeurism) and a group that I pertain to. 2) Africa; a continent much maligned and caricatured in the West and a place from which I come.

In America, the cinematic representations of Black women is a significant factor that contributes to the one-dimensional codification of women of African descent; meaning that my subjectivity is often mediated, if not at times defined, by what is represented by the media. Unfortunately, the “function of both black and white women in cinema is most often sexualized,

and for each of them, their representational status is frequently that of repositories for the continuation of their respective 'races'. For black women, conventional patriarchal and Eurocentric notions of femininity have been particularly problematic. This stems from being doubly inscribed with Otherness, as black and female" (Young 1996: 178). This is most definitely the case in most cinematic representations radical or otherwise. We are even faced with a situation where filmmakers working from the margins make movies that are guilty of the same misrepresentations of Black women we would find in mainstream cinema. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) reminds us, in many cases, "the powerless have learned to parrot the language of the powerful," (p. 58)² mainly because "we have all learned our lessons well, and victims not infrequently become fervent abettors of their executioners, living together with the latter in a closed, self-accredited universe of lies... Natives too must be taught in order to be anti-colonialist and de-westernized; they are, indeed, in this world of inequity, the handicapped who cannot represent themselves and have to either be represented or learn how to represent themselves" (p. 59). The film "Woman on Top" (WOTP) by director Fines Torres, and scriptwriter Vera Blasi is a fine example of how we as 'natives' aid and abet our own executors.

I considered the arrival of WOTP to be a primordial return to the worst forms of racist and sexist cinematic representations, using Africans and Latin Americans as fodder for uncritical audiences that do not expect complicated and/or complex representations of Other from the Hollywood big screen. It is prescient in its microcosmic enactment of how economically powerful hegemonic practices create regression in the struggle within the politics of identity and difference, even as we make positive inroads into the politics of representation. In this film the Venezuelan-born female director (Fines Torres),³ as Michael Tunison (2000) says in his review of WOTP, "adopts a candy-shop approach to commercial storytelling, packing her film with

enough sexy stars, bright South American colors and tangy bossa nova tunes to distract viewers from the lame predictability of Vera Blasi's script" (p. 1). Fines Torres provided the Madrid-born actress Penélope Cruz⁴ with a Hollywood starring vehicle that projected Cruz into Hollywood stardom, however, this was conducted on the graves of diasporic Africans and Latin Americans; who were robbed of their diverse and complicated identities by trashy offensive stereotypes. The film attempts to utilize ingredients from the Alfonso Arau (1992) Mexican foreign film smash-hit "Like Water for Chocolate," but unfortunately the filmmaker only manages to cobble together a ridiculous romantic fantasy in the Latin American magical-realist tradition.

The film WOTP comfortably takes on Eric Lott's (1993) notion of a 'racial cross-dressing,' i.e. the white desire and ability to simulate blackness (which also encodes as otherness), as a method for reinstating and sustaining the constructed imaginary of a white identity. WOTP exemplifies the fetishization⁵ of Other in the Hollywood practice of white actors and actresses playing Other-selves always in contrast to the civilized western-self. The fetishistic iconography of Other versus Self and the act of cross-dressing means to establish, in the realm of the social and psychological, political boundaries of spatial power through the imaginary. At the same time the very act itself intends to define sociocultural practices and ritual beliefs of Others as "irrational" and "fetishistic," thus disavowing them as legitimate systems. So, we find that in WOTP there is an eroticisation of 'African religion' in a way that betrays ambivalent attraction and repulsion. In WOTP, Candomblé becomes an "Afro-dysiac"⁶ used to place (fix) and reference Isabella (Penelope Cruz), Toninho (Murillo Benicio), and Monica's (Harold Perrineau Jr.) 'progress' from their primal roots in Salvador de Bahia into the postmodernity of ambiguous (race, gender, and sexuality) San Francisco. WOTP is an account of the civilizing narrative of a 'native' reborn, in the case of Toninho. He transitions from the bossa nova serenading sexist

Latino to a civilized gentleman, who cannot account for his change when asked by Isabella, “Why can’t you have been like this before?” This change is also physically marked by Toninho’s change of clothing from colourful, floral ‘Hawaiian’ shirts to a more conservative grayish sweater. The film pits the ‘primitive’ African gods and superstitions of the majority inhabitants of Salvador de Bahia (belittling the serious practice of Candomblé) against the magic realism of modern love (a la Romeo and Juliet minus the tragic ending), and finds it lacking the qualities necessary for a modern day Third World, white, upwardly-mobile, married couple. African Orishas are ridiculed and misrepresented in this film. I recall an Afro-Cuban friend’s⁷ comment about the inaccuracy or impossibility of the religious practices, e.g., the consultation with a santera over the phone. The Orishas are displayed as unnecessarily demanding and unforgiving of human error, as is revealed to us through Isabella’s communication with Iemanjá. WOTP serves to reflect the harsh reality of Brazil’s myth of racial democracy, which has positioned people of African descent in a contradictory space where the very structural effects of racism are seen to be consequences of an imagined colour of one’s destiny or accidents of birth. Meanwhile, racism in Brazil has denied Afro-Brazilians, especially women, access to education, housing, good jobs, even stable relationships,⁸ and in WOTP also to representation. This is clear when you consider that from an area as populated by people of African descent, as is Salvador de Bahia, what we are offered as main characters are a white Brazilian woman (who is in actuality European), a white Brazilian man (who is at least Brazilian) and an Americanised Afro-Brazilian transvestite man (who is actually African-American).

WOTP is also evidence of how foreign actresses, actors, and filmmakers intentionally or inadvertently deconstruct their identities and talent in order to pander to a narrow white hegemonic understanding of what are Hollywood cinematic representations of Other. So we

have, on the big screen, Antonio Banderas continuously playing the thematically fixed role of the Latin Lover, in contrast to the dynamic characters he has played in Pedro Almodóvar's films; and in typical Hollywood fashion Penélope Cruz appears to be carrying on this tradition. In *WOTP* Cruz plays Isabella, a Brazilian who comes to San Francisco and rises to stardom as a TV chef. Her character Isabella is constructed as a Third World white woman, who is not quite on top; struggling to rid herself of the machismo of Latin American men, the primitive superstitions of African diasporic religious practice, but not the advantages of being 'exotic' so therefore desirable in a western world. Isabella, especially when we see her in the proverbial red dress, is a siren, who's very sweat makes rosebuds bloom. We are never certain whether it is her good looks or her sweet animalistic 'tropical' pheromones that has thousands of white men trailing after her in the streets of San Francisco. "Isabella is as spicy as her Brazilian cooking. Sexy, exotic and utterly enchanting, she melts the hearts of men as fast as her food melts in their mouths" (Ellingson, 2000, p. 1). Through Isabella the audience (mostly men of European descent) are invited to join in the feast of 'eating the Other,' in that the "commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture" (hooks 1992: 21). Isabella is also geographic place. She is what Anne McClintock (1995) calls the persistent gendering of the imperial unknown. She is a boundary marker of imperialism, and an example of the feminizing of land. Thus, *WOTP* repeats a colonizing myth when we are told, "Isabella is Brazil and (naturally) Brazil is Isabella." This mythmaking is symptomatic of white male megalomania and simultaneous anxiety about dangerous marginality that must paradoxically be both integrated and segregated into mainstream culture. Just as Isabella has the magical powers

to seduce us with her touch, smell, voice, and even sweat so to does Brazil seduce us with sight, sound, smell, and physicality: Isabella and by natural association Brazil are the body to the West's mind, in the Cartesian mind/body split.

There is a need for audiences to recognize that Vera Blasi's script not only provides us with gendered racist representations, but also privileges time over space in her modernist narrative of the civilizing process of dis-placed Third World white citizens. Also, as described, the cinematic representations of WOTP use a long line of colonial metaphors, for example, "the continued [problematic] use of the 'dark continent' trope, the metaphorical status of which serves to naturalize a whole set of ideas about Africa, its inhabitants and [indeed] its diaspora" (Young, 1996: 177), which is commonplace for Hollywood films (radical or otherwise). In the final analysis, this film moves beyond problematic to dangerous representations of Other and could be described as a 21st century turn; back to overt neocolonial cinematic racism, masked in the glibness of benign comedy, and produced by Others who have more than risked a complicity with the very terms that they themselves experience violation⁹.

In talking about Black female spectatorship, bell hooks (1992) argues that there is power in looking, because "even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). She further states that all attempts to repress the Black gaze have rather produced in us "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (p. 116). More often than not our experiences when reading mainstream literature or cinema is that of the voyeur looking into white lives or white masqueraders uncritically re-enacting Other lives, thus for us to critically look is to say, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (p. 116). It is also about appropriating and constructing critical and interrogating gazes that look to

analyze mainstream literary or cinematic accounts in order to resist the imposition of dominant ways of looking and knowing, which negate Black representation.

In order to achieve the oppositional gaze that hooks conceptualizes, there is a need for women of African descent¹⁰ to not only develop written cultural critiques or testimonies (both factual and fictional), such as those written by Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Bessie Head, Nawal El Sa'adawi, Sindiwe Magona, Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa, Benedita da Silva, Maryse Condé, Merle Collins, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Lola Young, Sonia Sanchez, Lorraine Hansberry, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Angela Davis, Michelle Wallace, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria T. Hull to name a few, but to also make our own visual representations as have been done by filmmakers such as Gloria Rolando, Julie Dash, Nancy Raimist, and Cheryl Dunye; in order to “employ a deconstructive filmic practice to undermine existing grand cinematic narratives... [and] retheorize subjectivity in the realm of the visual” (hooks, 1992: 130). Therefore, I have begun to learn how to make documentary film as a concrete form of cultural critique because visual representations have pedagogical power; i.e., the ability to inform or misinform viewers at many different levels.

The 15-minute documentary sketch, *Diasporic Memory Recherche* is a cultural critique that I created and will present today. The piece chronicles my personal and symbolic journey through physical space and the memory of time, in an attempt to understand what my identity may be comprised of in diasporic landscapes. In this subjective piece I touch on issues to do with identity, colonization, travel, cultural loss, hybridity, and time-space compression. By recalling past events in a “struggle” to understand my present, I engage in the Asante concept of *sankofa* – reaching into the past to inform the here and after. Thus, also acknowledging that the past is not simply there in memory, but must be articulated to become memory. Memory then becomes

recherché rather than recuperation. In addition, the temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not the past itself, even though memory is dependent on the past. Nowadays, struggles for minority rights are increasingly organized around questions of cultural memory, its exclusions and taboo zones, thus, any “struggle for memory is ultimately also a struggle for history...” (Huysen 1995: 5). It is a struggle that I attempt to resonate in an oppositional documentary gaze that roars my story.

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¹ I use Paulo Freire's (1973, 1996) argument that individuals proceed from analysis to identification of avenues of action to improve their socioeconomic and political power, in anti-authoritarian, dialogical, and interactive ways. It is in this process that they begin to critically read the word (text) and the world.

² This speaks to Audre Lorde's (1984) argument that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. "They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p.112).

³ Interestingly enough Fines Torres' foreign film work, e.g., "Celestial Clockwork" with the brilliant actress Adriana Gil, is much more complex in its representations of characters of Latin American and African descent. As is to be expected people of African descent are symbolized by their connection to black magic, however, Torres gives us wry humour and a more sophisticated version of African religious practice (in this case *Santería*) than the heavyhanded comedic representation of *Candomblé* in *WOTP*.

⁴ Penélope Cruz has had a rich experience as an actress in about 17 foreign films. She began at the young age of 17, in the J.J. Bigas Luna (1992) film "Jamón, Jamón." She continued to play complex female characters in many of these films, e.g., the Oscar-winning "Belle Epoque" (1992), and especially in films made by the Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, such as "Live Flesh" (1997) and the Best Foreign Film Oscar-winner "All About My Mother" (1999). She also obtained American renown with *WOTP*, "The Hi-Lo Country," "All the Pretty Horses," "Blow," "Captain Corelli's Mandolin," "Vanilla Sky," etc.

⁵ Anne McClintock (1995) provides a very interesting and informative account of the roots of the word fetish; from the medieval Portuguese word *feitiço* (which meant sorcery or magical acts), as it was used to control witchcraft and illicit female sexual activity in Europe and the intercultural spaces created on the West African coast by trade relations between radically different cultures, to the hybrid word *fetisso* that entered the English language in 1625 in the context of imperialism and an emerging global economy.

⁶ This is a term coined by Tomás López-Pumarejo.

⁷ This was after watching WOTP. This friend practices *Santería*, which shares similar *Orishas*, practices, and roots with *Candomblé*.

⁸ In a forthcoming Ufahamu publication entitled “Exploding the Myth of Racial Harmony: Afro-Brazilian Female Experiences,” I elaborate on the Brazilian myth of racial harmony and how it particularly affects women of African descent. In that paper I reference a large body of work that theorizes and researches this Brazilian phenomenon.

⁹ This is a reference to Judith Butler’s (1997) take on Gayatri Spivak’s term “an enabling violation.”

¹⁰ I do not want to suggest that the responsibility lies exclusively at this group of women’s door, however, the lioness must tell her own story because the great hunter is always prone to focusing on his conquests (my take on the Lion and Hunter proverb, the origins of which I do not know).