Sensuous movements
Beauty, power and memory in Jordache Ellapen’s Queering the Archive (2018)

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ABSTRACT
Jordache Ellapen’s Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy (2018) is a visual art project that explores erotics as an epistemological and methodological frame to think through race, diaspora, memory, history and desire in/of contemporary South Africa. I argue that Queering the Archive is invested in beauty as a project of sensuous memory, pleasure, movement and relation that works through and against geohistorical logics and conditions of race, diaspora and coloniality. Through a photo essay based on a close reading of the visual art, and a companion piece of an interview with the artist, I argue that Queering the Archive challenges our logics of the legacies of indentureship by centring those bodies who were used as labour and raw matter for global racial sexual capital. Ellapen re-imagines and re-images brown bodies as alive and beautiful in motion and in relation with erotic energy, playful desire and intimate joy. Ellapen crafts relations between colours, textures, forms and genres through mixed media practices, including layering and juxtaposing family photographs with staged photographs. These relations put the photographs in intimate tension and contradiction with one another as much as in beautiful, sensuous motion together, the edges of each highlighted as much as blurred through these relations. I read these relations as evocations and provocations of the histories and memories the photographs are dense with and made fragile by. These histories and memories include indentureship, colonialism and migration as structures and processes of power that shape intimate relations between peoples in South Africa. Ellapen’s focus in this project on
different brown bodies in relation to one another through erotic feeling and touching is embedded within these histories and memories, but these erotics are not determined, bound or regulated by the colonial and imperial infrastructures of power. In Queering the Archive, hegemonic colonial and postcolonial aesthetic regimes are disrupted and the brown body becomes a brown body in desiring and joyful movement and relation, re-imagined and re-imaged as elegant, beautiful and sensual towards different futurities.

KEYWORDS
Afro-Asia, sexuality (or queer), brown, beauty, intimacy, femininity, masculinity, ocean, desire, diaspora

INTRODUCTION
Jordache Ellapen’s Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy (2018) is a visual art project that explores erotics as an epistemological and methodological frame to think through race, diaspora, memory, history and desire in contemporary South Africa. Through a close reading of Family Portrait I: Chennai/Tongaat and Family Portrait II: Sugarcane Coolies, I explore how Ellapen unbinds and rebinds legacies of indentureship, queer pleasures and intimacies, and formations of diaspora, race and nation.

Ellapen centres lives and bodies which were used as indentured labour and raw matter for global racial capital and re-imagines the bodies, lives and memories of indentured Indians and their descendants as vivid and beautiful. The brown male body of his erotic studio photography moves through, complicates and is made beautiful by multiple relations: legacies of indentureship, the racial politics of postcolonial nationalism, and the frame of family and kinship (Gqola 2010; Hofmeyr and Williams 2011; Hofmeyr 2013; Livermon 2020).

Ellapen’s art intervenes in dominant discourses of Blackness, Indianness and Africanness in contemporary South Africa and
co-constitutive diasporas. These discourses of belonging and nation are shaped by histories and legacies of colonialism, indentureship and apartheid, overlaid with the class and caste politics of other forms of migration (for example, of merchants and lawyers) from India (and Pakistan) both before and after apartheid. Undergirded by postcolonial infrastructures under pressure because of the mandates of global capital, tensions between multiple communities in South Africa are produced at the nexus of race, class and caste (Nuttall 2009; Pirbhai 2009; Desai and Vahed 2010; Gupta, Hofmeyr, and Pearson, 2010; Hansen 2012; Bahadur 2014; Livermon 2020).

Offering a complicated and dense challenge to the politics of brownness at the intersections of queer diaspora studies, Indian Ocean studies and studies of indenture, Ellapen’s art becomes an urgent site for thinking about Afro-Asian and Afro-Indian intimacies (Rastogi 2008; Ellapen 2017, 2020; Goffe 2020). His art challenges the erasure of Indian indentureship in considerations of Indian diasporas. His focus on affect, intimacy and desire within the legacies of indentureship opens new and different archival sites, genres and angles. His art contributes to the work of how we conceptualize sexuality and masculinity through and within Afro-Asian frames and routes, and what centring histories of indentureship as histories of sexuality might tell us about global capital, diaspora, intimacy and postcolonial politics of nationhood (Wahab 2019; Khan 2016; Persard 2020; Ellapen 2017).

First, I introduce and situate Jordache Ellapen as a South African Indian artist in the wider context of South African histories and politics. Second, I explore how his art complicates colonial and postcolonial frames of global capital and belonging. Third, I discuss how Ellapen focuses on kinship as archival presence, routed through the personal, the affective and the intimate. Finally, I analyze how Ellapen crafts beauty as an index, a form of labour and care, and as a force and sign of life, centring the queer brown male body.
Queering the Archive (2018)

Jordache Ellapen is a South African Indian artist and scholar, descended from indentured workers. Ellapen’s creative and intellectual projects explore the relationship between aesthetics, race and politics in South Africa and the African Diaspora, and are situated within contemporary circuits of Afro-Indian and Afro-diasporic queer cultural production. His art explores the histories and legacies of Indian indentureship in South Africa, including the racial and class politics of belonging and Afro-Indian intimacies. Ellapen’s debut film, cane/cain was screened in March 2011 at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and Queering the Archive: Brown Bodies in Ecstasy was exhibited at the Michaelis Galleries in Cape Town in 2018. His scholarship has appeared in *Kronos* (2020), *Feminist Studies* (2021) and *Feminist Formations* (2021). Situated alongside artists, writers and scholars such as Sharlene Khan, Haseenah Ebrahim, Rajiv Mohabir, Amar Wahab, Tao Leigh Goffe and Richard Fung, Ellapen’s work explores the politics of race, pleasure and power in the aftermath of the institution of indenture, across oceanic routes and global diasporas.

Ellapen’s aesthetic practices break rules of form and genre to craft provocations of epistemology. In *Queering the Archive* (2018), the question of form is central: *Family Portrait I* and *Family Portrait II* are both, arguably, constructed as triptychs through the centring of a family photograph with visible edges and different scenes on either side. *Family Portrait I* and *II* must, therefore, be read together, for example, as a variation on a theme or a narrative in three parts. This means that we cannot view, read, understand or take delight in these artworks through beauty, race, indentureship, labour or diaspora as separate themes and frames. Beauty is situated in sensuous movement within, through and across the politics of race, indentureship, labour and diaspora because these are also part of the webs that produce beauty (Reddy 2016; Tu 2021; Sharpe 2019).
Ellapen uses multiplicity as an aesthetic practice: there are six photographs in *Family Portrait I* and eight photographs in *Family Portrait II*. Ellapen also uses different genres of photography, from erotic studio photography to family photographs, passport photographs to photographs of pages of books. This multiplicity of number and type of photograph challenges the use of any one genre to tell the story of indentureship, desire, race and diaspora, and highlights the uses of specific genres to tell variations of these themes and the conditions that produce these uses. Family photograph albums and erotic studio photography may provide archives that resist and challenge political, historical and cultural public erasures of inter-racial and cross-continental intimacies (Campt 2012, 2017; Jay and Ramaswamy 2014; Miller-Young 2014; Goffe 2018; Ellapen 2020).

In *Family Portrait I*, the family photograph, the photograph of/from the pages of the encyclopedia, and the photographs of the beach and sugarcane field are layered in a way that produces the effect of them each being merged into one another; each is present, but the edges of each are not so easily detected as separate from one another. The composition emphasizes not only the multiplicity of the photographs but also the different size and shape of each, so that none of them disappears into any other as a form of absence. For example, the line in the centre of the artwork could be a crease in the family photograph, or the edges of either the pages of the encyclopedia or the photographs of the beach and sugarcane field. The photographs are not just layered on top of one another; there is in fact a play on opacity (Glissant 1997) through both gradient and the positioning, neither of which produce a direct alignment of any of the frames of any of the photographs. The temporalities of the family photograph, the personal photograph and studio photograph become stuck together, overlap and merge, while the metaphoric opacity of meaning of the personal photograph seeps into the studio photograph and the family photograph. Thus, the edges of these photographs have
sunk into one another, that is, have merged and disappeared somewhere in and through their relation to one another so that you cannot quite tell what the relation is or the linear sequence of photographs. This is a crafting of a particular nature of relation: multiplicity of presence without invisibility, without hierarchy and with difference, but a difference that does not depend on, and is not produced through, binding and sealing into separatenesses — epistemological, ontological, cartographic — and does not require any of the processes and histories embedded within these photographs to be dislocated outside the frame, that is, the frame of memory, history, relation or place (Campt 2012, 2017; Goffe 2018; Wahab 2019; Ellapen 2020; Landau and Kaspin 2002; Lowe 2015; Sharpe 2016).

UNBINDING: COLONIAL CAPITAL AND POSTCOLONIAL BELONGING

Here, I explore how Ellapen’s art unbinds colonial and postcolonial frames of global capital and belonging. Ellapen mixes different genres, practices and effects to challenge dominant discourses of belonging in South Africa and the Indian diaspora.

In *Family Portrait I*, the photographs of the encyclopedia and the photographs of the sugarcane and beach together signal the technologies and frames of the British Empire that transformed Indian peoples into labour, to indentureship between Asia and Africa as a project of global capital. ‘Hindoos’, ‘Low Caste’ and ‘Behar’ function as categories of imperial rule that produced the people in the photographs as both objects and data — a particular form of labour — because an encyclopedia does not only provide information but provides information organized according to alphabet, that is, according to a particular logic, which, very easily, becomes a fact of epistemology, cartography and ontology (McClintock 1995; Mirzoeff 2000; Hayes 2007; Campt 2012). Indeed, visuality here is a form of colonial knowledge: the
photographs of the pages of the encyclopedia symbolize the deployment of visuality in the process of transforming these bodies into usable objects for global capital. These categories produce people as transparent in the metaphoric sense, as bodies and objects that are completely knowable, consumable and usable (Hartman 1997; Landau and Kaspin 2002; Lowe 2015; Sharpe 2016; Bhana Young 2017; Bajorek 2020; Sharma 2020).

The photographs of the sugarcane and the beach also defy the imperial frames of visuality not only because of how each is located within this artwork, but also because of the photographs themselves. Both are photographs one may find in a personal album, composed without central focus points, which indicate a camera frame and perspective that is not ethnographic, official or formal. The composition of both as wide shots indicates someone standing at a distance, but a distance of presence; for example, the proximity of the pole in the photograph of the sugarcane field hints at the angle where a photographer may be located — just across the way from the edge of the field rather than at a height. This distance, then, is not one of omniscience or omnipresence. This distance is of presence, and of a clear fragment of a place, which indicates place rather than hides it, challenges the deployment of distance in the photographs in the pages of the encyclopedia.

The fragment here indicates one angle, one perspective — but one that is necessary to consider: the site and perspective of personal memory. This is a fragment of memory, indicated not just by the fact that these photographs may be from a personal album but also by their fading (though not faded) hues. This memory is personal, and the personal album becomes an important archive to consider the legacies of indenture (Campt 2017; Goffe 2018; Wahab 2019; Ellapen 2020).

The intimate effects and legacies of indentureship are contained in the personal photographs of the beach and sugarcane field, emphasized through the sepia-coloured family photograph of women and children in the centre. The photograph of the
beach and the photograph of the sugarcane field are not just on either side of the family photograph but are overlaid and merged together: in the family photograph, the third (and smallest) boy is either leaning against the woman in the centre or is sitting with her — we cannot tell because the family photograph becomes submerged here into the photograph of the beach, an effect, almost, of the smallest boy rising from or disappearing into the waves in the photograph of the beach.

The photographs of the ‘Low Caste’ ‘Hindoos’ from the British encyclopedia merged into the photographs of the beach and the sugarcane signal the politics of caste and class of indentureship (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000; Desai and Vahed 2010; Hansen 2012; Bahadur 2018). The descendants and legacies of Indian indentureship pose a complicated challenge for dominant discourses of global Indian diasporas in several ways. First, as upper-caste, upper-class and mobile, in which social mobility and economic mobility both coalesce as signs of modernity (Chatterji and Washbrook 2013; Reddy 2016; Hedge and Ajaya 2017). Second, legacies of indentureship reorient our frames of regions and routes that comprise Indian and Indian diaspora in cultural, intellectual and political imaginations, challenging methodological, theoretical and disciplinary boundaries. Third, the imagined racial boundary and coherence of Indian across national and diasporic frames — which are, as Reddy points out, co-imbricated (2016) — are challenged by Afro-Indian/Afro-Asian relations, including erotic intimacies (Ellapen 2017, 2020; Wahab 2018, 2019; Goffe 2020).

In Family Portrait II, the bodily proximity and erotic charge of black and brown bodies signals a particular form of Afro-Indian presence, that is, sexual intimacies between brown and black South Africans, including friendship, love and sex. The bodily proximity (and erotic charge) of black and brown bodies, rooted in the labour politics of plantation life through the photographs of sugarcane in both Family Portrait I and II, also take up dominant
discourses of contemporary South African nationalism, in which Indian migrants are represented as social and economic elites. Ellapen’s art breaks open monolithic representations of South African Indians, including how their arrival and present economic and political power is represented. This, in turn, resists South African discourses of racialized authenticity and belonging (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000; Hansen 2012; Desai and Vahed 2010; Gupta, Hofmeyr and Pearson 2010; Nuttall 2009).

The only object in sight in both *Family Portrait I* and *II* is a mask made of wood in different shades, with different angles carved into the mask, symbolizing *Africa* in *South Africa*. Yet how the masks are worn provoke the complexities of race, ethnicity and intimacy. We may speculate that the mask, marked as *African*, worn by a body shaded in tones that are not acknowledged as *African*, signifies the Africanness of the man who wears this mask. In *Family Portrait I*, the mask is worn by the brown body in the centre of the frame. In *Family Portrait II*, two men hold a different mask each to obscure half of their faces while facing away from each other. Each is racialized differently, but both are holding African masks, symbolizing that *Africa* is present in and through both. At the same time, their bodies are in close proximity even if they are not facing each other, close enough that we might wonder if their bodies are touching — moreover, a pose and posture of back to back may not mean to turn away from each other but rather to be located together in a moment, a space, even as each faces a different direction — that difference in direction is, in fact, what undergirds being located in the same moment, the same space (Ahmed 2006).

Both are, in fact, facing the same direction, towards the camera. Both are translucent, merged with the photographs of sugarcane and of a blue-tinted photograph visible in the space between them of two men in a tender, erotic embrace, while the photograph of the two men with masks is interrupted by the technicolour photograph of two brown men in a tender, erotic embrace. Ellapen’s
crafting of both interruption and connection marks how even (symbolic) bodies turned away from one another are in close proximity under the sign of Africa through the history of indentureship: the history of sugarcane as one history of South Africa as one history of intimacy are merged, overlaid and stuck together, not separable, not extricable, along with how these histories interrupt one another.

Simultaneously, we may wonder at the nature of these relations, through both the use of the mask and the aesthetic practices. The mask may symbolize opacity (Glissant 1997), while layering and translucency creates depth as much as connection, especially with the contrast of colours — the blue tint against the different shades of technicolour in each studio photograph. We cannot know the nature of these proximities and these embraces, which means that none of these can be easily absorbed into dominant discourses of nation, race and diaspora. Does the opacity combined with constant interruption of each photograph with the other provoke caution, that is, to not think of interracial intimacy as a symbol or solution to national unity? How do sexuality, race and class become sticky matters (Ahmed 2004; Wu 2018) between people in close and/or intimate proximity? What do these intimacies interrupt, and what are they interrupted by when interruption, too, is about connection?

**REBINDING INTIMACIES**

In *Family Portrait I* and *II*, Ellapen challenges the erasure of Indian women in the legacies and archives of indentureship (Hartman 2008; Bhana Young 2017; Wahab 2018; Ellapen 2020) by rerouting diaspora through the maternal and the feminine. Ellapen uses the force of technicolour photography to locate queer brown male bodies and intimacies within this frame of familial kinship, so that queer desire and pleasure is not dislocated from these relations but, rather, is located within them as legacy, interruption and intimacy.
In *Family Portrait I*, the family photograph of children with two generations of women symbolizes intergenerational intimacies and the extended family network within the context of indentureship. In *Family Portrait II*, the two family photographs feature Ellapen’s grandfather and father, but the women of his family are still prominent and present. This consistent intergenerational presence, framed by the extended family, highlights how integral women were to making and maintaining relations and intimacies, and resists the patrilineal frame for family, community, diaspora and memory. Moreover, the family photograph in *Family Portrait I* in particular complicates colonial and postcolonial frames of patrilineal authority in family structures, and functions as a reminder of collective, expansive forms of care — mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and cousins (Carter 1994; Bahadur 2014; Ellapen 2020.

In *Family Portrait II*, to the right of the family photograph in the centre is a sepia-tinted photograph of the author’s parents, the sepia more prominent against a studio photograph, made translucent, of a naked man with darker skin (black or brown — perhaps the point is that we cannot tell) with his head tipped back. The photograph of the sugarcane is notable in green and gold, and because the figures in sepia appear without a frame, they appear as if standing in sepia on the gold of the sugarcane — yet not quite, the sharpness of their silhouettes and the sepia signaling the different temporalities within these photographs. At the forefront are two naked men in technicolour, both figures interrupting the other photographs. The use of gradient locates both the man with his head tipped back and the figures in sepia at a depth, depth as distance, so that it is the two men in technicolour who are at the forefront, and the photograph of the sugarcane is centred, almost in triangulation, between the other photographs.

The use of gradient, the contrast between colours, and the layering produce relation between these photographs, not as separable elements but as sticky, overlaid and merged. We cannot see the edges of the family photograph, nor the frames of the studio
photographs, while the photograph of the sugarcane runs the entire length of this artwork. For the family photograph of the artist’s parents, the sepia tone and the depth as distance may hint at memory and history. Yet their silhouettes come into contact with the bright technicolour of the studio photography, creating connection across that depth, across that distance. The interruption, crafted through the layering and contrast of colour and shade, is a relation of proximity and intimacy. The eroticism and beauty of the two men in technicolour, the eroticism signaled in their proximity to one another (confirmed in the studio photograph to the left of the centre), is located within the frame of family, of memory — and within the frame of indentureship, symbolized by the dark green and gold hues of the sugarcane. This is also how I read the body of the man on the left. At first glance, his body may interrupt both family photographs — yet, in fact, it is his body, and his body as interruption, that connects both sepia photographs together: both are shaped through and by the body of the man in their midst.

Ellapen’s aesthetic practice crafts, and insists on, the situatedness of queer bodies within frames of family and memory, but as overlaid, merged intimacies and histories.

Indeed, Ellapen’s aesthetic practice disrupts the linear (heteronormative) time of postcolonial nationalism and statehood, and the erasure of queer lives from legacies and archives of indentureship. In *Family Portrait II*, the studio photograph of the naked man with his head tipped back (as if in ecstasy) is positioned between the two men in technicolour at the forefront, the blue tint and translucency positioning him at depth as distance to the figures in sepia in between. Their silhouettes, even in sepia, are sharper than his because they are not as translucent — although both are translucent enough for the colour photograph of the green and gold of the sugarcane to be prominent, darkened through the overlays. The translucence here creates a depth of temporal distance, so that this figure may be read as located in memory and history. The figures in sepia both do and do not interrupt this
depth as temporal distance towards the two men in the forefront, that is, the family photograph here is both opaque and not opaque enough. Therefore, while Ellapen unbinds and rebinds the South African Indian family to locate queer lives and erotics within this frame, he does not situate the family as the origin or start of any narrative. Sepia does not indicate (temporal) hierarchy (linearity) or origin — rather, sepia in both artworks, and the more muted tones of the beach and sugarcane in *Family Portrait I*, functions as memory made prominent and memory made present through contrast within the same frame. Simultaneously, queer presence is located across the past (translucency) and the present (technicolour) and is located within the archives of family and indentureship, and interruption functions as relation, as intimacy.

*Family Portrait I* centres the erotic studio photograph of the supine brown body, posed without a surface, so that the effect is of a body suspended in air, a body suspended across the surfaces of each of the other photographs but not contained within any of them — even as his hand seems to lie in the sugarcane field, which is also, simultaneously, the ground upon which the family in the family photograph stands. The studio photograph is opaque on either side of the edges of the family photograph so that the lines of this body are sharp against the photographs of the pages, the beach and sugarcane field. It is the contrast between the hues, tones and colours of each photograph brought together in this frame that emphasizes the depth and brightness of each, the relation between them necessary and prominent.

**UNBINDING BEAUTY**

Situated at the interstices of colonial and postcolonial politics of indentureship, archive, sexuality and raciality, Ellapen crafts beauty through a precision of detail, interruption, gradient, the discomfort and difficulty of multiple genres, and striking contrast. Ellapen makes the queer brown male body beautiful
through studio photography, complicating dense meanings of both beauty and masculinity, and challenging the visual politics of legacies of indentureship (Vahed 2005; Hansen 2012; Campt 2012 and 2017; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000; Desai and Vahed 2010; Nair 2020; Carter 1995; Landau and Kaspin 2002).

It is not that male bodies cannot be beautiful. However, the racial and colonial politics of male beauty, of beauty and masculinity, are dense and knotty. Beauty is a tricky question for brown and black male bodies, under the combined weight of colonial regimes of sexual fantasy, postcolonial regimes of state and nation, and global racial capital. Beauty can be a mode of racialized sexual objectification, a site and tool of racialized feminization located within legacies and structures of sexual deviancy and coded as cultural degeneracy and political failure (Fanon 1967; Bailey 2013; Johnson 2008; Livermon 2020; Manalansan 2003; Eng 2001; Munoz 1999; Macharia 2019; McClintock 1995; Nguyen 2014; Wu 2018). Beauty can be an index of knotting together practices, bodies and discourses of masculine as a symbol of postcolonial nationalism; beauty can operate ‘as a form of aesthetic and sexual capital’ (Reddy 2016: 6); and beauty can be a transnational regime of race, gender and desire (Lee 2019). Beauty can be a mandate and purchase of race and class, a form of pleasure and leisure prohibited working and labouring populations (Reddy 2016; Tu 2021). The social life of beauty can provide spaces and relations of intimacies, anchoring how people make worlds and make life bearable, and how the processes of beauty are practices of comfort and care (Tu 2021). Beauty can demarcate social domains which exclude bodies transformed into plantation labour, made present in archives of indentureship only through colonial frames of visuality (Carter 1995; Anderson 2009; Wahab 2018, 2019; Ellapen 2020).

I specifically think about beauty through the work of Vanita Reddy in Fashioning Diaspora (2016). Reddy considers beauty as ‘a mode of aesthetic judgment and a diasporic mode of embodiment’ (2016: 6), which, in Ellapen’s art, centres indentureship as
the frame of a particular diasporic formation, a set of intimacies across the Indian Ocean and mode of belonging in South Africa. Ellapen deploys beauty as ‘a form of labor and care’ (Reddy 2016: 6) towards indentured South African Indians and their descendants. His use of erotic studio photography to make these queer brown male bodies beautiful, and his incorporation of family photographs, centring the women of his family, signal beauty as an aesthetic practice, which challenges the archival erasure of Indian indentured labour and dominant colonial visuality of Indian labourers. Beauty is, therefore, ‘a set of narratives and practices’ (Lee, Moon and Tu 2019: 5) that are informed by their historical and social contexts, and an index (Reddy 2016: 6) of the life and memory of indentured labour.

The studio photography is beautiful in ways that are different and (perhaps) more explicit than the others, as artistic production (Miller-Young 2014). In *Family Portrait I*, the photographs of the beach and sugarcane could be read as beautiful, as could the family photograph, but this beauty could also be of memory and attachment — as if pulled from a family scrapbook, the beauty is configured in the meaning these photographs carry for those in relation to them.

Yet Ellapen does not refuse the multiple forms and meanings of *beautiful*; rather, his artwork incorporates this multiplicity, which becomes the anchor of the beauty of the brown body in the centre of the frame (Nair 2020; Campt 2017). The brown body in the centre of the frame, vibrant with depth and precision, is made beautiful through these multiple forms and meanings: the brown body is beautiful not despite the histories and relations embedded within these different frames but rather because of, and anchored in, these histories and relations. There is a delicate precision here: the details of each hue and shade of colour is visible precisely through the difference, the contrast, which merges and disappears into one another: the elegant, bright, brown body in the studio photograph, the sepia of the family photograph, the darker
green and pale blue of the sugarcane field, and the pale blue-grey and pale golden of the ocean and the beach.

In *Family Portrait II*, the suspension of two figures in sepia across the upper body of the man in the studio photograph creates the effect of them standing on a ground of sugarcane, a ground of his body, his skin made of the golden hues of both the sugarcane and the browns of his body, almost as if his body and the sugarcane have merged. This translucence indicates how the histories of indentureship are not extricable from these bodies, but live underneath their skin, like muscle, vein, nerve, blood and bone. This is Ellapen’s beautiful and/but unsettling emphasis on not only the enduring legacy of indentureship but also a refusal to erase what those forms of labour do to a body and how those effects cannot be dismissed (Tu 2021).

Present in both *Family Portrait I* and *II* is the beauty of the brown male body. In both artworks, the studio photographs are made beautiful through the lighting, the high-definition camera and the graceful, elegant pose, which highlights, moreover, the tones of brown of these bodies, vibrant and vivid, and hints of bright light lighting up the skin of the collarbone and shoulder. In *Family Portrait I*, the pose is elegant, languid — sensuality expressed in the supine pose, the dipped neck and the arm trailing onto the (invisible) space beneath. The studio lighting highlights different shades and tones of brown, warm and vibrant, light glittering and glistening off the skin, bright enough to highlight muscle and bone as matters of sensuousness. The depth that this lighting provides to brown skin is of the vibrancy of life and pleasure. Ellapen’s photography crafts depth and dimensionality — the darker skin of the ankle, the muscle in the thighs, the collarbone, the edges of the shoulders — through and in the tones.

In *Family Portrait II*, the two men to the right of the frame are photographed with exquisite and attentive detail. The man at the edge of the frame has two piercings, and light glitters off the silver rings at his nipple and belly button, highlighting the delicacy of
the silver jewellery against the shades of brown skin. The angle at which he is standing means that bright light glistens on his skin, creating an effect of a glow across the left side of his body — his jawline, his pectoral, down the curve of his belly, to the V of his pelvis and top of his thigh — which creates shades and tones of brown, highlighting dips, curves and muscle, creating an erotic line of light and skin.

To the left of the frame are two men in intimate embrace, their upper bodies visible, one resting on his elbow as he tilts his head and shoulders back languidly towards the man above and on top of him, framing him with one arm, leaning down, their lips touching softly, gently, their bodies creating a play of shadow and light on each other’s skin, the glittering of a silver belly button ring and nipple ring against the darkness of skin. The pose could be any form of intimate embrace: sex, cuddling, cuddly sex. The relaxed closeness of their bodies signals an easy intimacy, while the stillness of this embrace as the photographic stillness of bodies in motion infuses this photograph with sensuality. As Haseenah Ebrahim points out in her reading of Ellapen’s film *cane/cain* (2011), Ellapen’s art is infused with a sensual beauty, which means that the nature of the beauty of the brown male body in Ellapen’s artwork is erotic, pleasurable and gratifying to the senses (2018). Alongside this, the high definition of the camera and Ellapen’s attention to detail means that the beauty here is delicate and fine, refined, crafted through male bodies with sinew, muscle and definition. Thus, Ellapen crafts and highlights a different politics and aesthetics of *masculine* and *brown*, triangulated through the legacies of indentureship — the politics of race, labour and diaspora, and the frames of family and memory.

Ellapen plays with nakedness here in precise detail: the naked brown male body at the centre of the frame in *Family Portrait I* and the naked brown men at the forefront to the right and left of *Family Portrait II* are in high definition and technicolour — but their bodies are not transparent. Indeed, their naked bodies
interrupt the other photographs in both artworks. I read this play on nakedness triangulated through transparency and opacity as a symbol of how the meanings of the histories, memories and relations embedded in these frames are not transparent through the bodies and lives of these brown men within an ethnographic imagination (Wu 2018; Macharia 2019). The fact that these legacies cannot be separated from the erotic proximity between the two men in technicolour in *Family Portrait II* does not mean that the affective, political weight of those legacies contained within that erotic proximity is transparent or obvious. The opacity of these naked brown figures, crafted through the high-resolution technicolour beauty of the studio photograph, refuses an easy either/or, an easy narrativization of these legacies.

**CONCLUSION**

In his crafting of the beautiful queer brown male body, Ellapen reworks and challenges colonial and postcolonial politics of race, sexuality and diaspora in South Africa, across transoceanic legacies of indentureship. Ellapen produces a different politics and aesthetics of masculine, queer, and brown within the frame of Afro-Asia. He locates these beautiful queer brown men, their erotic intimacies and sensual proximities, within the frame of family, of familial and intimate memory, so that the politics of beauty, sexuality and masculinity are inextricable from the politics of kinship and heritage. His art, therefore, opens up new directions in which to think about sexuality and raciality in the context of South Africa, the visual politics of masculinity and diaspora in archives of indentureship, and the politics of beauty and memory in the lives and legacies of indentured Indians and their descendants.

Ellapen centres the politics of pleasure and power in consideration of the aftermath of the institution of indenture in his art, routing the aesthetics of queer brown masculinity and erotic intimacy through these histories and politics of diaspora, family,
labour, race and caste. In Ellapen’s art, colonial technologies of labour and postcolonial regimes of belonging are unbound, even as the meanings, relations and forms of intimacy are rebound. Beauty becomes a matter of making memory matter, making lives and bodies subjected to indentureship matter, and making queer intimacies matter within these legacies of labour, diaspora and race.

I conclude my analysis of Ellapen’s art by discussing future trajectories for inquiry into the unbound, unregulated, undisciplined sexualities of plantation life across geohistories shaped by racial indenture. How do we understand the dynamics of queer sex and intimacy in ways that engage with the difficulties and complications of family as both experience and institution? What does it mean to route diaspora through the feminine and the maternal, produced through and within the institution of the family?

Beauty opens up analytic possibilities as a lens, a form of social life, a form of labour and capital, for studies of the legacies of indentureship, including colonial and postcolonial regimes of visuality.

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