

THE PLANT AND THE PERSON

Ayesha Hameed



Ayesha Hameed, *Black Atlantis: the Plantationocene* (2020) Still

The monstrous victory of the plantation form of production lay in how it simultaneously forced human beings into one kind of machine, and the flora they cultivated into another. What their subjugation had in common was the corralling of their free life into fodder to feed the fantasy of frictionless production. And following this fantasy which is one of pure exchange value, the body of the enslaved and indentured woman or man and the cane or cotton (or/) that they cultivated, were imagined and consequently imaged. Through being imaged they were put into circulation: a process that annihilated the resistant and inoperable. The plantation as the genesis of an imaginary of pure circulation, or in other words, the blueprint for an ontology of the machinic imaginary.

This is a still from a desktop video I made called *Black Atlantis: the Plantationocene* (2020). What you see is a still of a video of fields of grass, taken from a public bus in Barbados. The grass grows on a layer of soil only twelve inches deep laid over a bedrock of limestone. At the apex of trans-Atlantic slavery, the biggest supplies of cane in the world, grew on these twelve inches, cultivated by enslaved men and women. In its stead now are fields of grass. The buses are filled with black men and women, and it takes over three hours to make a journey by bus that would take twenty minutes in a car. Legacies of the plantation machine in a field of grass captured from a slow-moving bus. The temporality of the plantation machine in an image.



Ayesha Hameed, *I sing of the sea I am mermaid of the trees* (2021). Image courtesy K MacBride

This is an image of the installation *I sing of the sea I am mermaid of the trees* (2021). It is a series of cyanotype images of gutta percha trees taken in Tjipitir, Java, that have been tapped for their resin. This resin was used to insulate telegraph cables from the nineteenth century onwards. *I sing of the sea* explores the development of the telegraph as inextricable from the brutal crushing of the 1857 insurrection in India against the East India Company and the clearcutting of forests in Sarawak and Malaysia. The global scale of the circulation of gutta percha included indigenous peoples like Dyaks in the forests, Chinese traders and European merchants. Through the cable, time was compressed: a message that would have taken six weeks to transmit from Britain to her colonies now took minutes. Communication as a strangulating umbilical cord. On one side of the machine is the consolidation of India as a colony after 1857, the indigenous peoples, and the Chinese traders already imbricated in the violence of the opium trade. On its other side is the realm of monstrous fantasy: the tentacular machine of instant communication fuelling the monstrous genesis of Empire.

AYESHA HAMEED lives in London, UK. Since 2014 Hameed's multi-chapter project 'Black Atlantis' has looked at the Black Atlantic and its afterlives in contemporary illegalized migration at sea, in oceanic environments, through Afrofuturistic dancefloors and soundsystems and in outer space. Through videos, audio essays and performance lectures, she examines how to think through sound, image, water, violence and history as elements of an active archive; and time travel as an historical method. Recent exhibitions include Liverpool Biennale (2021), Gothenburg Biennale (2019), Lubumbashi Biennale (2019), and Dakar Biennale (2018). She is co-editor of *Futures and Fictions* (Repeater 2017) and co-author of *Visual Cultures as Time Travel* (Sternberg/MIT 2021). She is currently Co-Programme Leader of the PhD in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths University of London.
