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Reading hieroglyphs behind glass: A glimpse of reparative feminism in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977)

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Abstract This article examines Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's 1977 avant-garde essay film *Riddles of the Sphinx* as a cinematic text that makes the museum a site for imagining psychoanalytic feminism as a reparative reading practice. I argue that the film questions gender and race as "musealized" images that make predetermined essences present, and offers instead images of working through the damages of sexism and racism that erode the familiar poles of idealization and denigration. Focused on the psychic life of a middle-class white woman as she begins extricating herself from the narrow confines that white patriarchal culture has allotted her, *Riddles* revises the visual logics of castration, which opens the possibility that white women can, instead of defending themselves against shame, respond to the forms of sexism and racism that write Black women's lives.

Keywords psychoanalytic feminism · working through · white women · shame · dark continents · racial trauma

The op-ed written by activist Loretta Ross for *The New York Times* in August 2019, "I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture is Toxic," identifies a generative way to approach white women and their places within systemic racism. As her title indicates, the most pressing subject for Ross is "call-out culture" and the prevalence of "public shaming." For those who have been silenced, public outcries are often politically and emotionally necessary, but Ross argues that public shaming does not further the work of social justice as well as one might imagine. She distinguishes shaming from bringing white women to a place where they can see and undo the structural racism from which they benefit. Drawing on what could be described as a psychoanalytically informed perspective, Ross calls for responding rather than

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reacting, questioning certainties, speaking from places of vulnerability, and sharing stories instead of "clap[ping] back," even when others are on the wrong side of history, as white women have often been. Ross's essay underscores the patient attention to the interpersonal that is often a necessary part of political transformation. She recalls that as a young activist she confronted white women about their limited understanding of Black women and reflects on what she did not consider at the time: "They barely understood what it meant to be *white* women in the system of white supremacy. Was it realistic to expect them to comprehend the experiences of black women?" (Ross, 2019, original emphasis). In order for white women to understand the racism and sexism Black women experience, Ross argues, they need to see how hierarchies of gender and race have positioned them within white patriarchal dominance. One implication of her argument is that white women, hinged between racial privilege and gender oppression, are less likely to arrive at that insight if the calls for anti-racism rehearse the shaming and splitting that have constituted definitions of woman in patriarchal cultures (Holzman, 1995).

In the avant-garde feminist film *Riddles of the Sphinx*, directors Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen (1977a) compose a cinematic picture of the process to which Ross's argument points. The second in a series of essay films Mulvey and Wollen directed in the 1970s and early 1980s, *Riddles* enacts the laborious challenge of rewriting the habits of splitting the sign "woman" and offers a glimpse of a reparative feminism that could begin to address white women's place in systemic racism. Shaped by Mulvey's participation in the women's liberation movement in Britain, *Riddles* enacts the beginning of a transformation in which Louise, a white middle-class mother, begins to unhinge herself from the patriarchal order she has internalized. Given the tenacity of patriarchy, this is no small feat, either now or in the 1970s (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). The work Louise undertakes is aligned with the analytic process, but because it takes place on film and addresses viewing audiences, her individual story becomes part of the film's commitment to bringing the feminist engagement with psychoanalysis into public discourse. A scene in the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum makes the deep time of ancient history part of that translation. In the British Museum, where the aura of antiquities on display masks the thefts of colonial extraction, Mulvey and Wollen take the feminism of their film into the "dark continent," Sigmund Freud's figure for the indecipherability of female sexuality that reveals its imbrications with the racial hierarchies of colonialism.

As anyone who watches *Riddles* will likely attest, the film's engagement with race and racism is latent, not fully realized. When feminist scholars writing on *Riddles* in the 1980s took up the question of race, they focused on the portrayal of Maxine, the Black British woman who plays a significant role in Louise's feminist awakening. Incorporating the insights of Black feminism that began to take hold in the 1970s, scholars observe that Maxine's depiction is truncated, but they do not bring that observation into the film as a whole or the historical context from which it emerged, limiting the discussion of race to the visual depiction of one Black character (Kaplan, 1983, p. 180; Silverman, 1988, p. 132). The portrayal of Maxine does underscore that feminism's initial focus in the 1970s was challenging patriarchy, which limited its ability to recognize the racial exclusions upon which its

claims to equality relied, but understanding the film's implications for race does not have to halt at her image. My own scholarship reads *Riddles* as a manifestation of the feminist collaborations of the period. Tracing the film's efforts to write new languages of desire, pleasure, and protest, I argue that *Riddles* makes the afterlives of colonialism part of its textual address (Lamm, 2018, p. 261). Along similar lines, Catherine Grant (2019) observes that the "complex interracial dynamics" of the film are not "explored," (p. 66) but she creates a path to that analysis when she argues that *Riddles* "remains a rich resource for continuing questions about feminist politics, communities and artistic practice in the present day" (p. 57).

Riddles is a porous cinematic text that is open to future viewers and interlocutors. By revealing the visual logics that race and gender share, the film lends itself to the kinds of readings theories of intersectionality make possible. The film's work attenuating the splitting of the sign "woman" is key to its anti-racist potential. Drawing from the work of Melanie Klein, Juliet Mitchell (2001) describes the moralizing poles of this splitting in terms of "idealization" and "denigration," which are, she argues, "two sides of the same coin" (p. 14). The etymology of denigration links it to "blackening" and the racist associations between blackness and immorality. It therefore follows that the splitting Mitchell identifies maps on to racial hierarchies that place Black women on the other side of the sign woman. As Lorraine O'Grady (1994) argues, the "female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse. On the one side, it is white, on the other, not-white, or, prototypically, black" (p. 152). O'Grady's vivid formulation draws out the assumption that the sign "woman" is white and foregrounds the racial privileges that prop up its visibility. *Riddles* begins to repair such splits and the racial inequities they create by imagining a museum that allows viewers to work through the shaming and silencing endemic to the dark continents of colonialism.

Mulvey and Wollen composed *Riddles* like a book. Its seven chapters present the cinematic image as a page, and the multiple appearances of text stress the importance of reading. The central chapter is "Louise's story told in thirteen shots," and the scene in the British Museum is the last of those shots. Mulvey and Wollen composed these shots with a 360-degree pan that circles around the spaces in which Louise's life takes place. Executed by the cinematographer Diane Tammes, the 360-degree pan "inscribe[s] the form of a circle," as Wollen (1981) explains, and gives the film a concentric structure (p. 60). The circular pattern allows the directors to inscribe Louise's story into the museum's arrangement of images that freeze and materialize time and suggest how the movement for women's liberation has given Louise permission to project herself in the movement of history. Borrowed from Jean Luc-Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), a film that tracks a world in which women pay the price for the vulnerabilities late capitalism simultaneously produces and denies, the 360-degree pan circling a museum gallery evokes cyclical repetitions that complicate expectations of historical progress but also manifest the desire to see change.

The circular pan is an aesthetic device that suggests how the antiquities symbolize the longue-durée of women's oppression. It is a visual enactment of what Juliet Mitchell identified in 1966 as the "longest revolution," the multi-pronged process of dismantling ideologies such as the universal family that make women's

"social subordination" into an "*insurmountable*, bio-historical fact" (p. 20, original emphasis). The repetition of the pans—their slow, circular "revolutions"—demand a patience from viewers that is fundamental to psychoanalysis and key to its political impact. When patiently observed, repetitions carry the past, but they also open windows that allow small slivers of transformation to come into visibility (Kokoli, 2012, p. 29). Needless to say, these repetitions are antithetical to the clear signs of linear progress expected of feminist politics, but they also challenge the presumption that feminism's engagement with psychoanalysis cannot contribute to anti-racism.

The circling camera in *Riddles* parallels the film's return to the myth of Oedipus and its attempt to offer apertures on to the alterity it represses. Oedipus institutes a subjectivity defined by a "continuing victory of philosophical reason and self-consciousness," and an "involuted and atrophied sensitivity to the feminine," which his supposed "victory" over the Sphinx signifies (Jean-Joseph Goux, 1990/1993, p. 39). In *Riddles,* the Sphinx is an imaginary narrator with a disembodied voice who represents the feminine differences haunting oedipal victories. For this association, the directors draw on the figure's Greek iterations, which has a woman's face. But as Mulvey acknowledges in the film's second chapter, "Laura Speaking," the Sphinx originated in Egypt, and can therefore figure for the racial exclusions of Europe's imperial forays into North Africa. In both repressions, the vulnerability of the body is displaced through social hierarchies that in turn assign the burden of embodying the unconscious that the mastery of oedipal subjectivity denies.

Eerie, dream-like, and disorienting, *Riddles* does not seek transformation through a clear and rational vision. In the shot that takes place in the museum gallery, the camera circles around the space and slides over the display cases that arrange the antiquities in stacked rows of glass. Tammes positioned the camera so it creates a sight line through the middle of the room, which highlights its partial perspective. The movement allows for glimpses of the sensuous visual pleasures offered by these still objects: the yellowed browns of the mummies' softly contoured forms and the jeweled sarcophagi that are decorated with charcoal blacks, dusky orange-reds, and icy-blue whites that bring the pictorial forms and patterns of the hieroglyphs into relief (Fig. 1). The hieroglyphs represent an interpretative process *Riddles* models

Fig 1: Image of sarcophagus in the British Museum. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

and symbolize the film's attention to forms of otherness that are sublated (both negated and preserved) in western thought. They are part of layering and fracturing the field of vision so as to reveal the histories of affective and reproductive labor congealed within visual representations of women. More broadly, the hieroglyphs challenge the metaphysics of vision that generates the presumption that images of gendered and racialized bodies make predetermined essences present, which allows them to serve as sites of fantasy projections and easily exploitable forms of labor power.

Rejecting transparency, the hieroglyphs in *Riddles* bring reading to the act of seeing, and the music adds listening to the multisensory experience the cinematic sequence encapsulates and provokes. The camera turns to the hypnotic score Mike Ratledge composed with an analog synthesizer (Young, 2013, p. 20). Woven into his pattern of haunted electronic sounds is the voice of the Sphinx. The actress Mary Maddox gives it a silvery high pitch, and as the Sphinx narrates three vignettes that embroider the cinematic image with lyrical reflections on desire and memory, the Egyptian artifacts become connected to feminism's transformative impact on Louise's psychic life. "Oddly mournful," both the music and the voice of the Sphinx make the textured and layered images vibrate with affects that are difficult to identify (Young, 2013, p. 20).

In the course of its circling, the camera happens upon Louise and her daughter Anna walking toward and through the threshold into the exhibition space (Fig. 2). Anna is a small child, and the top of her head comes just over the hem of her mother's red-orange skirt, which rhymes with the color of the paint on the walls as well as the saturated dye of the antiquities. Though the music increases in tempo when these two figures appear, the camera does not stop to focus on Louise and Anna or adopt their perspective. A seemingly neutral structure of sustained attention, the camera continues to circle on its predetermined course. Mother and daughter cross through the camera's field of vision in aleatory fashion as they wander through the space and look at the Egyptian artifacts (Fig. 3). A few times the camera catches their reflections in the glass. These reflections highlight the "aesthetic third" the museum can foster: an intersubjective space that holds the psychic interiority of the individual, the distinct qualities of the objects she encounters, and the social worlds of which they are a part (Froggett & Trustram,

Fig. 2: Louise and Anna entering an Egyptian gallery at the British Museum. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

Fig. 3: Louise and Anna walking through an Egyptian gallery at the British Museum. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, stills courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

2014, p. 483). The pan is key to this aesthetic third. It creates an embodied, receptive, and multisensory mode of viewing that opens the possibility of responding to the histories that the images carry.

Mulvey and Wollen work against the presumption that the museum transmits easily consumable visual knowledge. Tammes's camera, which captures the shadows that cloud the glass cases and the reflections that splinter across their surfaces, reveals that the directors were more interested in obscurity than clarity. This prismatic, mediated portrayal of the Egyptian artifacts erodes the museum's narcissistic investment in its "mastery of knowledge" and begins to question the gaze of theft, acquisition, and cultural appropriation that is complicit with the colonial exploitation that contemporary racisms continue and deny (Brown, 2004, pp. 258). At the same time, the film suggests that the psychic damage caused by histories of structural racism that colonial extraction emblematizes is not necessarily easy to see. Artifacts that imagine the continual unfolding of life in the other realm of death, the mummies and sarcophagi figure for losses that are difficult to disinter. For Louise, the film suggests, the antiquities represent the imminent loss of maternal fulfillment brought about by her daughter's differentiation, but also the "storage" of preoedipal pleasures in memory. By delving into these unconscious dimensions of maternal femininity, this scene also opens the possibility of seeing how the hierarchies of sexual and racial difference intertwine and compound each other.

The image of the hieroglyph is not limited to the scene in the British Museum. A synecdoche of the image world of ancient Egypt, the hieroglyph represents the questions of reading, translation, and symbolization the film raises (Wollen, 1981, p. 57). Discussing the film's movement "between images and words," which "culminat[es]" in the scene in the Egyptian gallery, Wollen (1997) recalls that when filming that shot, they were "accompanied by an Egyptologist who could read the pictographic signs, decipher their riddles, articulate their meaning, displace them from the visual to the textual" (p. 27). *Riddles* enacts a similar process, and the movement from the visual to the textual signals the film's affinity with Freudian dream interpretation. Wollen (1981) explains that "Freud himself described how the mise-en-scène of the dream produced a form of displaced writing, a pictograph, rebus, or emblem" (p. 58). This displacement is part of the film's feminist argument. It makes the cinematic image into a form of writing that carries unconscious

dimensions of women's experiences into consciousness and brings that writing to bear on the museum's production of images.

If seen as a piece of writing, the scene in the Egyptian galleries is a model for interrupting the museum's ability, as Timothy Mitchell (2004) argues, to "organize and grasp" the world "as though it were an exhibition' (p. 448). The west's exhibitionary impulse "set[s] up" Egypt as a "picture," according to Mitchell, and subjects it to a feminized visuality, readily available for the grasp of visual exposure and exploitation (p. 456). This picture of Egypt is an image spun from the orientalist imagination and fabricated for effortless consumption. It reflects Europe's oedipal need to position Egypt as its "surrogate and even underground self" (Said, 1979, p. 3). Egypt props up Europe's self-image of mastery and strength, a task that aligns with the work the cinematic image of woman is expected to perform. Indeed, the museum fetishizes the Egyptian artifacts; they are robbed of their use value and are frozen as curatorial commodities, laden with values and histories that exceed their consumption by Britain's international museum-going public and the melancholic fantasies into which they are incorporated.

On the webpages for the British Museum, there are photographs of children looking at the Egyptian antiquities behind glass and framed by maternal figures. *Riddles* foresees these images and their iterations of the mirror stage in the museum context. In one part of the sequence, Louise and Anna approach an object together. Louise bends down to share Anna's perspective (Fig. 4). Parallel to the museum providing a frame for its "holdings" (Froggett & Trustram, 2014, p. 490), this image of a mother framing her daughter's engagement with the antiquities represents the value of a maternal care that shapes the child's "subjective, affective engagement" (Froggett & Trustram, 2014, p. 485) with objects of art. The Winnicottian holding makes the child's differentiation possible and creates a passage into external reality and its array of differences. Since it is part of Louise's resistance to patriarchal imperatives, this "subjective, affective engagement" might also lay a foundation for questioning the museum's cultural authority.

The second chapter, "Laura Speaking," is a portrait of Mulvey as the director explaining how central feminism is to the film's questioning of oedipal structures of authority and mastery. After the first chapter in which viewers see two hands flip through the pages of the film magazine *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*, Mulvey appears

Fig. 4: Louise and Anna looking at an object behind glass. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

sitting at a small desk reading from a text and addressing viewers directly (Fig. 5). Her soliloquy reveals how the Sphinx figures into the film's feminist reading of the Oedipus myth. Exiled from the order of the city and reason, the Sphinx "confirms," according to Mulvey, "women's sense of exclusion and suppression" (Mulvey & Wollen, 1977b, p. 62). She also possesses a "questioning voice, a voice asking a riddle," which is why she was chosen to be the film's "imaginary narrator." Mulvey speculates that it is "almost as though Oedipus stands for the conscious mind, and the Sphinx for the unconscious" (Mulvey & Wollen, 1977b, p. 62).

Mulvey's address to viewers is a condensed picture of the reading groups that were crucial for the intellectual explorations spurred on by women's liberation. Along withhistorian Sally Alexander, writer and activist Rosalind Delmar, and the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, film critic and broadcaster Margaret Walters, and artist Mary Kelly—whose *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1978) also draws from the image-world of ancient Egypt—Mulvey was a member of the Women's History Group. Together these activists and intellectuals read from Marxist political theory, structural anthropology, and psychoanalysis to deepen their understanding of the impediments to feminism. As Mulvey (2017) will later explain, "through a women's liberation reading group, I had encountered Freud and psychoanalysis, and it seemed as though Freudian theory could offer a way in, like a small crack of light through a chink in a door, and illuminate the problems that early feminist theory was trying to address" (pp. 317–318). One of those problems was the "socializa[tion]" of women "under patriarchy" (Mulvey, 2017, p. 318), which is characterized by "modes of actual bodily punishment" that discipline women into silence and a "shameful fear of betraying their desire" (Pollock, 2008, p. 125).

A cinematic iteration of Mulvey's contributions to feminist theory, *Riddles* models a disruption of that socialization by challenging the shame and silence assigned to women in dominant visual culture. Mulvey (2017) situates the hieroglyph in relationship to the "stutter" and the "riddle," which are part of the film's "search for the place from which women could utter the repressed counter-meanings of patriarchal discourse" (p. 319). Overlaid with text, the cinematic image is the place for discovering those repressed utterances. Before each shot of "Louise's story told in thirteen shots" is an intertitle composed of an incomplete sentence and arranged like a poem. Rather than explaining the narrative, these

Fig. 5: Laura Mulvey speaking as the director. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

poetic fragments add another layer of writing to the cinematic palimpsest and its search for a place in which women can "utter" what patriarchal discourse forecloses from articulation. In bright turquoise blue lettering, the passage before the scene in the British Museum states:

> a detour through these texts
> entombed now in glass, whose
> enigmatic script reminds her
> of a forgotten history and the
> power of a different language.

This passage foresees the cinematic portrayal of Louise and Anna wandering on "a detour" among the Egyptian antiquities. The "texts" are the hieroglyphs and their "enigmatic script" offers access to a "forgotten history." Making the film akin to analysis, the directors use words to excavate the desires and affects that have been buried by women's internalization of patriarchal imperatives. Since *Riddles* focuses on Louise's daughter Anna, and speculates about her psychic inheritance, this excavation connects to Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's (1994) argument that unresolved psychic traumas are transmitted intergenerationally through figures of burials, phantoms, corpses, tombs, and of course "mummies," a pun that would not have been lost on them. Abraham and Torok disinterred the traumas encrypted by these figures by focusing on the histories condensed in words, and they described the haunted speech of their patients as a "poetics" that the collaborative work of analytic interpretation reveals (1994, p. 140). Working with a similar understanding of language, Mulvey and Wollen compose a feminist poetics of the cinema that rewrites the castration scenario. This rewriting creates openings for white women to unhinge from the white patriarchal dominance that their presumed passivity has so often supported and perhaps make reparative connections to the traumas inflicted through systemic racial oppression.

Riddles operates from a premise that came out of feminism's engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis: by giving birth and devoting themselves to the interrelational care infants require, some women may re-experience the fulfillment that could have been available to them as girls before confronting the assumption that the female body is a site of guilt, inferiority, shame, and loss. Psychoanalysis has a figure for that assignment—castration—which no doubt registers for many readers as a ridiculous cliché, proof of the sexism attributed to psychoanalysis, and hopelessly out of date. And yet, the continuity of misogyny (Manne, 2018), which has accompanied the recent resurgence of white nationalism, warrants a reconsideration of castration as a symptom of patriarchy's psychic hold.

The possibility that women re-experience preoedipal fulfillment through pregnancy can be traced to a text such as Freud's "Femininity" (1933/1964), his late return to the story psychoanalysis tells about girls becoming properly passive women. Hinged on a literary image of a hieroglyph that represents the riddle of femininity, Freud (1933/1964) sifts through his own puzzlement about female sexuality and wavers on whether castration is inherent or imposed (p. 120). What Freud does make clear is that for the girl, castration means giving up her loving attachment to her mother and the power she presumed her mother possessed. While

relinquished, this preoedipal attachment does not disappear. Freud (1933/1964) writes that it is “left over for the future” (p. 134) and women will not be understood until it is “appreciate[ed]” (p. 119). This “prehistory” is dense with ambivalence, as it holds the traces of the girl’s love and the anger of an enforced loss. Ultimately, “Femininity” underscores the idea that women’s bodies are the source of their subordination. But the moments where Freud stresses the importance of women’s “prehistory” are openings to question castration and the defenses it solidifies along the maternal line. One of those defenses is what Juliet Mitchell (1966) describes as the “cult of maternity,” an idealization “matched” by the mother’s “real socio-economic powerlessness” (p. 22). The cult of maternity crystallizes the fantasy of a mother who will, as Barbara Johnson (2003) explains, completely “subordinate” herself to the needs of others (p. 79). The final image of “Femininity” is a portrait of a young woman cast permanently in dereliction and hyperbolically performing, through maternal sacrifice, western culture’s devotion to its sons.

For feminist intellectuals like Mulvey (2017), looking for a “small crack of light” (p. 317) that could illuminate the psychic impediments to feminism’s goal of political transformation, a text such as “Femininity” makes deep-seated assumptions about women available for scrutiny. It is a shadowy map for rewriting the trauma of women’s assignment to castration. What does the story of a woman’s life look like when challenging the assumption that her body is missing something—and therefore presumed guilty and shameful—becomes part of the telling? Disinterring the energies buried by the command that images of women’s bodies signal castration, *Riddles* makes a maternal return to the preoedipal a discovery of feminist potential that translates into a rich visual aesthetic dense with sensuous texture and porous enough to make responsive connections to racial oppressions.

In the shots leading to the scene at the British Museum, Mulvey and Wollen create visual and sonic spaces that evoke the enclosed world Louise creates caring for Anna. The circular pans become wider as the film unfolds and follow how those spaces slowly become part of the public world of London in the 1970s. The disorienting complexity of these shots represents the anomaly of a woman unwilling to relinquish her access to the sensual pleasure of the preoedipal, and Louise’s claim to this pleasure takes the film into its Marxist-feminist reflections on reproductive labor. It also leads her to Maxine, the British African woman she meets in the childcare center where she anxiously leaves Anna. It is likely that Maxine’s work involves caring for children from white middle-class families, but *Riddles* registers the political potential of their friendship to reimagine the hierarchies of reproductive labor through an aesthetically dense portrayal that evokes the complexity of their intersubjective encounter.

The penultimate shot of the “thirteen shots” represents Louise and Maxine in a room that is so richly decorated with objects of jeweled colors and fabrics of intricate patterns that it foreshadows the mummies, sarcophagi, and hieroglyphs in the British Museum and even looks like a private museum space (Fig. 6). There is a prismatic and sensual fullness to this portrayal that defies the assumption that the bodies of these women are inadequate. The positioning of the women in this space, thick with objects, layers, and patterns, contributes to the erotic and queer potential of their relationship, which is, as Grant (2019) explains, “left ambiguously

Fig. 6: Maxine's room. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

suspended between close friends and lovers" (p. 66). The circling camera reveals Louise, who wears a dark robe and sits with her back to a mirror as she reads from a book. The camera then turns to Maxine sitting at a dressing table framed in lights. She wears a silk robe of bright orange-red, and listens as Louise reads passages from her diary in which she has recorded her dreams (Fig. 7). The language is supple and dense, and Mulvey (2017) explains that when composing these diary entries, Wollen drew from the aleatory strategies of surrealist writer Raymond Roussel, which provided a model for creating an "arbitrary vocabulary and a random sequence of phrases" (p. 320). At the center of a scene that resembles the analytic encounter, Maxine's diary is an archive of dream work that realizes the film's attention to writing as a practice that brings unconscious material into consciousness.

The diary entries are the material across which Louise and Maxine collaborate on the collective feminist project of rewriting the sign "woman" and discovering the "power of a different language." The poetic density of the writing evokes the singularity of Maxine's subjectivity and challenges the expectation that the image of her body will be the site where the revision of race and racism takes place. Indeed, the fact that Louise is reading and thinking about the diary entries highlights the possibility that *she* is the character who needs to discover how to rewrite her place within white patriarchal culture. In other words, the film does not stage a scene of inclusion that unconsciously relies on the metaphysics of race and gender to make a

Fig. 7: Maxine listening. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). © British Film Institute Production Board, still courtesy of the BFI National Archive.

clear statement about injustice. Slowly and carefully, the film has brought Louise into the world Maxine has created for herself to work through the splitting of the sign woman into a "coin" that separates white and Black women through the familiar grammar of idealization and denigration (O'Grady, 1994, p. 152).

Riddles does not inflect its portrayal of Maxine with speculations about how her subjectivity might have been shaped by Britain's imperial and colonial histories. This choice is consistent with the film's attention to dimensions of subjectivity that cannot be easily discerned and pictured, but it may also reiterate the ideologies of western political economies that produce and benefit from racial hierarchies while also erasing racism's effects. This is a large-scale denial that white women have, in many instances, benefited from, exacerbated, and defended. While it is not wrong to critique *Riddles* on these grounds, it is also worth reiterating that the film is engaged in a psychoanalytic process of extricating Louise from the role of wife and mother that white patriarchal culture has sedimented through the premise that castration is not a figure but biological and historical fact. This process, long and formidable, is not wholly distinct from deconstructing the biological and historical construction of race. As it brings Louise's preoedipal pleasures from women's "prehistory" into a future lifted from castration's grim inscriptions of biological essentialism, *Riddles* suggests that a feminism engaged with psychoanalysis can contribute to collaborations among women that unravel the entrenched figurations of gender, sexuality, and race put into place by colonial hierarchies.

Freud's reliance on the metaphor of the dark continent is key to that unraveling. As Ranjana Khanna (2003) argues in her study named after the figure, psychoanalysis not only developed as a hermeneutic for the damage colonialism inflicted, but was itself haunted by the repressions that constitute colonialism. Khanna grafts this understanding of psychoanalysis on to transnational feminism and argues that colonial legacies haunt it as well (2003, pp. 207–230). This haunting can be discerned in the splitting in transnational feminism that impedes international coalitions: the sensationalized gestures of rescue on the part of women who benefit from global capitalism, but also the "suspicion" with which those feminists are received by women living in places designated for exploitation (Khanna, 2003, p. 210). This suspicion is warranted, but as Khanna (2003) argues, it also operates "as if colonialism were transparent or knowable in its entirety" (p. 211). The scene in the Egyptian galleries show that colonial histories haunt *Riddles* and the feminist politics from which it emerged, but because the film takes the unconscious as a premise, it begins to work through that haunting rather than repeating it through well-intentioned gestures of inclusion.

The metaphor of the dark continent appears in Freud's *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926/1959), a text in which he argues that those without medical training can practice psychoanalysis, pivoting it away from biology and into culture. The figure comes up in his discussion of infantile sexuality, which provokes the most passionately held objections to his work, and Freud uses the dark continent to identify how female sexuality eludes the grasp of psychoanalysis. Outlining the components of the Oedipus complex, which show that children "regularly direct their sexual wishes towards their nearest relatives," Freud (1926/1959) confesses that "we know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys," and then

declares that "we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of women is a 'dark continent' for psychology" (p. 212). Proximate to the threat of shame, the dark continent functions as an alibi for the challenge of confronting the difference of female sexuality. If the dark continent represents what cannot be known, then castration solidifies the certainty with which female sexuality belongs to its primitivist designation. Freud (1926/1959) asserts without question that girls "feel deeply their lack of a sexual organ that is equal in value to the male one" and that they "regard themselves on that account as inferior" (p. 212). The shame of uncertainty is displaced on to the premise of the girl's inferiority and her charged but unquestioned response to it. On the messy ground of the dark continent, the inferiority attributed to the female body mixes in with the inferiority attributed to racial difference.

The Question of Lay Analysis demonstrates that the figure of the dark continent manifests a colonial vision that makes Africa an example of sexual perversity. Soon after the figure appears, Freud turns to Egypt as part of his deliberation on childhood sexuality. He focuses on Julius Caesar's discovery of Cleopatra having "married … her still younger brother Ptolemy" (Freud, 1926/1959, p. 213). This mythical fragment of imperial history illustrates what is alive in the child—incestuous desires—and repressed in the course of growing up and becoming "civilized." The primitivism at work in this narrative of development becomes clear when Freud (1926/1959) writes that "we can still detect the same archaic factors which were once dominant generally in the primaeval days of human civilization" (p. 212). The child becomes a living embodiment of a primitive past, and this makes it easy to see "exhumed civilizations" such as Egypt as metaphors for the "infantile prehistory of the present" (Pollock, 2006, p. 11). These ideas of racial progress animate western archaeology and are certainly at play in the British Museum's Egyptian galleries. Identifying the ideology in which the museum visitor participates, Pollock (2006) writes that she consumes an image of "human prehistory" in which "the active childhood formations of all humans are disowned as the permanent, backward condition of racialized others" (p. 11). The scene in the British Museum begins to imagine another kind of seeing that the museum could make possible, and makes untangling female sexuality from the visual logics of castration central to that process.

The fictions of castration and primitivism become truths in the field of vision. In "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925/1961), Freud composes a scene of a girl confronting sexual organs different than her own. Unlike the boy, who belatedly arrives at his reaction of either "horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her," the girl is not granted a process of subjectivization, as her body's inferiority is not questioned: "She makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it" (Freud, 1925/1961, p. 252). Freud shows us the metaphysics of vision at work: the female body's predetermined inferiority is internalized and confirmed by the body of the boy, masterfully complete, without damage or deformity. Pollock (2008) argues that Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/1953) illustrates that "as girls emerge into womanhood their access to sexuality is censored so that what they experience as sexuality is its

shaming, its silencing, its unspeakability"(p. 123). This is the "social engineering" of shame that is intimately connected to racial abjection (p. 110). Indeed, Pollock (2008) argues that challenging the deep-seated assumptions that certain bodies "inherit" the "shameful traits" that provoke disgust is a project feminism and anti-racism share (p. 110).

The scene of shame underscores the importance of making images sites for the project of working through the traumas inflicted by colonial hierarchies. Mulvey and Wollen contribute to this project by bringing language to bear upon on the visual surfaces of their film and troubling the knowledge images can transmit with a "flash." As Pollock (2013) explains, images can "generate movement from blocked stasis, to allow a future to flow from the interior frozen lake of trauma" (p. 11). The relay between words and images in *Riddles* illustrates the psychoanalytic understanding of the image Pollock identifies. The texts, voices, and inscriptions make the images part of psychic processes and show that they are "carrier[s] of affects, fantasies, and displaced meanings" (Pollock, 2006, p. 4) In other words, the image in psychoanalysis is archaeological, and this materialist study of human history allows one to represent "patterns of subjectivity" as a "palimpsest of time and meaning, history, memory, and oblivion" (Pollock, 2006, p. 3). It is specifically subjectivity within the analytic encounter for which Freud drew upon the archaeological metaphor, and the 360-degree pan in the Egyptian gallery brings forth the circular relationship between the archaeology of the image and the image of archaeology. This relationship carries the primitive inferiority attributed to female sexuality and its link to racialized others.

Situating this archaeological understanding of the image within Freud's consulting room and its display of antiquities, Pollock (2006) argues that they testify to psychoanalysis as a "musealized space" and are therefore symbols of the laborious process of working through a frozen past that cannot be accessed directly but nevertheless shapes the present (p. 6). While Freud's objects "stand for the shattered, incomplete, and repressed histories, no longer available in their original unity or vitality," psychoanalysis allows the "discontinuous fragments" to become "rewoven into the tissue of shifting, subjective meaning" (Pollock, 2006, p. 5). What *Riddles* suggests is that gender and race are also "musealized," so it is not only cultural extraction the museum scene exemplifies, but also its work displaying, preserving, and holding objects until they can be woven into perception differently. The 360-degree pan imagines disinterring the traumas attached to both identity categories and moving through its "musealized" space, its crypt. Repression, whether individual, familial, or cultural, "at once erases and encrypts traumatic memories. They are *buried* and thus preserved like relics in the unconscious" (Pollock, 2006, p. 10, original emphasis). Psychoanalysis follows the lines of encryption to exhume the relics the unconscious preserves.

In the scene at the British Museum, the voice of the Sphinx, which Grant (2019, p. 66) links to Maxine, narrates that exhumation and carries its possibility into the future. While on screen Anna wanders the gallery as a young girl with her mother, the Sphinx narrates her childhood memories from "a point in her adult future" (Grant, 2019, p. 67). These recollections center on the sensuous plentitude of her mother's care, and include entering her mother's bedroom and seeing her sleeping

next to another woman, presumably Maxine: “She suddenly understood something she realized her mother had tried to explain…” (Mulvey & Wollen, 1977b, p. 76). Upon this discovery, she remembers feeling a surge of panic as though she might be abandoned, and though she anticipates her mother’s anger, sees her reassuring smile instead. These memories underscore that *Riddles* is imagining a matrilineal form of inheritance and the mother’s loved complexity as a caring figure who has not sacrificed her desires, both of which bestow the daughter with a sense of fullness that maps paths beyond her submission to castration. Overlaying the cinematic portrayal of Egyptian antiquities, the voice of the Sphinx reimagines the girl’s assignment to the “dark continent” without the logics of victory, defeat, and shame that encourage the displacement of that assignment on to the otherness of racial difference. Put simply, the scene in the museum imagines the development of a white daughter who can respond to the kaleidoscopic image of Louise and Maxine reading together in a private museum world and perhaps bring the potential of that representation of women collaborating across racial divisions into a political future in which structural racism can be dismantled.

Though it does not satisfy the demand to see clear images of political progress, *Riddles* does foresee the recent reckoning with the trauma museums have participated in by organizing themselves around the concept of civilization and the white masculinity that undergirds it. “Seeking a ‘pedagogy of hope’” for the museum, Timothy P. Brown (2004) argues that an understanding of trauma is necessary if this reckoning is going to address the violence that characterizes the twentieth century, the “age of catastrophe” (p. 249). Brown (2004) focuses specifically on the trauma of the Middle Passage and the “universal construction of whiteness as citizenship” that blocks out the “persisting reality of racial pain” (p. 251). His insights illuminate quite precisely the histories of exploitation the Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum hold: “Despite the image of pure prestige that characterizes the museum, a traumatic rupture essentially marks the artefact; it is the symbolic nexus of a social wound. Not only has the artefact been violently transplanted from one context to another; identity has been displaced and relocated” (pp. 247-248). Brown (2004) calls for a concept of the artifact that is “entangled in a history that must be re-imagined, re-membered, and retold in the interest of future possibilities” (p. 255). Overlapping with Froggett and Trustram’s argument about the “aesthetic third” the museum can foster (2014, p. 483), this reimagining entails seeing the artifact as a psychic object shadowed by the concept of the dark continent and riven with damage and loss. Brown (2004) argues that this entanglement entails softening the split between the “victim” and the “hero” but also understanding the “limits of shame and defeat” (p. 254). A museum unreflectively committed to its heroic memory shuts down the possibility of holding and healing the damage inflicted on the “tissue” of communities that its stolen artifacts represent and perpetuate (Brown, 2004, p. 249). Seeking a vision for the museum that would facilitate such a process, Brown (2004) asks: “Can cultural institutions extend themselves to a participatory form of symbolic action that would enable education to embrace and work through the very notion of crisis?” (p. 247). When understood within *Riddles* as a whole, the scene that takes place at the British Museum answers Brown’s question in the affirmative. It challenges the assumptions

that animate the museum's pretense to mastery and shows that working through the familiar splitting of the sign "woman" is one way that "participatory form[s] of symbolic action"' might begin (Brown, 2004, p. 247).

This essay began with Loretta Ross's (2019) argument that before white women can really understand the lives of Black women, they need insight into how hierarchies of gender and race have shaped their own lives. Ross does not take white women out of white supremacy or excuse their participation in it. Nor does she idealize them as people who already or automatically know the racisms with which they are complicit. Instead, Ross suggests that white women are subjects written by histories of white patriarchal dominance. *Riddles* offers a cinematic image of a white middle-class mother working through those long and stubborn histories by moving her out of the mise-en-scène of castration and excavating the links among women, guilt, and shame. When set in relationship to Ross's op-ed and the issues of "public shaming" it raises, the revision of castration in *Riddles* leads to the possibility of white women relinquishing the assignment to buttress the fiction of white masculine superiority and interrupt the entrenched habit of displacing the inferiority assigned to female bodies on to racial others. If deployed unreflectively, shame can provoke white women to defend themselves against calls for anti-racism rather than see correspondences between the censoring they have experienced and the repressions of racial abjection. Unsettling that defensive habit could lay the groundwork for responding to Black feminism's call to hear the words of women whose lives have been shaped by structural racism, but also see Black women as people with subjectivities that are neither transparent nor easily "musealized." Mulvey and Wollen's representation of the Egyptian galleries in the British Museum suggests that the feminist avant-garde cinema that developed in the 1970s can contribute to such a process by foregrounding museum artifacts as psychic objects that keep the damages of traumatic histories and the possibilities of healing in tension. With its sensual and disorienting aesthetic, *Riddles* shows viewers that the museum can be a place for realizing these goals on a collective scale. Displaying images that carry traumatic histories of theft, shame, displacement, and silence, the British Museum's "holdings" could be a model for the patient holding of images so the revolutionary turn into a reparative future can be glimpsed.

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