# Tracey Moffatt

## Free-Falling

# Only Angels Have Wings

Isaac Julien with Mark Nash

*April 21, 1987*

*Dear Sankofa Group.*

*My name is Tracey Moffatt. ... I'm writing to introduce myself since I am coming to London shortly and would like to meet you all. I've known about your film group for a few years now. ... I've been asked along with some other Aboriginal artists to attend an Arts Festival in Portsmouth in the South of England. Part of this festival will be a reenactment of the launching of the First Fleet, so it seems ridiculous that the organizers have asked us to attend this ceremony (the Queen will be present) when all it represents is the beginning of the invasion into our traditional lands. Therefore I am planning some sort of demonstration on the 13th of May in Portsmouth Harbour and I'm looking for support, especially from Black people. I have agreed to display my photographic work, this doesn't bother me, but I have no intention of standing around waving at a bunch of tall ships setting sail for Australia.*

In April 1987 Sankofa (the black film and video collective that I cofounded in 1983), received this postcard from Tracey Moffatt. It would be only later that I would have the opportunity to see her black-and-white prints *Some Lads* (1986), showing urban Aboriginal youths from the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Company—mainly men in various poses of undress, playing and smiling, all very cute, some with dreadlocks, and with pumped chests à la Bruce Weber. These images introduced us to an urban Aboriginal artistic community that even looked like some of the members of our own film group. We felt an immediate identification with Tracey's work. In the same postcard, Tracey wrote that she had just finished a short film:

*I'm also planning on bringing over my latest film called "Nice Colored Girls." It is a short (16 minutes) experimental piece which explores attitudes between white men and black women in this country [Australia] in an historical and contemporary context. Though the underlying purpose of the work is to illustrate the existence of a very real "urban Aboriginal culture."*

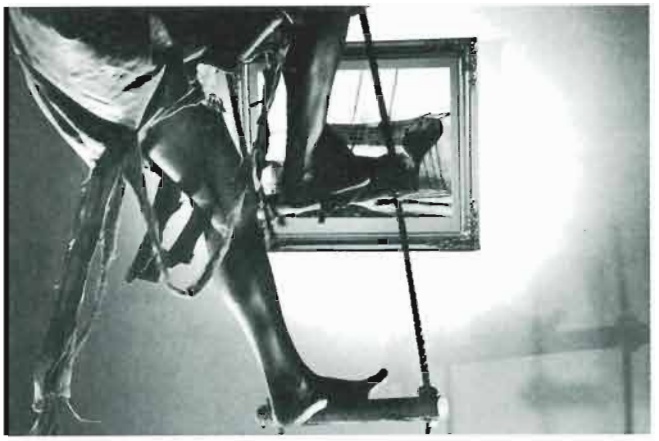
We didn't get to see the film right away, but another postcard —to Martina Attille, another founding member of the collective, on June 21, 1987—pointed us toward it:

*My film "Nice Colored Girls" was programmed with your film "Passion"* [Passion of Remembrance, *1986] at the film festival. It was well received. ... I think audiences have found your film an interesting exercise, but I heard comments like "Oh, very BFI" [British Film Institute], which I wasn't sure of what was meant, comparisons with S [Sally] Potter's "Gold Diggers"!! ... I hate having to be the spy in the audience. ... My little film is currently on videotape sitting in Sheila Whittikar's office, London Film Festival, why don't you ring her and grab it and look at it. I'm very pleased with it.*

We couldn't wait—we were thrilled to be able to see it. *Nice Colored Girls* turned out to be a cheeky, irreverent short. A meditation on girls out on the town, hustling in the night, in Sydney's downtown Kings Cross area, this stylized experimental film gave us an insight into the lives of young "colored girls" searching for "capital." These young urban Aboriginal women are emblematic of the bad-gurrl protagonists of much of Tracey's work.

These women's nights out become a rather precarious occupation: for them to fully experience pleasure, a seduction of revenge has to take place. Showing us what desire looks like in this postcolonial exchange for money, *Nice Colored Girls* contrasts the relationship between these contemporary urban Aboriginal women and their "captains" (sugar daddies) with that between Aboriginal women and white-male colonists over two hundred years ago. Where Aboriginal women once went on board the colonists' ships and exchanged their bodies for bags of coin, their descendants seduce modern-day captains by getting them drunk, dancing with them, and eventually snatching their wallets. As the film's subtitles put it (mimicking the style of anthropological films), "We call them captains because our mothers and grandmothers have always called them that." These gurrls enjoy themselves now much as the colonists report they enjoyed themselves then. Now, of course, things have changed, but maybe not enough—these women still have to play with the colonial masters to earn a living.

Moffatt's cinema has always involved dislocations of time and space, apparent in *Nice Colored Girls* through cuts between the Aboriginal girls' nightly rituals of seduction and a series of historical reenactments. In a film studio, an etching hanging on a wall in an ornate gilt frame shows a coastline with a European ship moored in the distance. In the foreground, with their backs to us, Aboriginal figures stand looking out over the bay. The camera backtracks, we hear contemporary street sounds, a rope ladder abruptly falls in front of the wall where the picture hangs, and all of a sudden several Aboriginal women climb up it as we hear a voice-over from a journal of an early English male settler. His narration of an interracial encounter is permeated with colonialist desire for the Other.



still from *Nice Colored Girls*, 1987

This play with the picture and frame recalls Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* of 1972, and, in fact, *Nice Colored Girls* is imbued with antirealist film strategies. In its attempt to avoid a linear narrative style, the film is reacting against the realist tradition of documentary or ethnographic film. It also comments on that tradition in its use of subtitling and in its foregrounding of artifice, decor, and color; throughout, it avoids the clichés of realist enactment. *Nice Colored Girls* immediately gave us an impression of Tracey as an artist interested in a Brechtian kind of critical distance as an act of political subversion, representing girls who have to behave badly through economic necessity but who refuse to be made to feel guilty because of that. Maybe Tracey was a bad gurrl herself. Indeed we were not disappointed when we met her.

I met Tracey again in 1991 when Mark Nash and I went to Australia to show my film *Young Soul Rebels* at the Sydney Film Festival shortly after its screening in Cannes. Tracey was working on the script for a film of her own, *Bedevil*, which eventually screened during the director's fortnight in Cannes in 1993. Tracey struck me as a charming postmodern artist. During our visit, I sensed that she felt quite alone in Australia, but she treasured her isolation in a way: it forced her to concentrate. She couldn't spend time being vocal about people's indifference to her concerns and just had to get on with making work, which was indeed what she did. She spoke of how much the Australian audience had liked my *Looking for Langston* (1989), and said she had been impressed not only by its visuality but also by its beautiful actors (boys being an interest we both shared). In my mind's eye, I had already identified Tracey as one of the mixed-race angels in my film who peer down from the balcony, their eyes beams of light that shine on human subjects who have been shunned and excluded. In a way, she was like Walter Benjamin's angel of history:

*His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.*[1]

1
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; reprint New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 257–58.

In Sankofa, Martina Attille and I recognized Tracey as a kindred spirit, working with similar themes but on the other side of the world—part of a diasporic exchange, part of her "network of like-minded artists." More important, we shared her aesthetic interest in artifice, style, and the tableau. Martina's short film *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) also shared Tracey-like aesthetics, and was shown along with *Nice Colored Girls* on England's Channel 4 TV in 1991. Form, light, color, mise-en-scène were foregrounded in Tracey's films and photographs, cutting across the restrictions of realist documentary, a category of visual production rooted in ethnography that we almost instinctively distrusted—not just because it usually misrepresented the lives of working-class or black people, but also because the strategies used by traditional documentaries to explore questions of racial difference and discrimination were too questionably informational, and simply "fixing."

When Lynne Cooke of the Dia Center for the Arts asked me to write an essay for this catalogue, she said that she wasn't asking me as a black artist but as someone who knew something of Tracey and admired her work, and who, through my own work, was familiar not only with film but with the placement of both film and installation in the art world. When I spoke to Tracey about the essay, she replied, "If you write about me as a woman artist of color I will kill you!" This extremely humorous joke was a response, I think, to the fact that critics writing about Tracey's work tend to emphasize her ethnicity and often ignore the extent to which her work explores constructions of whiteness and masculinity in postcolonial Australia, and the interdependency of Aboriginal cultures with the so-called white Australian culture. As someone whose work contests positionings like "artist of color," I would be last to reinstitute them. Still, even if Tracey's art is in no way defined by race and gender difference, it is clearly and crucially inflected by her particular experience of their effects, which contribute to it some of its most potent themes.

Tracey's art looks back to the psychic terrors and desires of the colonial past to make sense of the future. Other Australia-based women artists deal with some of these concerns (Laleen Jayamanne, for example, in her *Song of Ceylon* of 1985), but I haven't seen any doing so in such an accomplished way, free of the dictates of theoretical fashion. (It is often forgotten that Australia was at the vanguard of postmodern theory—publishing the translations in English of Michel Foucault, for example.) Dia's "Free-Falling" show is Tracey's first large-scale exhibition in New York. Presenting provocative work in film, photography, and video installation, it establishes her as an artist of international stature. The elements of the exhibition present different, often opposed, aesthetic strategies, but by looking more closely, we can tease out some of the continuities.

The video installation *Heaven* (1997) appropriates the fetishistic gaze usually attributed to the masculine imaginary and turns it back on men. White and black surfers at Sydney's Bondi Beach habitually change in and out of their swimming trunks on the street; Tracey finds them cloaking themselves in towels, or sheltering behind their cars. Interrupting this circuit in which men are usually seen only by one another, Tracey treats it as a performance staged for her camera. Of course, she chooses only the most beautiful boys to photograph. Later, however, she undercuts their narcissism by daring them to expose themselves to her. Some are cocksure, some regress into heterosexual mooning, others turn coy, struggling with their briefs in the confines of their cars. Ten years after *Nice Colored Girls*, we find one of the bad-gurrl characters now let loose on Bondi Beach, accosting surfers rather than captains, giving up watching for wallets in Kings Cross and taking up the camera to cruise for butts in Bondi.

Despite *Heaven*'s elements of erotic tease, it actually draws attention to the distinction between penis and phallus. The sculpted bodies of the surfers may be phallically masterful, but we see them at the limp-penis stage—not at their moment of physical glory, the moment of surfing, but skulking in their cars before or after it. These carefully modeled bodies end up becoming signs of the vulnerability and naïveté of masculinity. The soundtrack, similarly, has nothing to do with the action on the street. Although we see the men speaking, we do not hear their voices; instead we hear the crash of waves, interwoven with Tibetan drumming. The image of masculinity, then, is stripped of the *sound* of masculinity; the men are thus reduced to their images. Yet the sounds of both drums and sea—where Tracey, had she chosen to, could have photographed the surfers in glorious physical display—connote realms of masculinity. The fetishistic gaze, then, is displaced from the imaged body into a world it cannot actually see, the world implied by the sound of the sea and the drums. In all these respects, *Heaven* is a particularly irreverent example of a common effort in feminist and avant-garde cinema: an attempt to debunk some of the more oppressive tropes of heterosexuality.

*Heaven* is shown on a TV monitor, the small scale of the image reinforcing the video's intimacy. *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), though a short film, is a full-scale movie in its style and effect. It tells the story of a middle-aged Aboriginal woman forced to care for the ancient invalid white woman by whom she was adopted as a child. The characters are based on those of the 1955 Australian classic *Jedda* (directed by Charles Chauvel), one of the earliest Australian films to address the predicament of Aboriginal people being incorporated into a racist society. In *Night Cries*, the characters are presented as if thirty years older than in *Jedda* and living out their days alone in a now very decayed and cobwebbed studio-set homestead in the middle of a painted-backdrop desert.

stills from *Heaven*, 1997

Documentary films like Alec Morgan's *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1984) have also exposed the assimilationist policies of successive Australian governments that aimed to erase Aboriginal culture, for instance, the so-called Aboriginal Protection Board's forced removal of Aboriginal children into white foster homes to be used as slave labor between 1909 and 1930 (just as the early colonists had attempted to remove Aboriginal people altogether). *Night Cries* takes a more emotionally complex and ambiguous tack, dealing with the intricate scenarios of love and dependency that develop in mother-daughter relationships, whether biological or "cultural" (in, say, cases of adoption).

The two women in *Night Cries* participate in a "rural tragedy" of colonial domesticity. The film is shot through by diegetic cuts describing a stylized Salvador Dali–type landscape, the frame for the perverse relationships of domesticity, which are seen through a series of tableaux vivants featuring an old white "mother" who is brutishly but not unaffectionately served by a darker-skinned "daughter." The rendering of this "moment of hybridity"[2] is heightened by the colorful artifice of Tracey's painterly eye, as elements of narrative, biographical, or ethnographic interest are eclipsed in favor of phantasmatic scenarios. The mother-daughter relationship is a recurring motif across all of Tracey's work.

## Terra Nullius

Only in the last decade have Aboriginal peoples been able to establish legal recognition for themselves in the Australian state. The original genocidal campaigns of colonialism, along with subsequent expropriations and forced removals, were based on a sophistry developed by the British, who described Australia as an empty, uninhabited country (terra nullius). The colonists decided, in other words, that the continent they had "discovered" was empty of human life. Since Aboriginal peoples were not really human, they could simply be treated as animals, and exterminated. No need for treaties or agreements; the Europeans could just move in. Missionaries were sent out into this arid desert of a continent to try and convert its "savages" not just to Christianity but, in the process, to "humanity." Aboriginal children and the inevitably increasing population of mixed-race children were removed to orphanages and foster homes (the official policy of "due care"), eventually growing up to provide a source of cheap domestic and industrial labor. After a long legal battle waged by Aboriginal groups, the ideology behind this policy was finally overturned by the Australian High Court's *Mabo* decision in June 1992 (which established a concept of "native title" to land) that would take precedence over that imposed by the colonists. The present Australian government is seeking, without the agreement of Aboriginal people, to override the 1993 Native Title Act, which was passed as the result of negotiations with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interests and the government following *Mabo*. If successful, it will remove native title rights over large tracts of land.

[2] I quote Homi Bhabha's term for the condition of the mixed-race postcolonial subject, for whom a simple racial identity is not possible, but who finds inventive and creative modes of living racially or indeed sexually diverse identities.

The adoption policy is one of the primal scenes for Tracey's work, evidenced both in *Night Cries* and in the ghostly *Up in the Sky* (1997), a series of offset prints presenting staged images masquerading as documentary ones. One photograph, taken from inside a shabby shack, allows a glimpse of three nuns outside, framed in the window like sinister crows waiting to seize their prey—a brown baby in the arms of a white woman. In another photo, a trio of nuns toss the baby between them. Elsewhere two children play in the shadow of an embankment, which has the hieratic stillness of an Egyptian pyramid. One wears a nurse's uniform, the other stands blindfolded. In another photograph, the carcass of a dead cow hangs in a tree shot through by the sun's rays, while two butch-looking women, apparently about to be interrupted by a third protagonist, argue below.

These are scenes of lives in what appear to be squatter camps. Black and white figures wrestle in the dust; car-wreckers stand astride smashed vehicles; a crowd of black and white villagers line the street, witnessing something of the commotion introduced by the intrusive camera. The scenes evoke images of Outback life familiar from beer and car commercials on TV, as well as from documentaries exposing the abjectness to which both Aboriginal and poor white ("white trash") communities have been condemned. At the same time, the figuring of the white protagonists suggests other scenes: Tracey seems to have been influenced by Pasolini's imaging of the slums outside Rome. Neither *Accattone* nor George Mitchell's Mad Max films, *Up in the Sky* could nevertheless almost be a recently discovered set of production stills from such films. These images were shot in the abandoned mining area of Broken Hill in southeastern Australia, where many commercials as well as the Mad Max series were shot—a "junky Australian landscape" where Moffatt found people ready to pose for her.[3] Everyone desires the Warholian moment.

The mesmerizing stare on the face of a white girl is frozen, abandoned. As she sits in a metal tub, waiting for "something more," a rough, tattooed young white man walks along, smiling to himself. White townsfolk return our gaze as they look out of the picture frame, as if waiting for the director to say "Action!" before a crowd scene begins. Dazed by a car's headlights, a crazed white man crawls across the road—the cliché of Aboriginal abjection in the white imaginary. Then he crawls back. In this science-fiction Australia, some roles are reversed, bringing the elements of fantasy in our imagining of them closer to home. We also find a counter-reading to terra nullius—in a sense, it is now the white race that is abandoned. Tracey focuses her affinity with and ambivalence toward these landscapes through her staged reenactments, which look as if they might come from film, television, or *Life* magazine spreads from the fifties. A reworking of the master narrative of race relations is a recurring motif; the scenes are thoroughly implanted with demonstrations of interracial interdependence, and also of a gendered subjectivity.

3
Sonya Voumard, "The Moffatt Mosaic," *The Australian Way* (Qantas inflight magazine), (August 1996).

Whereas a number of contemporary artists (Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Rebecca Horn, Julian Schnabel)[4] have been fascinated by mainstream cinema, Tracey is one of several artists making the opposite move from film and video to the gallery, presenting moving and still images together in the space of art. Avant-garde and experimental film has moved closer to the art world in recent years, separating itself from more mainstream narrative cinema, which may have incorporated some of its innovations but has rejected its radical vision. Hollywood and the art world are opposed on the question of meaning: where Hollywood likes meaning to be self-evident (but often makes it either inconsequential or a reinforcement of conventional systems of understanding), postmodern art of the nineties is concerned with meaning's absence, or with the suspension of narrative. There is, to adapt Frank Kermode's phrase, no longer any sense in having an ending at all. Tracey's work is emblematic here: abandoned somewhere in Australia (somewhere reminiscent of one of the settlements clustered along the trans-Australian railroad, and occasionally visited by documentary filmmakers and social workers), we are at some kind of crossroads. In terms of race, the assimilationist narrative has been eviscerated; but there is no utopian multicultural narrative to take its place.

The narrative of progress has been replaced by a series of Manichean encounters, such as the staged roller-derby encounters in the photo series *GUAPA (Good Looking)* (1995).[5] The black and white female contestants enact violent encounters with one another and with the (white) male referee. Is this the fantasy assimilationist arena of American sports (the series was made during a residency in Texas)? Or a semisublimated enactment of racial and sexual antagonisms? The photographs are tinted in soft rose-sepia pastel shades that could evoke advertisements for feminine products, further confusing the viewer as to what is really at stake. As distilled, hyperstylized simulations of photojournalism in old *Life* magazines from the fifties, they contest an already established documentary format. These women are formidable-looking people and are clearly having fun.

Here and elsewhere, Tracey deploys a kind of absence of signification, achieved not by draining the signifier of its significance but by deriving it from precontextualized elements that are nevertheless cut off from subjective and autobiographical narratives. The images, then, are floating, as if in a time capsule, left for some future civilization to determine their meaning, which is almost on the verge of being lost. When I was teaching cinema studies at New York University recently, I was able to see Tracey's film *Moodeitj-Yorgas (Solid Women)* (1988), a series of documentary video interviews with Aboriginal women in Western Australia, interrupted by visual and auditory dislocations. Confirming that Tracey's insight into Australian national identity and artistic cultural practices could only be

4
See Mike O'Pray, "Movie Wannabes," *Art Monthly*, no. 210 (October 1997), pp. 1–6.

5
Televised with great popularity in the seventies, roller derby contests—with their snarling, bumptious skaters engaged in what appeared to be mortal combat—exemplify Tracey's identification of sport as the synthesis of theater and violence. To emulate roller derby's tough female competitors, Tracey hired models with thick muscular bodies, and clothed them in costumes produced by a local Texan seamstress. See Tracey Moffatt, "Diary of a Texas Art Residency," in *Tracey Moffatt: Fever Pitch* (Annandale, Australia: Piper Press, 1995), pp. 5–12.

postcolonial and postmodern, *Moodeitj-Yorgas* problematizes the conventional first-person interview strategy with out-of-sync sound. Meanwhile, her questioning of Aboriginality, and her view of it and whiteness as interrelated, undermine the binaristic positioning of Europeans and Otherness so prevalent in race relations. *Moodeitj-Yorgas* began a process of healing the ontological and narcissistic wounds of nonwhite subjects; while Tracey's inventory of hybrid representations moved toward the possibility of a métisse or creole society, it also acknowledged the value and ethics of Aboriginal cultures. And the film's status as a series of experimental video portraits emphasized its own technological and electronic form, announcing the death of realistic ethnographic documentary practice and the birth of a more aesthetic, self-reflexive art.

The question of resignification is crucial to Tracey. Contesting the cheap race-relations sociology that would condemn the nonwhite artist to performing the Other, she refuses any fixity that would correspond to the categories of identity politics. What could it mean, in fact, for an artist to be fixated on codes of racial difference while not prioritizing the question of visual form? Tracey is one of a number of "bad gurrl/badd blak" women artists—Kara Walker comes to mind as another—who seek to avoid the burden of black representation by hyperbolic use of stereotypes. Race signifies and creates meaning in our readings of visual representations, but Tracey's work is also about the impossibility of a calculus of the multiple tragedies of race and colonialism—the "modern tragedy" according to Raymond Williams in his book of the same name, which is distinguished by the impossibility of extrapolating from the Greek and Shakespearean tragedy of the individual to the tragedy of a whole social group.[6] Haunted by a colonial past, we can use Tracey's work to reposition ourselves through what she brings of modernity to this landscape. Whiteness and Otherness are transformed in this encounter.

Lacanian analyst Danuza Machado has compared the relations, on the one hand, between analysis and the analysand, and on the other, between the work of art and the viewer. She says,

*The work of art is something that doesn't make sense, it proliferates sense. ... It is something that provokes in the viewer a turning point like the psychoanalytic act. ... [Like] any form of entertainment, it is a way out of the malaise of daily life, it makes you think about your situation.*[7]

It is this daily malaise of race relations that Tracey wants to shake up. In *Up in the Sky*, there is a photograph of a dark-skinned Aboriginal man staring up into the sky. Behind him, a sunset glows across a mountain. In another image, an Aboriginal baby lies on a bed behind a broken wall. Which is the past? Which is

6
See Raymond Williams, *The Modern Tragedy* (London: Verso Editions, 1979).

7
Danuza Machado, "A Little Object," interview by Alex Potts, *AN* (previously *Artists Newsletter*) (September 1997), pp. 10–13.

the future? Moffatt provides various pairings and triplings in her displays of images in "Free-Falling," inviting the viewer to imagine these images like film stills—stills, however, that do not let the viewer imagine a single narrative but offer differing, contested ones. The possibility of uniting these disparate fragments (and their implied profilmic reality) is promised in the aesthetics of the display, but then withheld. *Up in the Sky* evokes the ontological and narcissistic injuries that are performed on the body of the Other.

As Françoise Vergès has written in a discussion of anamnesis, the work of thought, "A group can express what is still lacking or still to come only through a redistribution of its past. From the knowledge of the past, of the conditions that made it such, a group can decide what is lacking, for instance freedom or equality."[8] Moffatt's work is about exposing or exploring some of those gaps in representation. It both evokes the injuries of the colonial past and imagines other scenarios, such as those of *Up in the Sky*, which thus can be imagined differently, even transcended. A phantasmatic repetition of the loss and injury that Aboriginal peoples, among others, have suffered, her art is about reparation. It is about the possibilities of working through those experiences to move beyond issues of identity. Opening the grave, freeing the ghosts whose presence haunts the living, is not only essential to understanding, it is also an essential part of her art.

8
Françoise Vergès, "Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism," in *The Fact of Blackness*, ed. Alan Reid (London: ICA, 1996), p.64.

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is an artist and filmmaker who is currently a visiting lecturer in Afro-American studies and visual and environmental studies at Harvard University. His most recent film is *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* (1996), most recently screened at the 38th Film Festival Dei Popoli, Italy, and his most recent installations are *Trussed* at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff and *Fanon S.A.*, shown at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennal 1997.

**Mark Nash**
is a lecturer in film history and theory at the University of East London and produced and cowrote *Frantz Fanon*.

from *Up in the Sky*, 1997