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Lord, C.; Williams Gamaker, M.

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Catherine Lord with Michelle Williams Gamaker

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Take 1: Preposterous and Other Histories

Michelle Williams Gamaker, an artist, filmmaker, and practice-based scholar, is currently exhibiting *House of Women* (2017-).¹ It is a short fictional documentary that depicts an audition for the role of Kanchi, the South Asian, mute and colonized female character of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's celebrated feature film *Black Narcissus* (1947). Adapted from Rumer Godden's 1939 novel of the same name,² the 1947 film is set in a religious mission in the Himalayas, where, in the mountains north of Darjeeling, a convent of nuns has established a school and dispensary. The base, in the deserted palace of Mopu that was once a harem for Indian women, is euphemistically called 'The House of Women.' Re-appropriating this sobriquet for her own artwork, Williams Gamaker constructs an aesthetic and political critique of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's tale of white, western nuns attempting to assert their authority over the colonized Other.³ As Richard Dyer notes, such narratives expose the fragilities of white male power by centring the 'white female soul.'⁴ Rather than making a film which dramatizes the white man's anxieties, Powell and Pressburger displaced this central problem of gender and ethnicity onto a group of white, female characters. The nuns become the vehicle for exploring the crisis of colonial masculinity as its powers are on the wane.

In response to these colonial symptoms, Williams Gamaker introduces four auditioning actors, all with equal screen time, each of whom identify as Indian or Indian-British. They form a collective of highly educated, ambitious, talented, articulate female and transgender actors: Jasdeep Kandola, Tina Mander, Arunima Rajkumar and Krishna Isha. Throughout the film, a mystery surrounds the question of whether this recasting is for a future remake of *Black Narcissus* or for an altogether different film or, given another surreal yet strong possibility, whether perhaps Williams Gamaker is re-auditioning the actors for the 'original' feature. Tantalizingly, the film opens with 'in November 2014, auditions were held to recast the role.' In other words, the re-enactment of the casting from 1946-7 could equally well be played out in 2014. Indeed, a 'symptomatic' reading of *House of Women* can accomplish a re-visitation of the antecedent work by addressing some of its key repressions. Could the present film release and transform the symptoms of the precursor work?

If the filmmaker's imaginative re-enactments take place through what cultural analyst Mieke Bal has termed artistic acts of 'preposterous history,'⁵ we would respond in the affirmative. For Bal, such artistic works are 'theoretical objects that "theorize" cultural history. This

theorizing makes them instances of cultural philosophy and they deserve the name *theoretical objects*.⁶ Bal's concept of preposterous history follows artists who take a style, genre or aesthetic tactic to its extreme. Thus, she argues for an aesthetic re-visitation and re-enactment that can be flagrant and excessive. The implication of Bal's approach is that practice-based works can be likewise daring and extreme in re-enacting their precursors' creations.

Williams Gamaker's 'house' of gender-fluid and Indian/Indian-British talents carries out acts of preposterous history by recreating a Kanchi who might disrupt and correct what Powell and Pressburger's film presents: the emotional and political remnants of a fading British Empire. In a critical practice of re-visitation, ghosts will come to the fore. In his work about Marx's 'spectres', Jacques Derrida proposes that the spectre arrives in order to be re-articulated and re-invented.⁷ More boldly than Derrida, Williams Gamaker has made a film which expels colonial ghosts, refusing to let them roam about carrying their hegemonies under their arms. Such 'spectre-busting' requires a bold use of genre and style to subvert, critique, and do practice-based work on the predecessors' work.

Our goal is to explore *House of Women* as a unique act of preposterous history-making. By this we mean that it will not mimic or ventriloquize Bal's concept. Rather, here we understand the term 'preposterous filmmaking' as a process of hybridizing elements of the precursor together with the current work. We will explore how *Black Narcissus* starts to look incomplete without its *enfant terrible* descendant.

In this regard, one helpful interlocutor is Gayatri Spivak. Her canonical concept of the 'subaltern' puts forward the notion of an unspeakable space which radical forms of repetition and re-enactment might liberate.⁸ The paradoxical aspect of a filmed audition is its status as what we term *filmed theatre*. The entire premise of actors turning up for interviews about their lives, before reading and then re-reading the script, is taken for granted not just in film and television auditions, but also in stage castings. Rebecca Schneider's ground-breaking study of how theatre 'performs remains' questions the notion that live theatre is somehow free from re-enacting the past as an entanglement of already-made events.⁹ While Bal's use of preposterous history joins together contemporary works with historical precedents so that the recent reforms the anterior, Schneider examines how theatrical re-enactment responds to cultural histories in times of political crisis. We argue that preposterous filmmaking leaves the predecessor in need of Other histories and their mediations. Williams Gamaker's film aims to go beyond the task of re-interpreting a historical, cinematic text. Crucially, her film has a mission. It involves re-imagining *Black Narcissus*, using the audition as the point of departure. The aesthetic, political, and imaginative ambition is to re-start Pressburger and Powell's film, as though it might be transported into a contemporary dimension. *House of Women* refuses to let the precursor become 'all there is.'

Take 2 and 3: Subalterns Get Preposterous

Actors repeat and re-perform lines in different ways. The four auditionees turn up and provide a range of different interpretations of Kanchi. They are roughly the same age –twenty-six – as Jean Simmons would have been when she auditioned for *Black Narcissus*. Following the novel, screenplay, and directors, Simmons sexualized the female Indian identity of the sixteen-year-old Kanchi who, throughout the entire film, says not a word. Actor and filmmakers

engaged in an unspeakable act: white Simmons ‘blacked up.’¹⁰ In stark contrast, Williams Gamaker’s four auditionees are outspoken. They all share information about their multifaceted heritages, mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds, complex diasporic statuses, degrees in law, and acting ambitions. A polite, engaging yet faceless interviewer, played by Kelly Hunter, pursues her interviewees in crisp Received Pronunciation, a voice enameled with serious yet *faux* intimacy and inflected with moments of condescension and threat. In this preposterous audition, one can imagine the young auditionees encouraging Jean Simmons’s character to speak. However, the filmed audition traps them in a vulnerable interview format where one would want to do the right thing to get the role. The spectre of the subaltern looms between takes.

Spivak’s much cited 1988 essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ presents a key problem for a subjectivity so structured by the hegemonies of power and language. Often voiced by white, western, male philosophers who impose their concepts and language on colonial subjects, the often non-white female exists at the margins of society; ‘they’ would express themselves ‘otherwise’ in radically different terms. Spivak’s case-study is the Hindu widow throwing herself on her dead husband’s pyre and the scorching critique hurled at it by white male western discourse:

Faced with dialectically interlocking sentences that are constructible as ‘White men are saving brown women from brown men’ and ‘The women wanted to die,’ the postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis – What does this mean? – and begins to plot a history.¹¹

The issue here is the difficulty of tracing the voices of the women between the lines of gender, race, and religion. What would these women say and in what signs and symbols would they voice it? The subaltern’s cultural heritage of silence may mask the potential of voices that can come to life through a new plotting or, in the case of Williams Gamaker’s film, the capability of the prospective Kanchis to reiterate and alter the fixed audition text.



Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Alphabets*, 2017, sequence from *House of Women*, available at: <http://www.oarplatform.com/house-of-preposterous-women/>.

Williams Gamaker smartly reveals the paradox inherent in discourse and naming. The reading aloud of the alphabet of names is a prime example. The acting hopefuls recite a laundry list of very British names. Some are more or less neutral in terms of class, such as Mary and Tommy. But Oliver, Henry, Lucy, and Edward provide a class of normatively evaluated 'posh' names, while the girl's name, Queenie, is antiquated. Importantly, at face value these names are ethnically white. But, of course, in the context of a multi-cultural society, where hybridity and LGBTQTI+ identity collide, 'Lucy loves Lucy' and 'Peter is Pan' produce comedy. By bringing together British names from now and from Empire, and by interlacing them with transgender and post-colonial subversions, the four Kanchis bring to life a subaltern who can find their words, ventriloquizing then releasing the silent source through a past made future. This preposterous screenwriting-as-filmmaking fuses past and present in such a way that there is no more blacking up of actors. Rather, they can speak from their own



Michelle Williams Gamaker, *We're just going to shoot you in close up*, 2017, sequence from *House of Women*, available at: <http://www.oarplatform.com/house-of-preposterous-women/>.

cultural history. One actor, Tina Mander, relates the complex origins of her family's ethnic and religious hybridity from Jalandhar, India to Stevenage, Hertfordshire. Her T-shirt depicts Muhammad Ali in boxing gear. She wants to be an actor because she has been inspired, not by a woman but by Robert de Niro, specifically his performance in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). She aims to be 'as brave as de Niro.' Another, Arunima Rajkumar, introduces herself with the poetry of her first name, meaning 'the first ray of sunlight that falls on Earth.' This medley of poetic and theoretical language is key to keeping the voices multi-faceted. Arunima is also a photographer – not only is she at the receiving end of the camera's gaze, but she knows how to wield it herself.

Kelly Hunter begins her reign of innuendos. These underpin the micro-aggressions of the colonial gaze. In this sequence, the concept of the 'postcolonial' will crack under the weight of caricature. 'We're just going to shoot you' says the interviewer, with double meanings flying. Did Arunima know, asks the interviewer, that the very terms for camerawork, such as 'shoot' in photography, emerged at the time of big game hunts (according to Susan Sontag).¹²

Photography also uses the language of ‘loading,’ ‘stalking,’ ‘aiming,’ and ‘cocking.’ Hunter delivers these words with the inflections of haughty and pernicious sexiness. As she does, the medium shot of Arunima is full frontal and eye-line, a figure no doubt ready to be ‘shot.’

In this way, Williams Gamaker’s film exposes the less-than postcolonial gaze, turning its non-white female ‘object’ into an animal to be hunted and shot. In other words, her camera engages in a preposterous game entangling two types of camera. Reflexively, the insidious aspect of this gaze repeats the trophy-shooting camera of the white male filmmaker. As a gaze that would hunt its prey, it is particularly disturbing. There is the additional cruelty of failing to treat animals as ‘species beings.’ Such objectification of women and non-human animals is tantamount to an aesthetic declaration of war.

Rebecca Schneider has explored the ‘entanglements’ of past history and contemporary representations of civil wars through their re-enactments. She refers to battles that ‘were then’ and are repeated in such a way that they ‘are inside now.’ She underlines how ‘representational practice’ is ‘already a practice of re-enactment’, and quotes Richard Schechner’s adroit phrase to describe the action that produces sameness in difference, namely, ‘twice behaved behaviour.’¹³ When Williams Gamaker’s camera repeats and cites the insidiousness of the past, it does so reflexively to point out how the male gaze has sought to hunt down the female and entrap her as a colonized and postcolonial Other. To release the subaltern from this gaze means bringing ‘her’ – Kanchi – inside the voices, bodies and experiences of the auditioning actors. Once the historical Kanchi of the book and feature film is multiplied within the auditionees, she has a chance to be repeated preposterously and thus released into multiple voices. The auditionees hold their own with the faceless Kelly Hunter and remain unfazed. Arunima has a capacity to remain grounded and look back. Tina calmly sports her Muhammad Ali T-shirt. Neither actor loses their professional composure. Neither becomes defensive nor recoils into absolute victimhood, as must Kanchi, who is horrifically beaten for ‘leading on’ the Young General (played by Indian actor Sabu) in Powell and Pressburger’s film. Williams Gamaker’s preposterous filmmaking enables Arunima and Tina to answer back to the camera by assertively meeting its gaze.



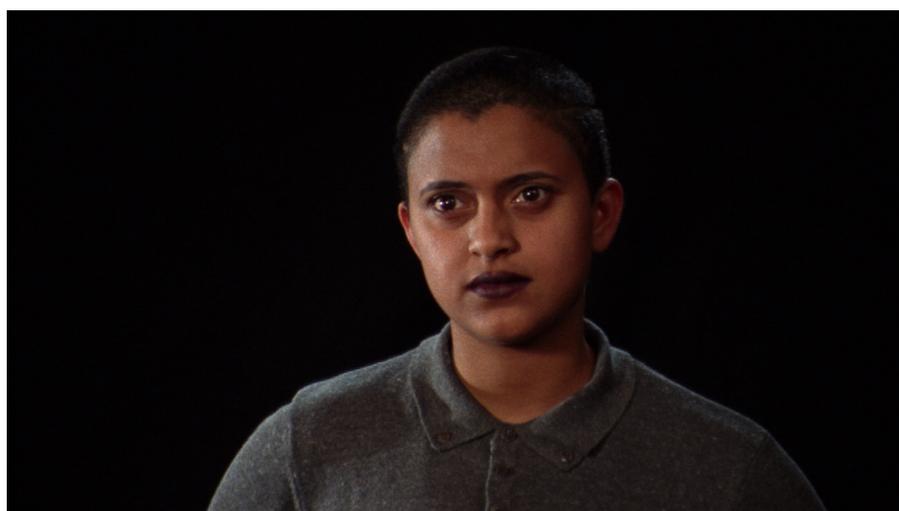
Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Have you ever seen the film Peeping Tom?*, 2017, sequence from *House of Women*, available at: <http://www.oarplatform.com/house-of-proposterous-women/>.

Take 4: The Ghost in the Preposterous

As an *auteur*, Williams Gamaker ‘ghosts’ through the montage, script and shot choices another clear and present spectre: that of Michael Powell. The work begins with the interviewer’s announcement that the crew will shoot close-ups. With an increasing and irritating intensity, the front light seems to sway, then starts to flash in the actors’ eyes. It then goes dark, producing an oscillation effect between an uncomfortable fill light and the shadow that appears and disappears across their faces. A metaphor is at stake. I read the subtle ‘torture’ technique of the light with shadow that darts on and off as signifying the insane-making treatment of marginal people in all cultures: the dominant culture acknowledges the existence of Jasdeep, Tina, Arunima, and Krishna as excess or utility. The subtle torture effect as shadow effect is re-enacting past white male habits.

As the subtle and alienating lighting effects begin with Tina, so too does the interviewer’s creepy line of questioning. She asks Tina whether she has ever seen Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*. The backstory is pertinent. Released in 1960, the film of a serial murderer who tortures and films his female victims’ agonies with a camera as his weapon of choice was so notorious it effectively ended Powell’s career in the UK. The interviewer shares this information with an unpleasant emphasis on ‘ended.’ Tina deals affably with this referencing of *Peeping Tom* as a sub-textual threat when she responds: ‘So the camera was the weapon? Sounds cruel.’ The lighting effects which have intruded like weapons are joined by the soundtrack of a subtle but palpably raised heartbeat. Yet another auditionee, Jasdeep, begins her close up. Jasdeep visibly feels the pain of the light in her eyes. She has a telling moment of vulnerability as her heartbeat starts quickening, and in a disarmingly straightforward way she asks a practical question to mitigate the tension: ‘Shall I just speak?’

Once again, the actors are submitted to more flashing light aggravations and asked not to blink. Then they read the dialogue, a direct citation from Powell and Pressburger’s onscreen script, itself cannibalized from Godden’s novel.¹⁴ Krishna Isha cites the lines of the British agent Mr Dean, precisely: ‘I told you this was no place to put a nunnery.’ The convent is described as too ‘remote’ and ‘looks at such immensity.’ The auditioning Kanchis are re-enacting a white man Dean, while simultaneously embodying Kanchi from the feature film and novel.



Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Let's go through the dialogue*, 2017, sequence from *House of Women*, available at: <http://www.oarplatform.com/house-of-proposterous-women/>.

This act of narrative doubling, of giving Kanchi Dean's lines as well as their own, subverts the binary opposition of male-female and white-Asian-British, of authority-powerlessness. Kanchi engages in 'twice-behaved behaviour' through textual citation. The 'twice-behaved' in a different temporal context, in an audition from 2014, has a retroactive and preposterous impact on the entanglements between all the Kanchis – the auditionees, Jean Simmons, the fictional Kanchi characters, and what might have been their multiple possibilities in hypothetical, possible worlds. Yet the past, colonial cruelties of male shooting cameras is reiterated in the oscillating shadows. While Schneider is insightful in delineating the power of entanglement between past and present performances, Bal's concept of preposterous history directs us to read this sequence as a double entanglement in which the present film can change the past. The ghost of the putative Michael Powell, killing his characters with a camera, is brought out of the genie bottle. As a released spectre of filmmaking, a new future for women filmmakers is brought out of the shadows.

Take 5: Preposterously - My Place, My name, Sister

When Krishna comes into the frame, the silky tones of Hunter's voice almost climax at the last video slide of mountains and blue clouds which Krishna views, with the camera now at a side angle, removing any full-frontal impositions. The interviewer gets excited by the projected image, using words like 'heaven' and 'God.' Krishna answers right back, now assuming the power of naming, and at this point, addressing the interviewer as Sister Clodagh.

KANCHI

(to Interviewer)

Remember, you and your God aren't on British Territory anymore. (beat) You'll have to get used to living in the wind, Sister Clodagh. The General's father used to keep his ladies here. They call it the 'House of Women' – it will be suitable, won't it, if you decide to come?

Kelly Hunter's interviewer/Sister Clodagh snaps back: 'Don't speak to me like that, Hansanphul.' The voice, which has attempted to efface its white presence, has herself been identified and entangled with the General's prostitutes. Hansanphul, the given name, attempts to pin down and disempower the subject. But Krishna has a retort: 'It's easier if you call me Kanchi, I'm quite used to it.' Hansanphul as Kanchi's designated name is the one imposed by an entanglement of race and gender power interests both 'glocal' and colonial. The name Kanchi also bears its own inflections of subaltern signification, as it is a Nepali word for a 'young girl' who is 'sweet.' In *Black Narcissus*, the term is patronizing. But in *House of Women*, Williams Gamaker's script has reframed the problem. Here, Kanchi has accepted her name, perhaps emotionally re-inflecting it with her triggered and assertive response to that faceless voice of interviewing authority.

In Bal's terms, Kanchi preposterously liberates her subaltern predecessors. By making Kanchi semiotically equivalent to Asia – that is, the continent free from the colonizer – the first step is taken to reclaim a language for South Asian subjectivities both female and transgender. It is important to note that the actor Krishna Isha is non-binary transgender. Thus, the Asian continent, once under Empire and now undergoing the tyrannies of globalization, might still be preposterously released by black and brown, multi-gendered female and transgender forces. For Kanchi will never be all that is.

Take 6: It's a Warp to the Future

The subversive *House of Women* has served its predecessors well. It has preposterously suggested that ahead of their time, Pressburger, Powell, and Godden were making intimations about colonialism and sexism. *House of Women* teaches its precursor how to do reflexive filmmaking. Williams Gamaker's actors start their audition with the color chart in hand.¹⁵ Once the film's opening provides the textual information about Jean Simmon's Pan Stick make-up, we hear the voices of the crew. We term a film about an audition a meta-filmic event. Reflexivity is its own device, allowing a film to inhabit a film. Once released, these reflexivities inspire us to think of the precursor texts themselves as potentially reflexive in their endeavors. Indeed, once the spectres in *Black Narcissus* have been outed, then its political narratives can breathe. The aesthetic and political accomplishment of Williams Gamaker's endeavor is to allow the interpreter to release more critical interpretations from the precursor work than otherwise come to light. A preposterous intervention as reflexive allows different temporalities to collide, such that *Black Narcissus* already promises plural temporalities beyond its own colonial time-zone. Indeed, the filmmaker's move is to transform the antecedent from 'that's all there is' into 'there is so much more than is'.

Moreover, the film's beginning provides us with one incarnation of Kanchi before we even meet the actors. This is the face of Krishna Isha. We are already told who will get the part before the audition begins. The sequel to *House of Women* is *The Fruit is There to be Eaten* (2018). In this work, Krishna Isha does indeed play Kanchi in a convent set magically between Mopu and Rotherhithe in London. The migrating Mopu and a malleable transgender subject, Krishna as Kanchi, will inhabit the London of this future narrative, to continue a preposterous journey.

- 1 Michelle Williams Gamaker, *House of Women* (Channels Festival, Melbourne, Dokfest Kassel, Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, Switzerland, L'Alternativa, Barcelona 2017; Transmediale, Berlin, International Women's Film Festival, Cologne, Visite Film Festival, Antwerp 2018, BFI London Film Festival's Experimenta Programme, London, 2018). The film is now part of the Arts Council of England's national collection.
- 2 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *Black Narcissus* (London: Pinewood, 1947). Originally published in 1939, Rumer Godden, *Black Narcissus* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 2006).
- 3 Edward Said's canonical *Orientalism* (London: Vintage, 1979) carefully and comprehensively reveals how the 'Orient' is marginalized and excluded through literary and linguistic strategies deployed by the dominant culture. The use of the concept 'Other' to read Said finds one comprehensive example in Shehla Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, of 'the Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique* (New York: Vol 417 of Counterpoints, 2012). Burney argues that Said's consistency is to explore the Orient as the 'Other' to Western literary and cultural discourse, and she is consistent in using the capitalised version of the Other.
- 4 Richard Dyer defines 'end of Empire' texts as ones in which uncertainty invades and we, the spectators, witness the erosion of white, male domination. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 181.
- 5 Mieke Bal, *Reading Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5. Bal takes her point of departure from a pertinent line in T.S. Eliot's 1917 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. She argues that when a new and influential poem arrives and 'for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if even so slightly, altered,' and therefore the poet 'will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.' T.S. Eliot, *Collected Essays: 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 5.
- 6 The emphasis on 'theoretical objects' draws on the work of Mieke Bal. See Bal, *Reading Caravaggio*, 5.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge Classics, 1994). The first French edition was *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993).
- 8 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271-313.
- 9 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 10 Opening 2 minutes of *House of Women*.
- 11 Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' 93.

- 12 Michelle Williams Gamaker's script for Kelly Hunter's voice-over uses direct quotes of 'loading, stalking, aiming, cocking' from Paul S. Landau, 'Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa,' in *Images of Empire: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 147. Landau adopts these words from a close reading of Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1973), 7. Landau cites Sontag pointing out that 'snapping a shot' means the same thing as 'to snipe', which also means to shoot at a moving target. For a connection between the colonial gaze and the hunting gaze see also John M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- 13 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 92. She cites Richard Schechner, 'Restoration of Behaviour,' in *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35-116.
- 14 Godden, *Black Narcissus*, 32.
- 15 In film production, a 'color chart' is a flat object which has a broad spectrum of colors used to measure the light temperature, exposure, and white balance of an image. Filmmakers utilise this chart to save time in post-production, as skin tone and clothing are often inaccurate directly after the film has been processed. The use of color grading in post-production makes adjustments by using the chart as reference. American motion pictures used the somewhat dubious term 'China Girl', which referred to an image of a woman framed by colour bars for calibration purposes. The chart within this context also alludes to the nuanced differences in skin tone of the auditionees in relation to the inherent whiteness beneath the brown Pan Stik make-up of Jean Simmons who played the original Kanchi in *Black Narcissus* (1947).

Michelle Williams Gamaker is an artist filmmaker. Her recent trilogy re-explores marginalised characters from Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* (1947). She is a BA Fine Art Lecturer at Goldsmiths and Pavilion's Chair of Trustees. She also runs the Women of Colour Index Reading Group with Samia Malik and Rehana Zaman.

Catherine Lord is a writer, actor and theatre-maker. She lectures in Media and Culture, at the University of Amsterdam. She has directed new writing at London Fringe (2015-2017) and was selected to take part in the Royal Court Writer's Programme (2017). Her publications focus on practice-based research, post-colonial studies, cross-media, ecology and climate change.