Paradise Fallen is an installation which draws on theoretical and literary research and interdisciplinary art making practices, largely produced during residencies in two settings. The camera and associated technical and ideological apparatus are more than simply the media used to make the work, but are also points of departure in exploring forms of knowledge production. This paper elaborates on narratives, concepts and politics that emerge through the figure of the island, especially as they emerge in relation to the creative practice.

Paradise Fallen offers up what Sarat Maharaj [1] refers to as xenoepistemics, or what, extrapolating from Sarah Ahmed [2], might be considered a queering of phenomenology. Xenoepistemics is important for questions of creative research as it contains a challenge to embrace knowledge that is non-linear, estranged, foreign or other. Queer phenomenology in similar ways asks for approaches or orientations to the sensible world in ways that value deviations or non-normative positions. I take both of these concepts to embolden and enrich my exploration of the creative process as contributions that enable journeys into the sites that I have photographed and filmed.

In this way, the creative practice draws on literary and cultural theory to extend conventional historiography and oceanography. This includes understanding movement and flows of people and goods in relation to their historical underpinnings as well as varied and heterogenous contemporary forms, which includes global commerce, tourism, forced migrations, exiles and even slavery.

Paradise Fallen is derived from residencies in two locations: Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean and the peninsula and islands of Dakar, Senegal, in the Atlantic Ocean. The major work of the final installation was a large scale projection, Île Aux Serpents (25 minutes looped), initially screened in Dakar, Senegal, and installed more elaborately for Watershed in Johannesburg at the multidisciplinary space fem of colour. The video installation was located in a large space, empty but for one long bench. The projection and audio designed to immerse the viewer in the landscape. The installation built to house the film effectively bracketed off the viewer from the outside world: the audience enters the space, dropped into the cinematography of the island world. This was to explore an encounter of physical and metaphysical terrors that lurk beneath and within any landscape. In the paper, the idea of the island (in general) as out of time and space is explored, through an engagement with social theory and literature rather than via perhaps more obvious associations of colonial history, slavery and globalization.

Paradise Fallen is an interdisciplinary work tied to the histories of these two places or sites. A crucial component of colonialism and slavery included mastering the ocean, as a medium that could be traversed, immense yet conceivably conquerable. Even while the ocean can be considered a powerful force of historical and political significance, it can also be figured of as a device for contemplation and so linked to the aesthetic of the sublime. The historical political significance of the ocean has been explored by many writers such as through Paul Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’ [3] in reference to the transatlantic slave trade. References to the Indian Ocean likewise allude to the ocean as integral to the symbolic and economic forces of colonialism. The ocean becomes a crucially important yet epistemologically amenable space from which to viscerally and poetically leverage more analytical critical work.

In this sense, I approach the island as a figure or narrative device that provokes the bipolar enactment of disorder/breakdown/obliteration and reconstitution of western society. The island is marked more by its connections with the outside than by its insularity [4]. The ambition for the treatment of landscape is to insist that the landscape is more than a mise-en-scene in which narrative unfolds; rather the island drives the narrative (perhaps more as a character would), and through the writing, cinematography, editing and installation of the work, the rich and complex associations of islands are invoked. While the film picks up on various literary and theoretical cues, it insists on an aesthetic and poetic register integral to its cinematic logic. Within the context of the history and contemporary economy of islands as locations for flows of people, currency, products and ideas, the film and the installation in its entirety treat the island as site, always in excess of its cinematic potential. Rather than explore the juxtapositions of imaginary islands and contemporary places, and between colonial history and modern economies, the work is crafted in a filmic non-time and non-place. Even though the collection of works that constitute Paradise Fallen are initiated in two settings, the intent is for the view to traverse historical epochs and multiple spaces.

Within the work, water also operates in multiple ways, particularly in the film, Île Aux Serpents. Dakar is at sea level, and so water enters as an unavoidable phenomenon as a base...
for colonial sea exploration and subsequent colonial links. But water is also a medium to reflect on how representational strategies operate as intermediaries between desire and its objects. From a cinematographic point of view, the atmosphere in Dakar is infused with this water. A lot of the film relies on time-lapse photography, and as described, most of the footage was taken standing in front of large bodies of water.

In addition to Île Aux Serpents, the work includes one sculptural 8 channel work (60 second video fragment, looped) containing images of a palm tree – manipulated to be in the negative – bristling in the wind, and one single channel monitor piece (14 minutes 39 seconds looped) that scrolled the text of a manifesto written in Dakar. The installation also includes two large scale drawings (140 x 140 and 140 x 5m) and a stack of photo litho prints of a film still from Île Aux Serpents, printed together with a poem by Danai Mupotsa from her anthology of poetry, Feeling and Ugly [5].

A key aim of the work was to use the dislocating strategy within the cinematography to create an illusion of being in a non-specific place in a non-specific time. The strategy was to capture a sense of immersion, so to draw the viewer in. This determined the length of the edits: the image is held much longer than the conventional durations we are used to in commercial cinema or television. The scene or image is held in an effort to hold the viewer within a landscape. There is a relationship developed here between image, screen, site, camera, and the viewer who receives the images thousands of kilometers and many years away from the scene. The gambit of Paradise Fallen is to play with the impossibilities of return, to revisit to the scene of the (a) crime.

References and Notes