Notes

5 Ibid., pp. 7–8.
8 Ibid., p. 154.
9 Ibid., p. ix.

Reading racial fetishism: the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe

Kobena Mercer

Imaging the black man’s sex

[. . .] Mapplethorpe first made his name in the world of art photography with his portraits of patrons and protagonists in the post-Warhol New York avant-garde milieu of the 1970s. In turn he has become something of a star himself, as the discourse of journalists, critics, curators and collectors has woven a mystique around his persona, creating a public image of the artist as author of ‘prints of darkness’. As he has extended his repertoire across flowers, bodies and faces, the conservatism of Mapplethorpe’s aesthetic has become all too apparent: a reworking of the old modernist tactic of ‘shock the bourgeoisie’ (and make them pay), given a new aura by his characteristic signature, the pursuit of perfection in photographic technique. The vaguely transgressive quality of his subject matter – gay S/M ritual, lady bodybuilders, black men – is given heightened allure by his evident mastery of photographic technology.

In as much as the image-making technology of the camera is based on the mechanical reproduction of unilinear perspective, photographs primarily represent a ‘look’. I therefore want to talk about Mapplethorpe’s Black Males not as the product of the personal intentions of the individual behind the lens, but as a cultural artifact that says something about certain ways in which white people ‘look’ at black people and how, in this way of looking, black male sexuality is perceived as something different, excessive, Other. Certainly this particular work must be set in the context of Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre as a whole: through his cool and deadly gaze each found object – ‘flowers, S/M, blacks’ – is brought under the clinical
precision of his master vision, his complete control of photo-technique, and thus aestheticized to the abject status of thinghood. However, once we consider the author of these images as more than the 'projection, in terms more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts,' then what is interesting about work such as The Black Book is the way the text facilitates the imaginary projection of certain racial and sexual fantasies about the black male body. Whatever his personal motivations or creative pretensions, Mapplethorpe’s camera-eye opens an aperture onto aspects of stereotypes - a fixed way of seeing that freezes the flux of experience - which govern the circulation of images of black men across a range of surfaces from newspapers, television and cinema to advertising, sport and pornography.

Approached as a textual system, both Black Males (1983) and The Black Book (1986) catalogue a series of perspectives, vantage points and 'takes' on the black male body. The first thing to notice - so obvious it goes without saying - is that all the men are made. Each of the camera's points of view lead to a unitary vanishing point: an erotic/aesthetic objectification of black male bodies into the idealized form of a homogenous type thoroughly saturated with a totality of sexual predicates. We look through a sequence of individual, personally named, Afro-American men, but what we see is only their sex as the essential sum total of the meanings signified around blackness and maleness. It is as if, according to Mapplethorpe’s line of sight: Black + Male = Erotic/Aesthetic Object.

Regardless of the sexual preferences of the spectator, the construction is that black male identity lies in the domain of sexuality. Whereas the photographs of gay male S/M rituals invoke a subcultural sexuality that consists of doing something, black men are confined and defined in their very being as sexual and nothing but sexual, hence hypersexual. In pictures like ‘Man in a Polyester Suit’, apart from his hands, it is the penis and the penis alone that identifies the model in the picture as a black man.

This ontological reduction is accomplished through the specific visual codes brought to bear on the construction of pictorial space. Sculpted and shaped through the conventions of the fine art nude, the image of the black male body presents the spectator with a source of erotic pleasure in the act of looking. As a generic code established across fine art traditions in Western art history, the conventional subject of the nude is the (white) female body. Substituting the socially inferior black male subject, Mapplethorpe nevertheless draws on the codes of the genre to frame his way of seeing black male bodies as abstract, beautiful 'things' (see figures 31.1, 31.3 and 31.4). The aesthetic, and thus erotic, objectification is totalizing in effect, as all references to a social, historical or political context are ruled out of the frame. This visual codification abstracts and essentializes the black man’s body into the realm of a transcendental aesthetic ideal. In this sense, the text reveals more about the desires of the hidden and visible white male subject behind the camera, and what 'he' wants-to-see, than it does about the anonymous black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted.

Within the dominant tradition of the female nude, patriarchal power relations are symbolized by the binary relation in which, to put it crudely, men assume the active role of the looking subject while women are passive objects to be looked at. Laura Mulvey’s contribution to feminist film theory revealed the normative power and privilege of the male gaze in dominant systems of visual representation. The image of the female nude can thus be understood not so much as a representation of (hetero)sexual desire, but as a form of objectification which articulates masculine hegemony and dominance over the very apparatus of representation itself. Paintings abound with self-serving scenarios of phallocentric fantasy in which male artists paint themselves painting naked women, which, like depiction of feminine narcissism, constructs a mirror image of what the male subject wants-to-see. The fetishistic logic of mimetic representation, which makes present for the subject what is absent in the real, can thus be characterized in terms of a masculine fantasy of mastery and control over the ‘objects’ depicted and represented in the visual field, the fantasy of an omnipotent eye who sees but who is never seen.

In Mapplethorpe’s case, however, the fact that both subject and object of the gaze are male sets up a tension between the active role of looking and the passive role of being looked at. This frisson of (homo)-sexual sameness transfers erotic investment in the fantasy of mastery from gender to racial difference. Traces of this metaphorical transfer underline the highly charged libidinal investment of Mapplethorpe’s gaze as it bears down on the most visible signifier of racial difference - black skin. In his analysis of the male pinup, Richard Dyer (1982) suggests that when male subjects assume the passive, ‘feminized’ position of being looked at, the threat or risk to traditional definitions of masculinity is counteracted by the role of certain codes and conventions, such as taught, rigid or straining bodily posture, character types and narrativized plots, all of which aim to stabilize the gender-based dichotomy of seeing/being seen. Here, Mapplethorpe appropriates elements of commonplace racial stereotypes in order to regulate, organize, prop up and fix the process of erotic/aesthetic objectification in which the black man’s flesh becomes burdened with the task of symbolizing the transgressive fantasies and desires of the white gay male subject. The glossy, shining, fetishized surface of black skin thus serves and services a white male desire to look and to enjoy the fantasy of mastery precisely through the scopic intensity that the pictures solicit.

As Homi Bhabha has suggested, ‘an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness.’ Mass-media stereotypes of black men - as criminals, athletes, entertainers - bear witness to the contemporary repetition of such colonial fantasy, in that the rigid and limited grid of representations through which black male subjects become publicly visible continues to reproduce certain idees fixes, ideological fictions and psychic fixations, about the nature of black sexuality and the “otherness” it is constructed to embody. As an artist, Mapplethorpe engineers a fantasy of absolute authority over the image of the black male body by appropriating the function of the stereotype to stabilize the erotic objectification of racial
otherness and thereby affirm his own identity as the sovereign I/eye empowered with mastery over the abject thrallhood of the Other: as if the pictures implied, Eye have the power to turn you, base and worthless creature, into a work of art. Like Medusa’s look, each camera angle and photographic shot turns black male flesh to stone, fixed and frozen in space and time: enslaved as an icon in the representational space of the white male imaginary, historically at the centre of colonial fantasy.

There are two important aspects of fetishization at play here. The erasure of any social interference in the spectator’s erotic enjoyment of the image not only refines bodies but effaces the material process involved in the production of the image, thus masking the social relations of racial power entailed by the unequal and potentially exploitative exchange between the well-known, author-named artist and the unknown, interchangeable, black models. In the same way that labor is said to be ‘alienated’ in commodity fetishism, something similar is put into operation in the way that the proper name of each black model is taken from a person and given to a thing, as the title or caption of the photograph, an art object which is property of the artist, the owner and author of the look. And as items of exchange-value, Mapplethorpe prints fetch exorbitant prices on the international market in art photography.

The fantasmatric emphasis on mastery also underpins the specifically sexual fetishization of the Other that is evident in the visual isolation effect whereby it is only ever one black man who appears in the field of vision at any one time. As an imprint of a narcissistic, ego-centred, sexualizing fantasy, this is a crucial component in the process of erotic objectification, not only because it forecloses the possible representation of a collective or contextualized black male body, but because the solo frame is the precondition for a voyeuristic fantasy of unmediated and unilateral control over the other, which is the function it performs precisely in gay and straight pornography. Aesthetized as a trap for the gaze, providing palatable on which the appetite of the imperial eye may feed, each image thus nourishes the racialized and sexualized fantasy of appropriating the Other’s body as virgin territory to be penetrated by an all-powerful desire, ‘to probe and explore an alien body’.

Superimposing two ways of seeing – the nude which erotizes the act of looking, and the stereotype which imposes fixity – we see in Mapplethorpe’s gaze a reinscription of the fundamental ambivalence of colonial fantasy, oscillating between sexual idealization of the racial other an anxiety in defence of the identity of the white male ego. Stuart Hall (1982) has underlined this splitting in the ‘imperial eye’ by suggesting that for every threatening image of the black subject as a marauding native, menacing savage or rebellious slave, there is the comforting image of the black as docile servant, amusing clown and happy entertainer. Commenting on this bifurcation in racial representations, Hall describes it as the expression of ‘both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilized, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking just below the surface; or by an untooled sexuality threatening to ‘break out’. In Mapplethorpe,

we may discern three discrete camera codes through which this fundamental ambivalence is reinscribed through the process of a sexual and racial fantasy which aesthetizes the stereotype into a work of art.

The first of these, which is most self-consciously ‘daily-acknowledged, could be called the sculptural code, as it is a subset of the generic fine art nude. As Philip pretends to put the shot, the idealized physique of a classical Greek male statue is superimposed on that most commonplace of stereotypes, the black man as sports hero, mythologically endowed with a ‘naturally’ muscular physique and an essential capacity for strength, grace and machinelike perfection; well hard. As a major public arena, sport is a key site of white male ambivalence, fear and fantasy. The spectacle of black bodies triumphant in rituals of masculine competition reinforces the fixed idea that black men are ‘all brawn and no brains’, and yet, because the white man is beaten at his own game – football, boxing, cricket, athletics – the Other is idolized to the point of envy. This schism is played out daily in the popular tabloid press. On the front page headlines black males become highly visible as threats to white society, as muggers, rapists, terrorists and guerrillas; their bodies become the image of a savage and unstoppable capacity for destruction and violence. But turn to the back pages, the sports pages, and the black man’s body is heroized and lionized; any hint of antagonism is contained by the paternalistic infantilization of Frank Bruno and Daley Thompson to the status of national mascots and adopted pets – they’re not Other, they’re ‘our boys’. The national shame of England’s defeat in the latest Test Cricket at the hands of the West Indies is accompanied by the slave-cult admiration of Viv Richards’s awesome physique – the high-speed West Indian batsman is both a threat and a winner. The ambivalence cuts deep into the recess of the white male imaginary – recall those newsreel images of Hitler’s reluctant handshake with Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics.

If Mapplethorpe’s gaze is momentarily lost in admiration, it reasserts control by also ‘feminizing’ the black male body into a passive, decorative objet d’art. When Phillip is placed on a pedestal he literally becomes property in the hands of the white male artist – like others in this code, his body becomes raw material, mere plastic matter, to be molded, sculpted and shaped into the aesthetic idealism of inert abstraction, as we see in the picture of Derrick Cross (see figure 13.3): with the tilt of the pelvis, the black man’s bum becomes a Brancusi. Commenting on the differences between moving and motionless pictures, Christian Metz suggests an association linking photography, silence and death as photographs invoke a residual death effect such that, ‘the person who has been photographed is dead . . . dead for having been seen.’ Under the intense scrutiny of Mapplethorpe’s cool, detached gaze it is as if each black model is made to die, if only to reincarnate their alienated essence as idealized, aesthetic objects. We are not invited to imagine what their lives, histories or experiences are like, as they are silenced as subjects in their own right, and in a sense sacrificed on the pedestal of an aesthetic ideal in order to affirm the omnipotence of the master subject, whose gaze has the power of light and death.

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In counterpoint there is a supplementary code of portraiture which ‘humanizes’ the hard phallic lines of pure abstraction and focuses on the face – the ‘window of the soul’ – to introduce an element of realism into the scene. But any connotation of humanist expression is denied by the direct look which does not so much assert the existence of an autonomous subjectivity, but rather, like the remote, aloof, expressions of fashion models in glossy magazines, emphasizes instead maximum distance between the spectator and the unattainable object of desire. Look, but don’t touch. The models’ direct look to camera does not challenge the gaze of the white male artist, although it plays on the active/passive tension of seeing/being seen, because any potential disruption is contained by the subtextual work of the stereotype. Thus in one portrait the ‘primitive’ nature of the Negro is invoked by the profile: the face becomes an afterimage of a stereotypically ‘African’ tribal mask, high cheekbones and matted dreadlocks further connote wildness, danger, exotica. In another, the chiseled contours of a shaved head, honed by rivulets of sweat, summon up the criminal mug shot from the forensic files of police photography. This also recalls the anthropometric uses of photography in the colonial scene, measuring the cranium of the colonized so as to show, by the documentary evidence of photography, the inherent ‘inferiority’ of the Other. This is overlaid with deeper ambivalence in the portrait of Terrel, whose grotesque grinace calls up the happy/sad mask of the nigger minstrel: humanized by racial pathos, the Sambo stereotype haunts the scene, evoking the black man’s supposedly childlike dependency on ole Massa, which in turn fixes his social, legal and existential ‘emasculaton’ at the hands of the white master.

Finally, two codes together – of cropping and lighting – interpenetrate the flesh and mortify it into a racial sex fetish, a juju doll from the dark side of the white man’s imaginary. The body-whole is fragmented into microscopic details – chest, arms, torso, buttocks, penis – inviting a scopophilic dissection of the parts that make up the whole. Indeed, like a talisman, each part is invested with the power to evoke the ‘mystique’ of black male sexuality with more perfection than any empirically unified whole. The camera cuts away, like a knife, allowing the spectator to inspect the ‘goods’. In such fetishistic attention to detail, tiny scars and blemishes on the surface of black skin serve only to heighten the technical perfectionism of the photographic print. The cropping and fragmentation of bodies – often decapitated, so to speak – is a salient feature of pornography, and has been seen from certain feminist positions as a form of male violence, a literal inscription of a sadistic impulse in the male gaze, whose pleasure thus consists of cutting up women’s bodies into visual bits and pieces. Whether or not this view is tenable, the effect of the technique here is to suggest aggression in the act of looking, but not as racial violence or racism-as-hate; on the contrary, aggression as the frustration of the ego who finds the object of his desire out of reach, inaccessible. The cropping is analogous to striptease in this sense, as the exposure of successive body parts distances the erotogenic object, making it untouchable so as to tantalize the drive to look, which reaches its aim in the denouement by
which the woman’s sex is unveiled. Except here the unveiling that reduces
the woman from angel to whore is redressed by the unconcealing of the
black man’s private parts, with the penis as the forbidden totem of colonial
fantasy.

As each fragment seduces the eye into ever more intense fascination,
we glimpse the dilation of a libidinal way of looking that spreads itself across
the surface of black skin. Harsh contrasts of shadow and light draw the eye
to focus and fix attention on the texture of the black man’s skin. According
to Bhabha, unlike the sexual fetish per se, whose meanings are usually
hidden as a hermeneutic secret, skin color functions as ‘the most visible of
fetishes’. Whether it is devalorized in the signifying chain of ‘negrophobia’
or hypervalorized as a desirable attribute in ‘negrophilia’, the fetish of skin
color in the codes of racial discourse constitutes the most visible element in
the articulation of what Stuart Hall calls ‘the ethnic signifier’. The shining
surface of black skin serves several functions in its representation: it suggests
the physical exertion of powerful bodies, as black boxers always glisten like
bronze in the illuminated square of the boxing ring; or, in pornography, it
suggests intense sexual activity ‘just before’ the photograph was taken, a
metonymic stimulus to arouse spectatorial participation in the imagined
mise-en-scène. In Mapplethorpe’s pictures the specular brilliance of black
skin is bound in a double articulation as a fixing agent for the fetishistic
structure of the photographs. There is a subtle slippage between representee
and represented, as the shiny, polished, sheen of black skin becomes
constituent with the luxurious allure of the high-quality photographic
print. As Victor Burgin has remarked, sexual fetishism dovetails with com-
modity fetishism to inflate the economic value of the print in art photo-
graphy as much as in fashion photography, the ‘glossies’. Here, black skin
and print surface are bound together to enhance the pleasure of the white
spectator as much as the profitability of these art-world commodities
exchanged among the artist and his dealers, collectors and curators.

In everyday discourse fetishism probably connotes deviant or ‘kinky’
sexuality, and calls up images of leather and rubberwear as signs of sexual
perversity. This is not a fortuitous example, as leather fashion has a
sensuous appeal as a kind of ‘second skin’. When one considers that such
clothes are invariably black, rather than any other color, such fashion-
fetishism suggests a desire to simulate or imitate black skin. On the other
hand, Freud’s theorization of fetishism as a clinical phenomenon of sexual
pathology and perversion is problematic in many ways, but the central
notion of the fetish as a metaphorical substitute for the absent phallus
enables understanding of the psychic structure of disavowal, and the
splitting of levels of conscious and unconscious belief, that is relevant to
the ambiguous axis upon which negrophilia and negrophobia intertwine.

[...]

We have been looking at some pictures to talk about a certain way in
which white peoples’ ‘looking’ at black people involves a racial fetishism.
The question of ambivalence underscored by Mapplethorpe’s recuperation
of commonplace stereotypes within a restaging of the classical male nude
corns the strange and uncharted landscape of the Western imaginary,
and more specifically, the political unconscious of white masculinity. However, in the current context, where the interventions of black feminists have prioritized issues at the interface of race, gender and sexuality, a new wave of black cultural practitioners are setting out to untangle our own ambivalences and to explore the diversity of sexual desires and identities within black communities. Refusing to think of ourselves as Other, such artists as Joan Riley and Jackie Kay in literature; Maureen Blackwood and Martina Attille of Sankofa Collective in filmmaking; visual artists shown in Lubaina Himid’s Thin Black Line exhibition at the ICA in 1985, have all engaged questions of sex and race in representation in challenging ways. Yet these initiatives have so far found little critical and theoretical support in debates about sexual representation.

In a conjuncture where progressive intellectual alliances among feminists, advocates of sexual politics, and critical theory in film and media studies have gained momentum in the academic world, the subject of race is still a structured absence from both public debate and course curricula. What worries me is the way a certain kind of psychoanalysis has come to function as a ‘master discourse’ in this situation, yet the ethnocentrism of classical Freudian theory remains unquestioned. While the concept of fetishism is suggestive precisely because it connects the economic and sexual contraflow of ideological investments, it is also problematic, for its roots in European thought lie in the colonizing discourses of missionaries and anthropologists on ‘primitive religions’. Moreover, the occlusion of race in the 1970s theorization of sexual difference is by the same token the instance of its heterosexism as well as its Eurocentrism. The Greek tragedy of Oedipus, as the grand narrative upon which desire-as-lack or ‘castration’ is based, is culture-bound despite the universalistic claims staked out for it. Other cultures may be patriarchal, but does that mean they produce an Oedipal sexuality?

The feminist appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize cultural struggles over the image has been profoundly enabling, but questions now being raised by cultural struggles over the meaning of ‘race’ suggest that universalist pretensions can be disenabling, for they preempt the development of pluralist perspectives on the intersections of multiple differences in popular culture. With regard to the psychoanalytic theory of fetishism, Metz confesses that ‘it has helped me . . . (but) I have also used the theory of fetishism as a fetish.’ If psychoanalysis continues to offer insight into cultural practices such as photography because it is ‘the founding myth of our emotional modernity’, then perhaps the unanswered questions of race may render visible some of the many blind spots that characterize our intellectual postmodernity. [. . .]

Notes

1 Dick Tracings, Time Out, 3 November 1983.
2 References are primarily to Robert Mapplethorpe, Black Males (Amsterdam, Gallerie Jurka, 1983) (with an introduction by Edmund White); Robert Mapplethorpe, 1970–
masculinity. feminists, a new e our own l identities other, such wood and s shown in have all ng ways. tal support es among and media ect of race curricula, as come to nocentrism concept of nomic and atic, for its missionaries closure of e token the ek tragedy or 'castra- staked out ey produce o theorize bling, but ng of 'race' ey preempt of multiple c theory of e also used ses to offer it 'the naneswed spots that

3 Hollinghurst, Robert Mapplethorpe, p. 13.
5 Laura Mulvey 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', Screen, 16, 3 (autumn 1975) [extracted in Chapter 25 of this volume].
7 Homi K. Bhabha, 'The other question: the stereotype and colonial discourse', Screen, 24, 4 (1983), pp. 18–36 [extracted in Chapter 24 of this volume].
8 Edmund White, in Mapplethorpe, Black Males, p. v.
10 Ibid., p. 41.
12 Anthropometric uses of photography are discussed in David Green, 'Classified subjects', Ten, 8, 14 (1984); and 'Veins of resemblance: eugenics and photography', in Photography/Politics: Two, eds P. Holland, J. Spence and S. Watney (London, Photography Workshop/Comedia, 1986); and with reference to photography as surveillance, in Frank Mort, 'The domain of the sexual', and John Tagg, 'Power and photography', Screen Education, 32 (autumn 1980).
14 Bhabha, 'The other question', p. 30.
19 Metz, 'Photography and fetish', p. 89.

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