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SKIN HEAD SEX THING

RACIAL DIFFERENCE AND THE HOMOEROTIC IMAGINARY

Kobena Mercer

I

In this article I want to explore the experience of aesthetic ambivalence in visual representations of the black male nude. The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe provide a salient point of entry into this complex 'structure of feeling' as this is one place where such ambivalence is experienced at its most intense.¹

My interest in this aspect of Mapplethorpe's work began in 1982, when a friend lent me his copy of *Black Males*. It circulated between us as a kind of illicit object of desire, albeit a highly problematic one. We were fascinated by the beautiful bodies, as we went over the repertoire of images again and again, drawn in by the desire to look and enjoy what was given to be seen. We wanted to look, but we didn't always find what we wanted to see. We were shocked, of course, and disturbed by the racial discourse of the imagery. Above all we were angered by the aesthetic equation that reduced these black male bodies to abstract visual 'things', silenced in their own right as subjects, serving only to enhance the name and reputation of the author in the rarefied world of art photography. But still we were stuck, unable to make sense of our own implication in the emotions brought into play by Mapplethorpe's 'imaginary'.

I've chosen to situate the issue of ambivalence in relation to these experiences because I am now involved in a partial revision of arguments made in an earlier reading of Mapplethorpe's work.² This revision arises not because those arguments were wrong, but because I've changed my mind, or rather I should say I still can't make up my mind about Mapplethorpe. In returning to my earlier essay I want to suggest an approach to ambivalence, not as something that occurs 'inside' the text (as if cultural texts were hermetically sealed or self-sufficient), but as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers – in relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific.

Posing the problem of ambivalence and undecidability in this way not only underlines the role of the reader; it also draws attention to the important, and equally undecidable, role of context in determining the range of different readings that can be produced from the same text. In this respect, it is impossible to ignore the crucial changes in context that frame the readings currently negotiated around Mapplethorpe and his work. Mapplethorpe's death in 1989 from AIDS, a major retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum in New York, the political 'controversy' over federal arts policy initiated by the fundamentalist Right in response to a second Mapplethorpe exhibition organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia –

1. References are made primarily to *Black Males* (with introduction by Edmund White), Galerie Jurka, Amsterdam 1982, and *The Black Book* (with introduction by Ntozake Shange), Schirmer/Mosel, Munich 1986.

2. Kobena Mercer, 'Imaging the Black Man's Sex', in Pat Holland, Jo Spence and Simon Watney (eds), *Photography/Politics: Two*, Comedia/Methuen, London 1986.

these events have irrevocably altered the context in which we perceive, argue about, and evaluate Mapplethorpe's most explicitly homoerotic work.

The context has also changed as a result of another set of contemporary developments: the emergence of new aesthetic practices among black lesbian and gay artists in Britain and the United States. Across a range of media, such work problematizes earlier conceptions of identity in black cultural practices. This is accomplished by entering into the ambivalent and overdetermined spaces where race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity intersect in the social construction and lived experiences of individual and collective subjectivities. Such developments demand acknowledgment of the historical contingency of context and in turn raise significant questions about the universalist character of some of the grand aesthetic and political claims once made in the name of cultural theory. Beginning with a summary of my earlier argument, I want to identify some of the uses and limitations of psychoanalytic concepts in cultural theory before mapping a more historical trajectory within which to examine the constitutive ambivalence of the identifications we actually inhabit in living with difference.

II REVISING

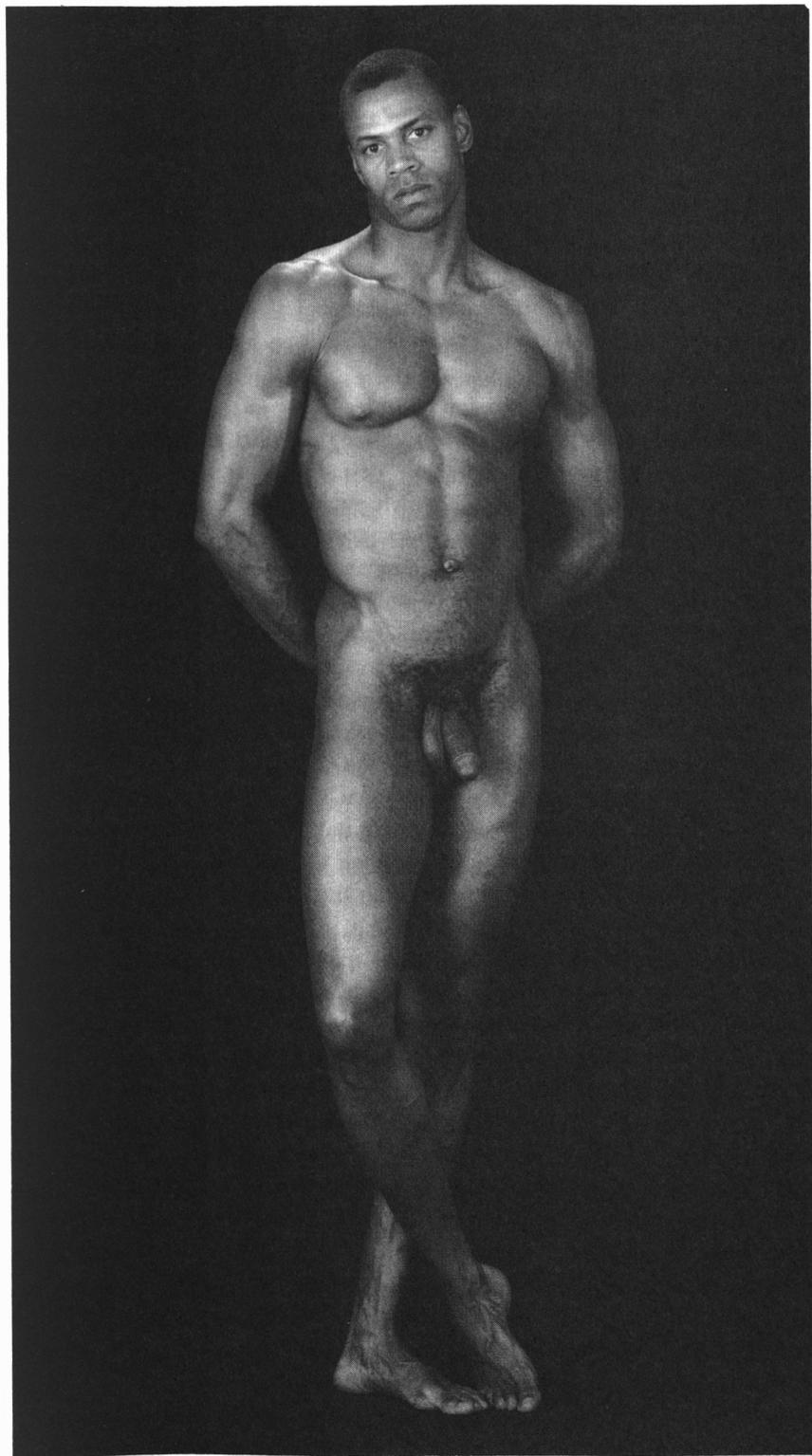
The overriding theme of my earlier reading of Mapplethorpe's photographs was that they inscribe a process of objectification in which individual black male bodies are aestheticized and eroticized as objects of the gaze. Framed within the artistic conventions of the nude, these bodies are sculpted and shaped into aesthetic artefacts that offer an erotic source of pleasure in the act of looking. Insofar as what is represented in the pictorial space of the photograph is a 'look', or a certain 'way of looking', the pictures say more about the white male subject behind the camera than they do about the black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted. This is because the invisible or absent subject is the actual agent of the look, at the centre and in control of the apparatus of representation, the I/eye at the imaginary origin of the perspective that marks out the empty space to which the viewer is invited as a spectator. This argument was based on a formal analysis of the codes and conventions brought to bear on the pictorial space of the photographs, and, equally importantly, on an analogy with feminist analyses of the erotic objectification of the image of women in Western traditions of visual representation.

Three formal conventions interweave across the photographic text to organize and direct the viewer's gaze into its pictorial space. A sculptural code, concerning the posing and posture of the body in the studio enclosure; a code of portraiture concentrated on the face; and a code of lighting and framing, fragmenting bodies into textured formal abstractions – all of these help to construct the *mise-en-scène* of fantasy and desire which structures the spectator's disposition toward the image. As all references to a social or historical context are effaced by the cool distance of the detached gaze, the text enables the projection of a fantasy which saturates the black male body in sexual predicates.

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Thomas, 1986. © The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, 1986.

These codes draw from aspects of Mapplethorpe's oeuvre as a whole and have become the signs by which we recognize his authorial signature. Their specific combination, moreover, is punctuated by the technical perfection – especially marked in the printing process – that also distinguishes Mapplethorpe's presence as an author. Considering the way in which the glossy allure of the photographic print becomes consubstantial with the shiny texture of black skin, I argued that a significant element in the pleasures the photographs make available consists in the fetishism that they bring into play. Such fetishism not only eroticizes the visible difference that the black male nude embodies, it also lubricates the ideological reproduction of racial otherness as the fascination of the image articulates a fantasy of power and mastery over the Other.

Before introducing a revision of this view of racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe's photographs, I want to emphasize its dependence on the framework of feminist theory initially developed in relation to cinematic representation by Laura Mulvey.³ Crudely put, Mulvey showed that men look and women are looked at. The position of 'woman' in dominant regimes of visual representation says little or nothing about the historical experiences of women as such, because the female subject functions predominantly as a mirror image of what the masculine subject wants to see. The visual depiction of women in the *mise-en-scène* of heterosexual desire serves to stabilize and reproduce the narcissistic scenario of a phallogocentric fantasy in which the omnipotent male gaze sees but is never seen. What is important about this framework of analysis is the way it reveals the symbolic relations of power and subordination at work in the binary relations that structure dominant codes and conventions of visual representations of the body. The field of visibility is thus organized by the subject/object dichotomy that associates masculinity with the activity of looking and femininity with the subordinate, passive role of being that which is looked at.

In extrapolating such terms to Mapplethorpe's black nudes, I suggested that because both artist and models are male, a tension arises which transfers the *frisson* of difference to the metaphorically polarized terms of racial identity. The black/white duality overdetermines the subject/object dichotomy of seeing and being seen. This metaphorical transfer underlines the erotic investment of the gaze in the most visible element of racial difference – the fetishization of black skin. The dynamics of this tension are apparently stabilized within the pictorial space of the photographs by the ironic appropriation of commonplace stereotypes – the black man as athlete, as savage, as mugger. These stereotypes in turn serve to regulate and fix the representational presence of the black subject, who is thereby 'put in his place' by the power of Mapplethorpe's gaze.

The formal work of the codes essentializes each individual model into the homogenized embodiment of an ideal type. This logic of typification in dominant regimes of racial representation has been emphasized by Homi Bhabha, who argues that 'an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of

3. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol 16, no 3, 1975.

otherness.⁴ The scopical fixation on black skin thus implies a kind of 'negrophilia', an aesthetic idealization and eroticized investment in the racial Other that inverts and reverses the binary axis of the fears and anxieties invested in or projected onto the Other in 'negrophobia'. Both positions, whether they devalue or overvalue the signs of racial difference, inhabit the representational space of what Bhabha calls colonial fantasy. While I would now qualify the theoretical analogies on which this analysis of Mapplethorpe was based, I would still want to defend the terms of a psychoanalytic reading of racial fetishism, a fetishism that can be most tangibly grasped in a photograph such as *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980).

The scale and framing of this picture emphasizes the sheer size of the big black dick. Apart from the hands, the penis and the penis alone identifies the model as a black man. As Frantz Fanon said, diagnosing the figure of 'the Negro' in the fantasies of his white psychiatric patients, 'One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis: the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis.'⁵ The element of scale thus summons up one of the deepest mythological fears and anxieties in the racist imagination, namely that all black men have huge willies. In the fantasmatic space of the supremacist imaginary, the big black phallus is a threat not only to the white master (who shrinks in impotence from the thought that the subordinate black male is more potent and sexually powerful than he), but also to civilization itself, since the 'bad object' represents a danger to white womanhood and therefore the threat of miscegenation and racial degeneration.

The binarisms of classical racial discourse are emphasized in Mapplethorpe's photograph by the jokey irony of the contrast between the black man's private parts and the public respectability signified by the business suit. The oppositions hidden/exposed and denuded/clothed play upon the binary oppositions nature/culture and savage/civilized to bring about a condensation of libidinal investment, fear, and wish-fulfilment in the fantasmatic presence of the Other. The binarisms repeat the assumption that sex is the essential 'nature' of black masculinity, while the cheap, tacky polyester suit confirms the black man's failure to gain access to 'culture'. The camouflage of respectability cannot conceal the fact that, in essence, he originates, like his prick, from somewhere anterior to civilization. What is dramatized in the picture is the splitting of levels of belief, which Freud regarded as the key feature of the logic of disavowal in fetishism.⁶ Hence the implication: 'I know it's not true that all black men have big penises, but still, in my photographs they do.'

It is precisely at this point, however, that the concept of fetishism threatens to conceal more than it reveals about the ambivalence that the spectator experiences in relation to Mapplethorpe's work as its 'shock effect'. Freud saw the castration anxiety in the little boy's shock at discovering the absence of a penis in the little girl (acknowledged and disavowed in the fetish) as constitutive of sexual difference. The clinical pathology or perversion of the fetishist, like a neurotic symptom, unravels for classical psychoanalysis the 'normal' developmental path of Oedipal heterosexual identity; it is the point at which

4. Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen*, Vol 24, no 4, 1983.

5. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), Paladin, London 1970, p120.

6. Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), *Standard Edition* Vol 21 (1961), pp147-57; *Pelican Freud Library*, no 7, 'On Sexuality' (1977), p351-7.

the norm is rendered visible by the pathological. The concept of fetishism was profoundly enabling for feminist film theory because it uncovered the logic of substitution at work in all regimes of representation, which make present for the subject what is absent in the real. But although analogies facilitate cognitive connections which have important cultural and political implications, there is also the risk that they repress and flatten out the messy intermediate space in-between. As Jane Gaines has pointed out concerning feminist film theory, the inadvertent reproduction of the heterosexual presumption in the orthodox theorization of sexual difference also assumed a homogeneous racial and ethnic context, with the result that racial and ethnic differences were erased from or marginalized within the analysis.⁷ Analogies between race and gender in representation reveal similar ideological patterns of objectification, exclusion, and 'othering'. In Mapplethorpe's nudes, however, there is a subversive homoerotic dimension in the substitution of the black male subject for the traditional female archetype. This subversive dimension was underplayed or obscured in my earlier analysis. My use of the theoretical analogy minimized the homosexual specificity of Mapplethorpe's eroticism, which rubs against the grain of the generic high art status of the traditional female nude.

To pose the problem in another way, one could approach the issue of ambivalence by simply asking: do photographs like *Man in a Polyester Suit* reinscribe the fixed beliefs of racist ideology or do they problematize them by foregrounding the intersections of difference where race and gender cut across the representation of sexuality? An unequivocal yes/no answer is impossible, it seems to me, because the image throws the question back at the spectator, for whom it is experienced precisely as the 'shock effect'. What is at issue is not primarily whether the question can be decided by appealing to authorial intentions, but the equally important question of the role of the reader and how he or she attributes intentionality to the author. The elision of homoerotic specificity in my earlier reading thus refracts an ambivalence not so much on the part of Mapplethorpe the author, or on the part of the text, but on my part as a reader. More specifically, it refracted the ambivalent 'structure of feeling' that I inhabit as a black gay male reader in relation to the text. Indeed, I've only recently become aware of the logical slippage in my earlier reading, which assumed an equivalence between Mapplethorpe as the individual agent of the image and the empty, anonymous, and impersonal ideological category I described as 'the white male subject' into which the spectator is interpellated. Paradoxically, this conflation undermined the very distinction between author-function and ideological subject-position that I drew from Michel Foucault's anti-naturalist account of authorship.⁸

In retrospect I feel this logical flaw arose as the result of my own ambivalent positioning as a black gay spectator. To call something fetishistic implies a negative judgment, to say the least. I want to take back the unavoidably moralistic connotations of the term, because I think what was at issue in the rhetoric of my previous argument was the encoding of an ambivalent structure

7. Jane Gaines, 'White Privilege and the Right to Look', *Screen* Vol 29, no 4, 1988.

8. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1977; see also Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, London 1977.

of feeling, in which anger and envy divided the identifications that placed me somewhere always already inside the text. On the one hand, I emphasized objectification because I felt identified with the black male subjects in the field of vision, an identification with the Other that might best be described in Fanon's terms as a feeling that 'I am laid bare. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance. I am being dissected under white eyes. I am *fixed*. Look, it's a Negro.'⁹ But on the other hand, and more difficult to disclose, I was also implicated in the fantasy scenario as a gay subject. That is to say, I was identified with the author insofar as the objectified black male was also an image of the object chosen by my own fantasies and erotic investments. Thus, sharing the same desire to look as the author-agent of the gaze, I would actually occupy the position that I said was that of the 'white male subject'.

9. Frantz Fanon, *op. cit.*, p82.

10. Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', in *Écrits: A Selection*, Tavistock, London 1977.

I now wonder whether the anger in that earlier reading was not also the expression and projection of a certain envy. Was it not, in this sense, an effect of a homosexual identification on the basis of a similar object choice that invoked an aggressive rivalry over the same unattainable object of desire, depicted and represented in the visual field of the Other? According to Jacques Lacan, the mirror-stage constitutes the 'I' in an alienated relation to its own image, as the image of the infant's body is 'unified' by the prior investment that comes from the look of the mother, always already in the field of the Other.¹⁰ In this sense, the element of aggressivity involved in textual analysis – the act of taking things apart – might merely have concealed my own narcissistic participation in the pleasures of Mapplethorpe's text. Taking the two elements together, I would say that my ambivalent positioning as a black gay male reader stemmed from the way in which I inhabited two contradictory identifications at one and the same time. Insofar as the anger and the envy were an effect of my identifications with both object and subject of the gaze, the rhetorical closure of my earlier reading simply displaced the ambivalence onto the text by attributing it to the author.

III REREADING

If this brings us to the threshold of the kind of ambivalence that is historically specific to the context, positions, and experiences of the reader, it also demonstrates the radically polyvocal quality of Mapplethorpe's photographs and the way in which contradictory readings can be derived from the same body of work. I want to suggest, therefore, an alternative reading that demonstrates this textual reversibility by revising the assumption that fetishism is necessarily a bad thing.

By making a 180-degree turn, I want to suggest that the articulation of ambivalence in Mapplethorpe's work can be seen as a subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms of the nude in dominant traditions of representation. This alternative reading also arises out of a reconsideration of poststructuralist theories of authorship. Although

Romantic notions of authorial creativity cannot be returned to the central role they once played in criticism and interpretation, the question of agency in cultural practices that contest the canon and its cultural dominance suggests that it really *does* matter who is speaking.

The question of enunciation – who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate? – implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference. It is enunciation that circumscribes the marginalized positions of subjects historically misrepresented or underrepresented in dominant systems of representation. To be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak, since the subject positioned in the margins is silenced and invisible. The contestation of marginality in black, gay, and feminist politics thus inevitably brings the issue of authorship back into play, not as the centered origin that determines or guarantees the aesthetic and political value of a text, but as a question about agency in the cultural struggle to ‘find a voice’ and ‘give voice’ to subordinate experiences, identities, and subjectivities. A relativization of authoritative poststructuralist claims about de-centering the subject means making sense of the biographical and autobiographical dimension of the context-bound relations between authors, texts, and readers without falling back on liberal humanist or empiricist commonsense. Quite specifically, the ‘death of the author’ thesis demands revision because the death of the author in *our* case inevitably makes a difference to the kinds of readings we make.

Comments by Mapplethorpe, and by some of the black models with whom he collaborated, offer a perspective on the questions of authorship, identification, and enunciation. The first of these concerns the specificity of Mapplethorpe’s authorial identity as a gay artist and the importance of a metropolitan urban gay male culture as a context for the homoeroticism of the black male nudes.

In a BBC television documentary in 1988, Lynne Franks pointed out that a strong sense of voyeurism is marked by its absence from Mapplethorpe’s work. A brief comparison with the avowedly heterosexual scenario in the work of photographers such as Edward Weston or Helmut Newton suggests similar aesthetic conventions at the level of visual fetishization; but it would also highlight the significant differences that arise in Mapplethorpe’s homoeroticism. Under Mapplethorpe’s authorial gaze there is a tension within the cool distance between subject and object. The gaze certainly involves an element of erotic objectification, but like a point-of-view shot in gay male pornography it is reversible. The gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object. This element of reversibility at the level of the gaze is marked elsewhere in Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre, most notably in the numerous self-portraits, including the one with a bull-whip up his bum, in which the artist posits himself as the object of the look. In relation to the black nudes and the S/M pictures that precede them, this reversibility creates an ambivalent distance measured by the direct look of the models, which is another salient feature of gay male pornography. In effect,

Mapplethorpe implicates himself in his field of vision by a kind of participatory observation, an ironic ethnography whose descriptive clarity suggests a reversible relation of equivalence, or identification, between the author and the social actors whose world is described. On this view, Mapplethorpe's homoeroticism can be read as a form of stylised reportage which documented aspects of the urban gay subcultural milieu of the 1970s. One can reread Mapplethorpe's homoerotica as a kind of photographic documentary of a world that has profoundly changed as a result of AIDS. This reinterpretation is something Mapplethorpe drew attention to in the BBC television interview:

I was part of it. And that's where most of the photographers who move in that direction are at a disadvantage, in that they're not part of it. They're voyeurs moving in. With me it was quite different. Often I had experienced some of those experiences which I later recorded, myself, first hand, without a camera.

It was a certain moment and I was in a perfect situation in that most of the people in the photographs were friends of mine and they trusted me. I felt almost an obligation to record those things. It was an obligation for me to do it, to make images that nobody's seen before and to do it in a way that's *aesthetic*.

In this respect, especially in the light of the moral and ethical emphasis with which Mapplethorpe locates himself as a member of an elective community, it is important to acknowledge the ambivalence of authorial motivation suggested in his rationale for the black male nude studies:

At some point I started photographing black men. It was an area that hadn't been explored intensively. If you went through the history of nude male photography, there were very few black subjects. I found that I could take pictures of black men that were so subtle, and the form was so photographic.

On the one hand, this could be interpreted as the discovery and conquest of 'virgin territory' in the field of art history; but alternatively, Mapplethorpe's acknowledgment of the exclusion and absence of the black subject from the canonical realm of the fine art nude can be interpreted as the elementary starting point of an implicit critique of racism and ethnocentrism in Western aesthetics.

Once we consider Mapplethorpe's own marginality as a gay artist, placed in a subordinate relation to the canonical tradition of the nude, his implicitly critical position on the presence/absence of race in dominant regimes of representation enables a reappraisal of the intersubjective collaboration between artist and model. Whereas my previous reading emphasized the apparent inequality between the famous, author-named white artist and the

anonymous and interchangeable black models, the biographical dimension reveals an important element of mutuality. In a magazine interview that appeared after his death in 1989, Mapplethorpe's comments about the models suggest an intersubjective relation based on a shared social identity: 'Most of the blacks don't have health insurance and therefore can't afford AZT. They all died quickly, the blacks. If I go through my *Black Book*, half of them are dead.'¹¹ In his mourning, there is something horribly accurate about the truism that death is the great leveller, because his pictures have now become *momento mori*, documentary evidence of a style of life and a sexual ethics in the metropolitan gay culture of the 1970s and early 1980s which no longer exists in the way that it used to. As a contribution to the historical formation of urban gay culture, Mapplethorpe's homoeroticism is invested with memory, with the intense emotional residue Barthes described when he wrote about photographs of his mother.¹²

The element of mutual identification between artist and models undermines the view that the relation was necessarily exploitative simply because it was interracial. Comments by Ken Moody, one of the models in the *Black Book*, suggest a degree of reciprocity. When asked in the BBC television interview whether he recognized himself in Mapplethorpe's pictures, he said: 'Not always, not most of the time ... When I look at it as me, and not just as a piece of art, I think I look like a freak. I don't find that person in the photograph necessarily attractive and it's not something I would like to own.' The alienation of not even owning your own image might be taken as evidence of objectification, of being reduced to a 'piece of art'; but at the same time Moody rejects the view that it was a unequivocal relation, suggesting instead a reciprocal gift relationship that further underlines the theme of mutuality:

I don't honestly think of it as exploitation ... It's almost as if ... and this is the conclusion I've come to now, because I really haven't thought about it up to now – it's almost as if he wants to give a gift to this particular group. He wants to create something very beautiful and give it to them ... And he is actually very giving.

I don't want to over- or underinterpret such evidence, but I do think that this biographical dimension to the issues of authorship and enunciation enables a rereading of the textual ambivalence in Mapplethorpe's artistic practice. Taking the question of identification into account, as that which inscribes ambivalent relations of mutuality and reversibility in the gaze, enables a reconsideration of the cultural politics of Mapplethorpe's black male nudes.

Once grounded in the context of contemporary urban gay male culture in the United States, the shocking modernism that informs the ironic juxtaposition of elements drawn from the repository of high culture – where the nude is indeed one of the most valued genres in Western art history – can be read as a subversive recoding of the normative aesthetic ideal. On this view, it becomes possible to reverse the reading of racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe's

11. 'The Long Good-bye', interview by Dominick Dunne, *Blitz*, London, May 1989, pp67-8.

12. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Jonathan Cape, London 1982.

work not as a repetition of racist fantasies but as a deconstructive strategy which lays bare psychic and social relations of ambivalence in the representation of race and sexuality. This deconstructive aspect of his homoeroticism is experienced, at the level of audience reception, as the disturbing 'shock effect'.

The Eurocentric character of the liberal humanist values invested in classical Greek sculpture, as the originary model of human beauty in Western aesthetics, is paradoxically revealed by the promiscuous intertextuality whereby the filthy and degraded form of the commonplace racist stereotype is brought into the domain of aesthetic purity circumscribed by the privileged place of the fine art nude. This doubling within the pictorial space of Mapplethorpe's black nudes does not reproduce either term of the binary relation between 'high culture' and 'low culture' as it is: it radically de-centers and destabilizes the hierarchy of racial and sexual difference in dominant systems of representations by folding the two together within the same frame. It is this ambivalent intermixing of textual references, achieved through the appropriation and articulation of elements from the 'purified' realm of the transcendental aesthetic ideal and from the debased and 'polluted' world of the commonplace racist stereotype, that disturbs the fixed positioning of the spectator. One might say that what is staged in Mapplethorpe's black male nudes is the return of the repressed in the ethnocentric imaginary. The psychic/social boundary which separates 'high culture' and 'low culture' is transgressed, crossed and disrupted precisely by the superimposition of two ways of seeing which thus throws the spectator into uncertainty and undecidability – precisely the experience of ambivalence as a structure of feeling in which one's subject-position is called into question.

In my previous argument, I suggested that the regulative function of the stereotype had the upper hand, as it were, and helped to 'fix' the spectator in the ideological subject-position of 'the white male subject'. Now I'm not so sure. Once we recognize the historical and political specificity of Mapplethorpe's practice as a contemporary gay artist, the aesthetic irony that informs the juxtaposition of elements in his work can be seen as the trace of a subversive strategy that disrupts the stability of the binary oppositions into which difference is coded. In social, economic and political terms, black men in the United States constitute one of the 'lowest' social classes: disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and disempowered as a distinct collective subject in the late capitalist underclass. Yet, in Mapplethorpe's photographs, men who in all probability came from this class are elevated onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal. Far from reinforcing the fixed beliefs of the white supremacist imaginary, such a deconstructive move begins to undermine the foundational myths of the pedestal itself. The subaltern black social subject who was historically excluded from dominant regimes of representation – 'invisible men' in Ralph Ellison's phrase – is made visible within the codes and conventions of the dominant culture whose ethnocentrism is thereby exposed as a result. The mythological figure of 'the

Negro', who was always excluded from the good, the true, and the beautiful in Western aesthetics on account of his otherness, comes to embody the image of physical perfection and aesthetic idealization in which, in the canonical figure of the nude, Western culture constructed its own self-image. Far from confirming the hegemonic white heterosexual subject in his centered position of mastery and power, the deconstructive aspect of Mapplethorpe's black male nude photographs loosens up and unfixes the commonsense sensibilities of the spectator, who thereby experiences the 'shock effect' precisely as the affective displacement of given ideological subject positions.

To shock was always the key verb of the avant-garde in modernist art history. In Mapplethorpe's work, the shock effected by the promiscuous textual intercourse between elements drawn from opposite ends of the hierarchy of cultural value de-centers and destabilizes the ideological fixity of the spectator. In this sense, his work begins to reveal the political unconscious of white ethnicity. It lays bare the constitutive ambivalence that structures whiteness as a cultural identity whose hegemony lies, as Richard Dyer suggests, precisely in its 'invisibility'.¹³ The splitting of the subject in the construction of white identity, entailed in the affirmation and denial of racial difference in Western humanism, is traced in racist perception. Blacks are looked down upon and despised as worthless, ugly, and ultimately unhuman creatures. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere the black body, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idolized as the embodiment of its ideal. This schism in white subjectivity is replayed daily in the different ways black men become visible on the front and back pages of tabloid newspapers, seen as undesirable in one frame – the mugger, the terrorist, the rapist – and highly desirable in the other – the athlete, the sports hero, the entertainer. Mapplethorpe undercuts this conventional separation to show the recto/verso relation between these contradictory 'ways of seeing' as constitutive aspects of white identity. Like a mark that is legible on both sides of a sheet of paper, Mapplethorpe's aesthetic strategy places the splitting in white subjectivity under erasure: it is crossed out but still visible. In this sense, the anxieties aroused in the exhibition history of Mapplethorpe's homoerotica not only demonstrate the disturbance and de-centering of dominant versions of white identity, but confronts whiteness with the otherness that enables it to be constituted as an identity as such.

In changing my mind like this, suggesting that the ambivalent fetishization of racial difference actually enables a potential deconstruction of whiteness, I think Mapplethorpe's use of irony can be recontextualized in relation to Pop Art practices of the 1960s. The undecidable question that is thrown back onto the spectator – do the images reinforce or undermine racist stereotypes? – can be compared to the highly ambivalent aura of fetishism that frames the female body in the paintings of Allen Jones. Considering the issues of sexism and misogyny at stake, Laura Mulvey's reading, from 1972, suggests a contextual approach to the political analysis of its 'shocking' undecidability:

By revealing the way in which fetishistic images pervade not just specialist

13. Richard Dyer, 'White', *Screen*, Vol 29, no 4, 1988.

publications but the whole of the mass media, Allen Jones throws a new light on woman as spectacle. Women are constantly confronted with their own image ... yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus ... The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires.¹⁴

This has a salutary resonance in the renewal of debates on black aesthetics given that contemporary practices which contest the marginality of the black subject in dominant regimes of representation have gone beyond the unhelpful binarism of so-called positive and negative images. We are now more aware of the identities, fantasies, and desires that are coerced, simplified, and reduced by the rhetorical closure that flows from that kind of critique. But this also entails a clarification of what we need from theory as black artists and intellectuals. The critique of stereotypes was crucial in the women's and gay movements of the 1960s and 1970s, just as it was in the black movements that produced aesthetic-political performative statements such as 'Black is Beautiful'. As the various movements have fragmented politically, however, their combined and uneven development suggests that analogies across race, gender, and sexuality may be useful only insofar as we historicize them and to the extent of what they make possible. Appropriations of psychoanalytic theory arose at a turning point in the cultural politics of feminism, and, in thinking about the enabling possibilities this has opened up for the study of black representation, I feel we also need to acknowledge the other side of ambivalence in contemporary cultural struggles, the dark side of the political predicament that ambivalence engenders.

In contrast to the claims of academic deconstruction, the moment of undecidability is rarely experienced as a purely textual event; rather it is the point where politics and the contestation of power are felt at their most intense. According to V.N. Volosinov, the social multi-acculturality of the ideological sign has an 'inner dialectical quality [which] comes out only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes', because 'in ordinary circumstances ... an established dominant ideology ... always tries, as it were, to stabilize the dialectical flux.'¹⁵ Indeterminacy means that multi-accultural or polyvalent signs have no necessary belonging and can be articulated and appropriated into the political discourse of the Right as easily as that of the Left. Antagonistic efforts to fix the multiple connotations arising from the ambivalence of the key signs of ideological struggle demonstrate what in Antonio Gramsci's terms would be described as a 'war of position' whose outcome is never guaranteed in advance one way or the other.

We have seen how, despite their emancipatory objectives, certain radical feminist anti-pornography arguments have been taken up and translated into the neo-conservative cultural and political agenda of the Right. For my part, I want to emphasize that I've reversed my reading of racial signification in Mapplethorpe not for the fun of it, but because I do *not* want a black gay

14. Laura Mulvey, 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious, or, "You Don't Know What is Happening, Do You Mr Jones?"' (1972), in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Macmillan, London 1989, p13.

15. V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), Harvard University Press, Harvard 1973, p24.

16. *New York Times*, 28
September 1989.

critique to be appropriated to the purposes of the Right's anti-democratic cultural offensive. Jesse Helms' amendment to public funding policies in the arts – which was orchestrated in relation to Mapplethorpe's homoerotic work – forbids the public funding of art deemed 'obscene or indecent'. But it is crucial to note that a broader remit for censorship was originally articulated on the grounds of a moral objection to art that 'denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, or national origin'.¹⁶ In other words, the discourse of liberal and social democratic anti-discrimination legislation is being appropriated and rearticulated into a right-wing position that promotes a discriminatory politics of cultural censorship and ideological coercion. Without a degree of self-reflexivity, black critiques of Mapplethorpe's work can be easily assimilated into a politics of homophobia. Which is to say, coming back to the photographs, that precisely on account of their ambivalence, Mapplethorpe's photographs are open to a range of contradictory readings whose political character depends on the social identity that different audiences bring to bear on them. The photographs can confirm a racist reading as easily as they can produce an anti-racist one. Or again, they can elicit a homophobic reading as easily as they can conform a homoerotic one. Once ambivalence and undecidability are situated in the contextual relations between author, text, and readers, a cultural struggle ensues in which antagonistic efforts seek to articulate the meaning and value of Mapplethorpe's work.

What is at issue in this 'politics of enunciation' can be clarified by a linguistic analogy, since certain kinds of performative statements produce different meanings not so much because of what is said but because of who is saying it. As a verbal equivalent of Mapplethorpe's visual image, the statement 'the black man is beautiful' takes on different meanings depending on the identity of the social subject who enunciates it. Does the same statement mean the same thing when uttered by a white woman, a black woman, a white man, or a black man? Does it mean the same thing whether the speaker is straight or gay? In my view, it cannot possibly mean the same thing in each instance because the racial and gendered identity of the enunciator inevitably 'makes a difference' to the social construction of meaning and value.

Today we are adept at the all too familiar concatenation of identity politics, as if by merely rehearsing the mantra of 'race, class, gender' (and all the other intervening variables) we have somehow acknowledged the diversified and pluralized differences at work in contemporary culture, politics, and society. Yet the complexity of what actually happens 'between' the contingent spaces where each variable intersects with the others is something only now coming into view theoretically, and this is partly the result of new antagonistic cultural practices by hitherto marginalized artists. Instead of analogies, which tend to flatten out these intermediate spaces, I think we need to explore theories that enable new forms of dialogue. In this way we might be able to imagine a dialogic or relational conception of the differences we actually inhabit in our lived experiences of identity and identification. The observation that different

readers produce different readings of the same cultural texts is not as circular as it seems: I want to suggest that it provides an outlet onto the dialogic character of the political imaginary of difference. To open up this area for theoretical investigation I want to point to two ways in which such relational differences of race, gender, and sexuality do indeed 'make a difference'.

IV DIFFERENT READERS MAKE DIFFERENT READINGS

Here, I simply want to itemize a range of issues concerning readership and authorship that arises across the intertextual field in which Mapplethorpe 'plays'. To return to *Man in a Polyester Suit*, one can see that an anonymous greetings card, produced and marketed in a specifically gay cultural context, works on similar fantasies of black sexuality. The greetings card depicts a black man in a business suit alongside the caption 'Everything you ever heard about black men ... is true', at which point the card unfolds to reveal his penis. The same savage/civilized binarism that I noted in Mapplethorpe's photography is signified here by the contrast between the body clothed in a business suit, then denuded to reveal the penis (with some potted plants in the background to emphasize the point about the nature/culture distinction). Indeed, the card replays the fetishistic splitting of levels of belief as it is opened: the image of the big black penis serves as the punchline of the little joke. But because the card is authorless, the issue of attributing racist or anti-racist intentions is effectively secondary to the context in which it is exchanged and circulated, the context of an urban, commercial, gay male subculture. My point is that gay readers in this vernacular sign-community may share access to a range of intertextual references in Mapplethorpe's work which other readers may not be aware of.

Returning to the 'enigma' of the black models in Mapplethorpe's work: the appearance of black gay video porn star Joe Simmons (referred to as Thomas in *The Black Book*) on magazine covers from *Artscribe* to *Advocate Men* offers a source of intertextual pleasure to 'those in the know' that accentuates and inflects Mapplethorpe's depiction of the same person. Repetition has become one of the salient pleasures of gay male pornography as photographic reproduction and video piracy encourage the accelerated flow by which models and scenarios constantly reappear in new intertextual combinations. By extending this process into 'high art', circulating imagery between the streets and the galleries, Mapplethorpe's promiscuous textuality has a sense of humour that might otherwise escape the sensibilities of non-gay or anti-gay viewers.

The mobility of such intertextual moves cannot be arrested by recourse to binary oppositions. The sculpted pose of Joe Simmons in one frame immediately recalls the celebrated nude studies of Paul Robeson by Nicholas Murray in 1926. Once the photograph is situated in this historical context, which may or may not be familiar to black readers in particular, one might compare Mapplethorpe to Carl van Vetchen, the white photographer of black literati in the Harlem Renaissance. In this context, Richard Dyer has retrieved a

17. Richard Dyer,
*Heavenly Bodies: Film
Stars and Society*,
British Film Institute/
Macmillan, London
1987, pp118-23.

revealing instance of overwhelming ambivalence in racial/sexual representations. In the 1920s, wealthy white patrons in the Philadelphia Art Alliance commissioned a sculpture of Robeson by Antonio Salemme. Although they wanted it to embody Robeson's 'pure' beauty in bronze, they rejected the sculpture because its aesthetic sensuality overpowered their moral preconceptions.¹⁷

The historical specificity of this reference has a particular relevance in the light of renewed interest in the Harlem Renaissance in contemporary black cultural practices. This rediscovery of the past has served to thematize questions of identity and desire in the work of black gay artists such as Isaac Julien. In *Looking for Langston* (1988), Julien undertakes an archaeological inquiry into the enigma of Langston Hughes' sexual identity. Insofar as the aesthetic strategy of the film eschews the conventions of documentary realism in favour of a dialogic combination of poetry, music, and archival imagery, it does not claim to discover an authentic or essential homosexual identity (for Langston Hughes or anyone else). Rather, the issue of authorial identity is invested with fantasy, memory, and desire and serves as an imaginative point of departure for speculation and reflection on the social and historical relations in which black gay male identity is lived and experienced in diaspora societies such as Britain or the United States. In this sense, the criticism that the film is not about Langston Hughes misses the point. By showing the extent to which our identities, as black gay men, are historically constructed in and through representations, Julien's film interrogates aspects of social relations that silence and repress the representability of black gay identities and desires. The search for iconic heroes and heroines has been an important element in lesbian, gay, and feminist cultural politics, and the process of uncovering identities previously 'hidden from history' has had empowering effects in culture and society at large. Julien is involved in a similar project, but his film refuses, through its dialogic strategy, to essentialize Hughes into a black gay cultural icon. This strategy focuses on the question of power at issue in the ability to make and wield representations. Above all, it focuses on who has the 'right to look' by emphasizing both interracial and intraracial looking relations that complicate the subject/object dichotomy of seeing/being seen.

Hence, in one key scene, we see the white male protagonist leisurely leafing through *The Black Book*. Issues of voyeurism, objectification, and fetishization are brought into view not in a didactic confrontation with Mapplethorpe, but through a seductive invitation into the messy spaces in between the binary oppositions that dominate the representation of difference. Alongside visual quotations from Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, and Derek Jarman, the voices of James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka combine to emphasize the relational conception of 'identity' that Julien's dialogic strategy makes possible. It is through this relational approach that the film reopens the issue of racial fetishism. An exchange of looks between 'Langston' and his mythic object of desire, a black man called 'Beauty,' provokes a hostile glare from Beauty's white partner. In the daydream that follows, Langston imagines himself coupled with

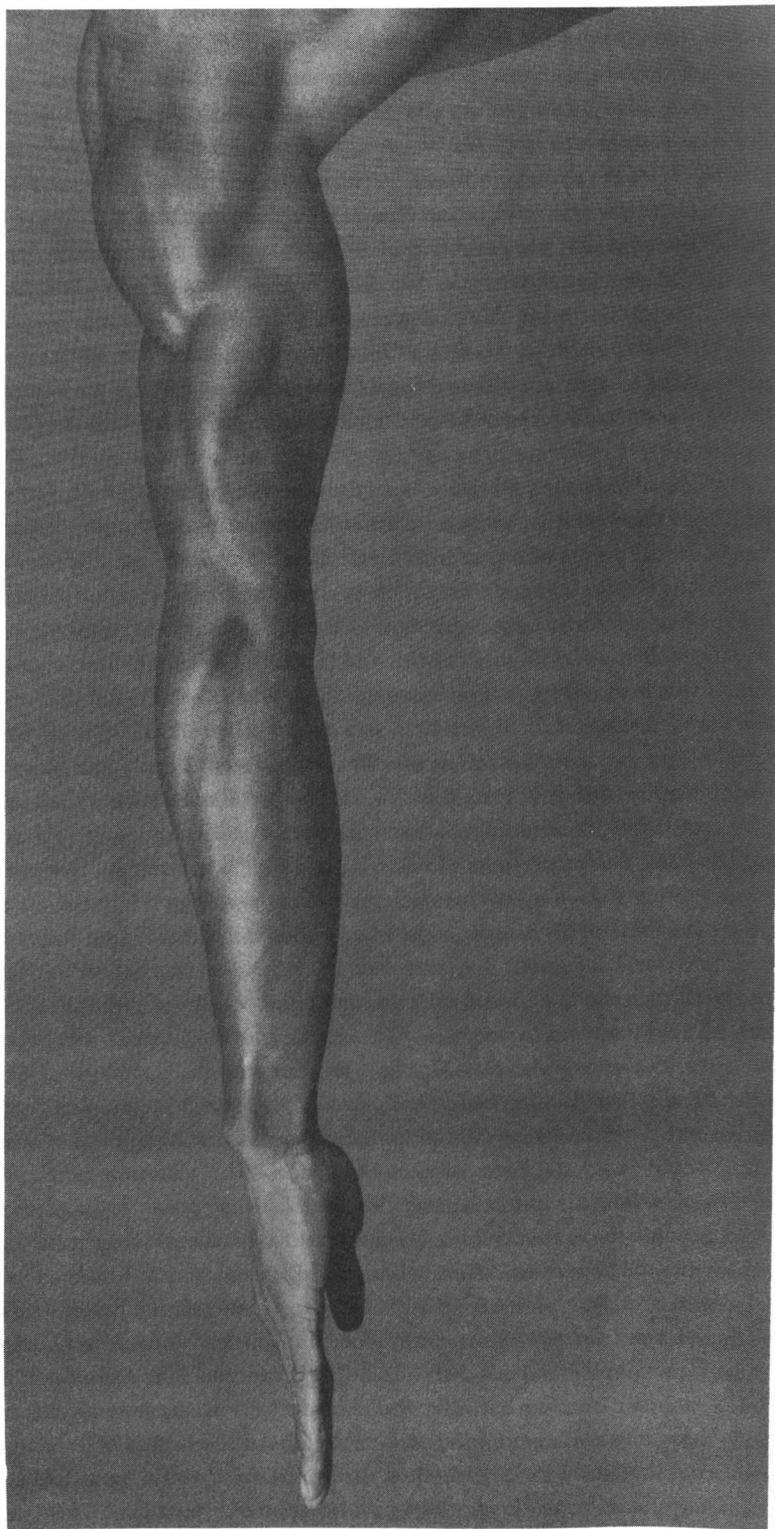
Beauty, their bodies entwined on a bed in an image reappropriated and reaccentuated from the homoerotic photography of George Platt Lynes. It is here that the trope of visual fetishization make a subversive return. Close-up sequences lovingly linger on the sensuous mouth of the actor portraying Beauty, with the rest of his face cast in shadow. As in Mapplethorpe's photographs, the strong emphasis on chiaroscuro lighting invests the fetishized fragment with a powerful erotic charge in which the 'thick lips' of the Negro are hypervalorized as the emblem of Beauty's impossible desirability. In other words, Julien takes the artistic risk of replicating the stereotype of the 'thick lipped Negro' in order to revalorize that which has historically always been devalorized as emblematic of the Other's ugliness. It is only by operating 'in and against' such tropes of racial fetishism that Julien lays bare the ambivalence of the psychic and social relations at stake in the relay of looks between the three men.

Historically, black people have been the objects of representation rather than its subjects and creators because racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation in the first place. Through his dialogic textual strategy, Julien overturns this double-bind as the black subject 'looks back' to ask the audience who or what *they* are looking for. The motif of the 'direct look' appeared in Julien's first film with the Sankofa Collective, *Territories* (1984), which was involved in an 'epistemological break' with the realist documentary tradition in black art. Similarly, what distinguishes current work by black lesbian and gay artists – such as the film and video of Pratibha Parmar, or the photography of Rotimi Fani-Kayode – is the break with static and essentialist conceptions of identity. The salient feature of such work is its hybridity: it operates on the borderlines of race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality, investigating the complex overdetermination of subjective experiences and desires as they are historically constituted in the ambivalent spaces in between.

Elsewhere, I suggested that, in relation to black British film, such hybridized practices articulated a critical dialogue about the constructed character of black British identities and experiences.¹⁸ Something similar informs the hybridized homoeroticism of Nigerian British photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode. The very title of his first publication, *Black Male/White Male*,¹⁹ suggests an explicitly intertextual relationship with Mapplethorpe. However, salient similarities in Fani-Kayode's construction of pictorial space – the elaborate body postures enclosed within the studio space, the use of visual props to stage theatrical effects, and the glossy monochrome texture of the photographic print – underline the important differences in his refiguration of the black male nude. In contrast to Mapplethorpe's isolation-effect, whereby only one black man occupies the field of vision at any one time, in Fani-Kayode's photographs bodies are coupled and contextualized. In pictures such as *Technique of Ecstasy*, the erotic conjunction between the two black men suggests an Afrocentric imaginary in which the implied power relations of the subject/object dichotomy are complicated by racial sameness. In *Bronze Head*, what looks like a Benin mask appears beneath a black man's splayed buttocks. This shocking

18. Kobena Mercer, 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain', in Mbye Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *Black-Frames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, MIT, 1988, pp50-61.

19. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Black Male/White Male*, Gay Men's Press, London 1987; see also, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, 'Traces of Ecstasy', *Ten-8*, no 28, 1988.



Derrick Cross, 1983. © The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, 1983.

contextualization places the image in an ambivalent space, at once an instance of contemporary African art, referring specifically to Yoruba iconography, and an example of homoerotic art photography that recalls Mapplethorpe's portrait of Derrick Cross, in which the black man's bum resembles a Brancusi.

If such dialogic strategies do indeed 'make a difference' to our understanding of the cultural politics of identity and diversity, does this mean the work is different *because* its authors are black? No, not necessarily. What is at issue is not an essentialist argument that the ethnic identity of the artist guarantees the aesthetic or political value of a text, but on the contrary, how commonsense conceptions of authorship and readership are challenged by practices that acknowledge the diversity and heterogeneity of the relations in which identities are socially constructed. Stuart Hall helped to clarify what is at stake in this shift when he argued that such acknowledgment of difference and diversity in black cultural practices has brought the innocent notion of the essential black subject to an end. Once we recognize blackness as a category of social, psychic, and political relations that have no fixed guarantees in nature but only the contingent forms in which they are constructed in culture, then questions of value cannot be decided by recourse to empirical commonsense about 'colour' or melanin. As Stuart Hall put it, 'Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily "right on" by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience.'²⁰

On this view, I would argue that black gay and lesbian artists are producing exciting and important work not because they happen to be black lesbians and gay men but because they have made cultural and political choices out of their experiences of marginality which situate them at the interface between different traditions. Insofar as they speak *from* the specificity of such experiences, they overturn the assumption that minority artists speak *for* the entire community from which they come. This is an important distinction in the relations of enunciation because it bears upon the politics of representation that pertain to all subjects in marginalized or minoritized situations, whether black, feminist, lesbian, or gay. In a material context of restricted access to the means of representation, minoritized subjects are charged with an impossible 'burden of representation'. Where subordinate subjects acquire the right to speak only one at a time, their discourse is circumscribed by the assumption that they speak as 'representatives' of the entire community from which they come. It is logically impossible for any one individual to bear such a burden, not only because it denies variety and heterogeneity within minority communities, but because it demands an intolerable submission to the iron law of the stereotype, namely the view from the majority culture that every minority subject is 'the same'. In the master codes of the dominant culture, the assumption that 'all black people are the same' reinforces the view that black communities are monolithic and homogeneous and that black subjectivity is defined exclusively by race and nothing but race. The dialogic element in contemporary black artistic practices begins to interrupt this restricted economy of representation by making it possible to think of a democratic politics

20. Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Document 7, Institute of Contemporary Art/British Film Institute, London 1988, p28.

21. Cornel West, 'The New Black Cultural Politics of Difference', British Film Institute Research Fellowship lecture, National Film Theatre, London, 23 June 1989.

22. Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, London 1987.

of difference and diversity. The work of black gay and lesbian artists participates in what has been called 'postmodernism' in terms of practices that pluralize available representations in the public sphere. To the extent that their aesthetic of critical dialogism underlines their contribution to the 'new cultural politics of difference', as Cornel West has put it,²¹ it seems to me that rather than mere 'celebration', their work calls for a critical response that reopens issues and questions we thought had been closed.

As I suggested in rereading Mapplethorpe, one of the key questions on the contemporary agenda concerns the cultural construction of whiteness. One of the signs of the times is that we don't really know what 'white' is. The implicitly ethnocentric agenda of cultural criticism, since the proliferation of poststructuralist theories in the 1970s, not only obscured the range of issues concerning black authorship, black spectatorship, and black intertextuality which black artists have been grappling with, but served to render invisible the constructed, and contested, character of 'whiteness' as a racial/ethnic identity. Richard Dyer has shown how difficult it is to theorize whiteness, precisely because it is so thoroughly naturalized in dominant ideologies as to be invisible as an ethnic identity: it simply goes without saying. Paradoxically then, for all our rhetoric about 'making ourselves visible', the real challenge in the new cultural politics of difference is to make 'whiteness' visible for the first time, as a culturally constructed ethnic identity historically contingent upon the disavowal and violent denial of difference. Gayatri Spivak has shown that it was only through the 'epistemic violence' of such denial that the centered subject of Western philosophy posited itself as the universalized subject - 'Man' - in relation to whom the Others were not simply different but somehow less than human, dehumanized objects of oppression. Women, children, savages, slaves, and criminals were all alike insofar as their otherness affirmed 'his' identity as the Subject at the centre of logocentrism and indeed all the other centrisms, ethnocentrism and phallogentrism, in which 'he' constructed his representations of reality.²² But who is 'he'? The identity of the hegemonic white male subject is an enigma in contemporary cultural politics.

V DIFFERENT DEGREES OF OTHERING

Coming back to Mapplethorpe's photographs, in the light of this task of making 'whiteness' visible as a problem for cultural theory, I want to suggest that the positioning of gay (white) people in the margins of Western culture may serve as a perversely privileged place from which to re-examine the political unconscious of modernity. By negotiating an alternative interpretation of his authorial position, I argued that his aesthetic strategy lays bare and makes visible the 'splitting' in white subjectivity that is anchored, by homology, in the split between 'high culture' and 'low culture'. The perverse interaction between visual elements drawn from both sources begins to subvert the hierarchy of cultural value, and such subversion of fixed categories is experienced precisely as the characteristic 'shock effect'.

Broadening this theme, one can see that representations of race in Western culture entail different degrees of othering. Or, to put it the other way around: different practices of racial representation imply different positions of identification on the part of the white subject. Hollywood's iconic image of the 'nigger minstrel' in cinema history, for example, concerns a deeply ambivalent mixture of othering and identification. The creation of the minstrel mask in cinema, and in popular theatre and the musical hall before it, was really the work of white men in blackface. What is taking place in the psychic structures of such historical representations? What is going on when whites assimilate and introject the degraded and devalored signifiers of racial otherness into the cultural construction of their own identity? If imitation implies identification, in the psychoanalytic sense of the word, then what is it about whiteness that makes the white subject want to be black?

'I Wanna Be Black', sang Lou Reed on the album *Street Hassle* (1979), which was a parody of a certain attitude in postwar youth culture in which the cultural signs of blackness – in music, clothes, and idioms of speech – were the mark of 'cool'. In the American context, such a sensibility predicated on the ambivalent identification with the Other was enacted in the bohemian beatnik subculture, and became embodied in Norman Mailer's literary image of 'the White Negro' stalking the jazz clubs in search of sex, speed, and psychosis. Like a photographic negative, the white negro was an inverted image of otherness, in which attributes devalored by the dominant culture were simply revalorized or hypervalorized as emblems of alienation and outsidership, a kind of strategic self-othering in relation to dominant cultural norms. In the museum without walls, Mailer's white negro, who went in search of the systematic derangement of the senses, merely retraced an imaginary pathway in the cultural history of modernity previously travelled by Arthur Rimbaud and Eugene Delecroix in nineteenth-century Europe. There is a whole modernist tradition of 'racial romanticism' that involves a fundamental ambivalence of identifications. At what point do such identifications result in an imitative masquerade of white ethnicity? At what point do they result in ethical and political alliances? How can we tell the difference?²³

My point is that white ethnicity constitutes an 'unknown' in contemporary cultural theory – a dark continent that has not yet been explored. One way of opening it up is to look at the ambivalent coexistence of the two types of identification, as they figure in the work of (white) gay artists such as Mapplethorpe and Jean Genet. In *Un Chant D'Amour* (1950), Genet's first and only foray into cinema, there is a great deal of ambivalence, to say the least, about the black man, the frenzied and maniacal negro seen in the masturbatory dance through the scopophilic gaze of the prison guard. In another context, I wrote: 'The black man in Genet's film is fixed like a stereotype in the fetishistic axis of the look ... subjected to a pornographic exercise of colonial power.'²⁴ Yes, I know ... but. There is something else going on as well, not on the margins but at the very center of Genet's film. The romantic escape into the woods, which is the liberated zone of freedom in which the lover's utopian

23. See Normal Mailer, 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', in *Advertisements for Myself*, André Deutsch, London 1959. The fantasy of wanting to be black is discussed as a masculinist fantasy in Suzanne Moore, 'Getting a Bit of the Other: The Pimps of Postmodernism', in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds), *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1988.

24. See 'Sexual Identities: Questions of Difference', a panel discussion with Kobena Mercer, Jacqueline Rose, Gayatri Spivak and Angela McRobbie, in *Undercut*, no 17, on Cultural Identities, 1988.

fantasy of coupling is enacted, is organized around the role of the 'dark' actor, the Tunisian, the one who is not quite white. On this view, the ambivalence of ethnicity has a central role to play in the way that Genet uses race to figure the desire for political freedom beyond the prisonhouse of marginality. Once located in relation to his plays, such as *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*, Genet's textual practice must be seen as his mode of participation in the 'liberation' struggles of the postwar era.

The word *liberation* tends to stick in our throats these days because it sounds so deeply unfashionable; but we might also recall that in the 1950s and 1960s it was precisely the connections between movements for liberation from colonialism, and movements for liberation from the dominant sex and gender system, that underlined their radical democratic character. In the contemporary situation, the essentialist rhetoric of categorical identity politics threatens to erase the connectedness of our different struggles. At its worst, such forms of identity politics play into the hands of the Right as the fundamentalist belief in an essential and immutable identity keeps us locked into the prisonhouse of marginality in which oppressions of race, class, and gender would have us live. By historicizing the imaginary identifications that enable democratic agency, we might rather find a way of escaping this ideological bantustan.

Instead of giving an answer to the questions that have been raised about the ambivalence of ethnicity as a site of identification and enunciation, I conclude by recalling Genet's wild and adventurous story about being smuggled across the Canadian border by David Hilliard and other members of the Black Panther Party in 1968. He arrived at Yale University to give a May Day speech, along with Allen Ginsberg and others, in defence of imprisoned activist Bobby Seale. Genet talks about this episode in *Prisoner of Love*, where it appears as a memory brought to consciousness by the narration of another memory, about the beautiful *fedayyin*, in whose desert camps Genet lived between 1969 and 1972. The memory of his participation in the elective community of the Palestinian freedom fighters precipitates the memory of the Black Panther 'brotherhood', into which he was adopted – this wretched orphaned nomadic homosexual thief. I am drawn to the kind of ambivalence, sexual and political, that shows through, like a stain, in his telling:²⁵

25. Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, Picador, London 1989, p213.

In white America the Blacks are the characters in which history is written. They are the ink that gives the white page its meaning ... [The Black Panther Party] built the black race on a white America that was splitting ... The Black Panthers' Party wasn't an isolated phenomenon. It was one of the many revolutionary outcrops. What made it stand out in white America was its black skin, its frizzy hair and, despite a kind of uniform black leather jacket, an extravagant but elegant way of dressing. They wore multi-colored caps only just resting on their springy hair; scraggy moustaches, sometimes beards; blue or pink or gold trousers made of satin or velvet, and cut so that even the most shortsighted passer-by couldn't miss their manly vigour.

Under what conditions does eroticism mingle with political solidarity? When does it produce an effect of empowerment? And when does it produce an effect of disempowerment? When does identification imply objectification and when does it imply equality? I am intrigued by the ambivalent but quite happy coexistence of the fetishized big black dick beneath the satin trousers and the ethical equivalence in the struggle for post-colonial subjectivity. Genet's affective participation in the political construction of imagined communities suggests that the struggle for democratic agency and subjectivity always entails the negotiation of ambivalence. Mapplethorpe worked in a different context, albeit one shaped by the democratic revolutions of the 1960s, but his work similarly draws us back into the difficult questions that Genet chose to explore, on the 'dark side' of the political unconscious of the post-colonial world.

The death of the author doesn't necessarily mean mourning and melancholia, but the mobilizing of a commitment to counter-memory. In the dialogue that black gay and lesbian artists have created in contemporary cultural politics, the exemplary political modernism of Mapplethorpe and Genet, 'niggers with attitude' if ever there were, is certainly worth remembering as we begin thinking about our pitiful 'postmodern' condition.