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On Representing ‘Doubly Othered’ Gay, Black Subjects

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In this essay, I explore what happens to our conventional understanding of ‘othering’ when subjects are not just othered on one count, but on two: in this case, on account of both their blackness and their homosexuality. Focusing specifically on the case of artist subjects, I demonstrate that this process of double othering has significant bearing on the interpretation of these subjects’ artworks. Thereby to provide a more adequate model for approaching these subjects and their work, I propose expanding Homi Bhabha’s conception of cultural hybrids to account for these subjects’ sexuality too. In order to lend support to this expanded concept of hybridity – and to provide an example of its application to the context of artistic production – I consider the work of the Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode. I draw attention to the complexity of the theoretical framework required to sufficiently capture all the processes at work in determining how both he and his artwork are perceived in a post-colonial context. In doing so, I aim to lend support to the contention that the cultural production of those in similarly ‘doubly othered’ social situations as Fani-Kayode is best understood within the context of this expanded concept of hybridity.

In *The Location of Culture*, one of the seminal works of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha introduces the idea of cultural hybridity in relation to a so-called ‘third-space’ that emerges from cultural intersections between (formerly) colonised and colonising peoples. By uncovering the deep-rooted inconsistencies in traditional colonial discourses, Bhabha claims, ‘cultural hybrids’ undermine the operation of uni-vocal colonial power. They deprive colonial culture both of the authority it has imposed and its claims to authenticity by drawing attention to ambivalences at the heart of its systems of othering. Yet, throughout his work Bhabha remains seemingly unconcerned with the cultural intersections of race and sexuality and any bearing that a consideration of such intersections might have on a conception of cultural hybridity.

In this essay, I explore what happens to our conventional understanding of the process of ‘othering’ when subjects are not just othered on one count, but on two: in this case, on account of both their blackness and their homosexuality. Focusing specifically on the case of artist subjects, I demonstrate that this process of double othering has significant bearing on the interpretation of these subjects’ artworks. Thereby to provide a more adequate model for approaching these subjects and their work, I propose expanding Bhabha’s conception of cultural hybrids to account for these subjects’ sexuality too. In order to lend support to this expanded concept of hybridity – and to provide an example of its application to the context of artistic production – I consider the work of the Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode. I draw attention to the complexity

of the theoretical framework required to sufficiently capture all the processes at work in determining how both he and his artwork are perceived in a post-colonial context. In doing so, I aim to lend support to the contention that the cultural production of those in similarly ‘doubly othered’ social situations as Fani-Kayode is best understood within the context of this expanded concept of hybridity.

The term ‘other’ was initially introduced to post-colonial studies by Edward Said. According to Said, the West effectively ‘constructed an image of the East’ as other precisely in order to attain knowledge of itself. In the classic poststructuralist manner of formulating identity as differential and contingent rather than coherent and independent, Said deconstructs the traditionally fixed and universal notions of ‘East’ and ‘West.’ He draws particular attention to how the West constructed an image of itself as the harbinger of rationalism and civilisation and the East as irrational and uncivilised. A similar application of the notion of othering has occurred in poststructuralist theorisations of sexuality and gender, with the supposed coherence of the notion of maleness depending on the othered status of femaleness, and the supposed coherence of the notion of heterosexuality depending on the othered status of homosexuality. The Nigerian-born photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode recognises that he is an outsider on two counts: in matters of his homosexuality and in terms of his “geographical and cultural dislocation” (276).

The process of double othering that faces black, gay men may at first seem to cohere with what Kimberlé Crenshaw sought to highlight in coining the term ‘intersectionality’ (140). Yet, while the stated goal of intersectionality was indeed to reconfigure feminism in order to account for women who were oppressed on not only one axis but two (just as black, gay men are), I would posit that it is nonetheless an unsuitable starting point for considering the process of double othering that the latter group faces. Intersectionality was a response to the fact that second wave feminism neglected to consider that race, class and sexuality overlapped with gender to constitute a person’s social identity. The feminist theorist bell hooks summarises that with intersectionality, “[women] began to rigorously challenge the notion that “gender” was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate” (xiii). In short, a more nuanced type of feminism was required to take account of the fact that the oppression facing women of colour, women from lower socioeconomic classes and women who identified as LGBTQIA differed from that which faced white, middle-class or straight women. However, there exists a further complexity in the case of doubly othered, black, gay men. While the singular source of oppression that concerns second wave feminism is the very same one that concerns Crenshaw – namely, the white patriarchy – the source of oppression facing black, gay men can be seen to be more diffuse. For these subjects are not othered solely by the group I will hereby refer to as “straight, white men.” They are also (more directly) othered by two further groups: white, gay men and black, straight men. In comparison, it would be wholly incorrect to summarise Crenshaw’s intersectionality as a movement that aimed

to highlight how black women were oppressed on two counts (by white women and by black men). Again, it aimed instead to highlight that the way in which black women were oppressed by a single source of power differed from the way in which this same source of power oppressed white, middle-class women. Since the oppressive power of white patriarchy inevitably underlies all social systems it cannot be denied that this too is the ultimate source of the oppression facing black, gay men. It is nonetheless important to consider the mechanisms by which this source of oppression enacts itself through a range of varied modes of othering. Much of what follows here is concerned with expanding upon this claim. I will begin by briefly articulating Bhabha's position on the process of othering and his related theory of hybridity.

Bhabha posits that constructions of otherness are dependent on something he calls fixity. The phenomenon of fixity is one that functions at the level of the sign (signifier) within discourses of colonialism – in relation to the 'sign of racial difference,' for instance. Fixity can be best understood through its fundamental connection with the idea of stereotyping, which, according to Bhabha, functions as fixity's major discursive strategy. Bhabha proposes that stereotyping stands in the way of our ability to interpret signifiers as anything other than their fixed meanings. With regard to the discourse on race, Bhabha argues that stereotyping "impedes the circulation and articulation of 'race' as anything other than its *fixity* as racism" (108). In other words, the notion of race is always accompanied by the fixed connotation of associated racism. This fixity is ultimately a result of the engrained racial stereotypes that are so central to colonial discourse. It is through fixity that race becomes the "ineradicable sign of *negative difference* in colonial discourses" (108). The notion of fixity has been captured somewhat more bluntly by Frantz Fanon in his remark that "wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro" (117).

Hybridity is the term Bhabha introduces to describe those people who exist in the spaces in between such fixed identifications that have arisen through stereotyping. These 'third spaces' in between the designations of fixed identity open up the possibility of "a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). The notion of hybridity is therefore conceived as a liberating and empowering one. Gen Doy, for example, notes how hybridity "empowers subjects in a post-colonial world" because the hybrid culture of diaspora "allows subjects to play with identities, reconstruct themselves and destroy stereotypes" (134). Bhabha himself emphasises hybridity's capacity to reconstruct an understanding of culture "based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism... but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (56). He argues further that culture itself is never actually fixed in space or time but rather is constantly in flux. It is cultural interstices that, according to Bhabha, carry culture in its purest form. Ultimately, then, hybridity indicates that "the concept of homogenous national cultures... or "organic" ethnic communities – *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in the process of profound redefinition" (5). A typical example of Bhabha's cultural hybrid is the

refugee or migrant who moves to settle in a different country and begins to adopt any number of the cultural codes and practices of that country alongside their own. It should, however, be noted that citing any such concrete examples of hybridity on Bhabha's terms is complicated by the fact that his argument ultimately aims to demonstrate that *all* forms of culture are in fact hybrid at the outset; that there is no such thing as a 'pure' or original culture. It is within this vein that I demonstrate how this process of othering occurs on two fronts simultaneously in the case of black, gay men and go on to argue that such subjects can more usefully be construed as examples of cultural hybrids.

Before progressing with my analysis of the double othering that black, gay subjects face, I must address the sentiment pervading much post-colonial theory that drawing of parallels between race and sexuality is either unwarranted, counterproductive or misleading. Shamira Meghani and Humaira Saeed, for example, warn that while the two categories do admit "some parallels in broad patterns of othering," they are only helpful "if they are not plotted on a pre-existing and stable matrix" (293). Similarly, for Anne McClintock, race and sexuality cannot be seen as structurally equivalent to each other; nor can race be "understood as sequentially derivative" of sexuality – they merely "come into being in historical relation to each other" (61). One need only read Fanon's account of the "crushing objecthood" that black people face to appreciate that, ontologically speaking, race is indeed quite unlike sexuality (Fanon, 82). Fanon proposes that ontology does not even "permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (82). I need not embark on an account of the ontology of sexuality to clarify that the same obviously cannot be said about gay men. It should suffice to clarify that in what follows I do not argue for the equivalence of the categories of race and sexuality. Rather, following McClintock, my aim is to take account of the fact that race and sexuality do indeed come into being in historical relation to each other by arguing that Bhabha's model of hybridity can be expanded to include sexuality and thereby better account for those subjects who are othered in virtue of both their race and their sexuality.

The artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode is a prime example of such a person. Born in 1955 in Lagos, Fani-Kayode spent much of his childhood in Africa, moving to Europe as an adolescent. He then moved to America as a young adult, before settling in Britain to practise as an artist. Kobena Mercer, in his important book *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*, shows that Fani-Kayode's work tends to be subjected to a categorical: one in which critical focus is directed at either his ethnicity or his sexuality. Mercer supposes that when Fani-Kayode's gayness is acknowledged, his blackness is sidelined, whereas when his Africanness is recognized, his homosexuality is down-played (99). Mercer's observation is incisive. It accurately summarises much of the theory and criticism that surrounds Fani-Kayode's work. This is particularly

problematic since a stated aim of Fani-Kayode's work is to blur this very boundary in criticism and create space for a decidedly queer, black form of artistic expression. He says "I make my pictures homosexual on purpose. Black men from the third World have not previously revealed



Figure 1: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Untitled*, 1987–1988. Courtesy Autograph, London.

either to their own peoples or to the West a certain shocking fact: they can desire each other" (276). Another problematic consequence of what Mercer observes is that Fani-Kayode's artwork tends to be seen in "limited ways that obscure the broader implications of his visual *métissage*" (98) such as his frequent referencing of the Yoruba people and their cultural traditions¹. Such referencing can be seen especially in works like *Untitled* (1987) and *Nothing to Lose* (1989) (see Figures 1

and 2). Works such as these weave a rich, dialogic relationship between Yoruba culture and queer culture, in the latter of which – as Ian Bourland points out – Fani-Kayode undoubtedly became well-versed during his years in the queer and underground scenes of London and Washington DC in the 70s and 80s (133–135). Fani-Kayode claims that his work links the typically postmodern questioning of social constructions of gender with a specific aspect of Yoruba spirituality: the way in which "concepts of 'reality' become ambiguous" as a result of the "technique of ecstasy" (276).

¹ The Yoruba are an ethnic group primarily inhabiting Nigeria and Benin, of which Fani-Kayode is a member. Incidentally, this is the same cultural tradition from which Kara Walker took the image of the goddess in her *Fons Americanus*.

Mercer flags a further way in which the depth of readings into Fani-Kayode's work is limited by



Figure 2: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Nothing to lose IX (Bodies of Experience)*, 1989. Courtesy Autograph, London

critical tendencies: through the highly problematic and widely debated connection with his white contemporary Robert Mapplethorpe. On the one hand, the work of the two photographers appears strikingly similar: both shoot predominantly in black and white, both focus on portraiture, their subjects are almost always men (who are almost always black), and both nearly always photograph these men nude – compare Fani-Kayode's *Untitled* (1985) to Mapplethorpe's *Phillip Prioleau* (1979), and *Ajitto* (1981) (see Figures 3, 4 and

5). On the other hand, we see that the anti-progressive tendency of not only invoking a Western paradigm of modern art when critiquing African art, but making it the starting point of all discussion, is inculcated by those very critics who insist on referring to Fani-Kayode – explicitly or implicitly – as the 'black Robert Mapplethorpe'. Consider Evan Moffitt's comparison of how Mapplethorpe's nudes "pose like burnished marble statues" while "Fani-Kayode's nudes explore their deepest subconscious desires" (78). Or recall the New York Guggenheim Museum's 2019 show² that "re-contextualised" Mapplethorpe's photographs by displaying them alongside a selection of black, male nudes by Fani-Kayode, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya – all of whom are black. Mercer's argument, then, is that by assuming that Mapplethorpe's "racial fetishism" provides the only context for the appraisal of Fani-Kayode, viewers overlook how he himself lived as a "black, gay artist" (105). Doy also points out how the suggestion that Fani-

² *Mapplethorpe Now: Implicit Tensions*. 24 Jul. 2019–5 Jan. 2020. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC.



Figure 3: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Untitled*, 1985. Courtesy Autograph, London.

Kayode's work *derives* from Mapplethorpe's sets up a comparison which ultimately devalues the former's "suggestive and culturally rich aspects," such as its Yoruba influence (159). In the comparisons that follow, however, I neither aim to re-contextualise Fani-Kayode's work nor suggest that it derives from Mapplethorpe's. Rather, I am interested in the potential for Mapplethorpe's work to act as a 'control test' for Fani-Kayode's. The comparison here is invoked in order to illuminate some important differences between how the work of a gay, white man and a gay, black man are perceived as well as the differences between each photographer's relationship with their black, male sitters.

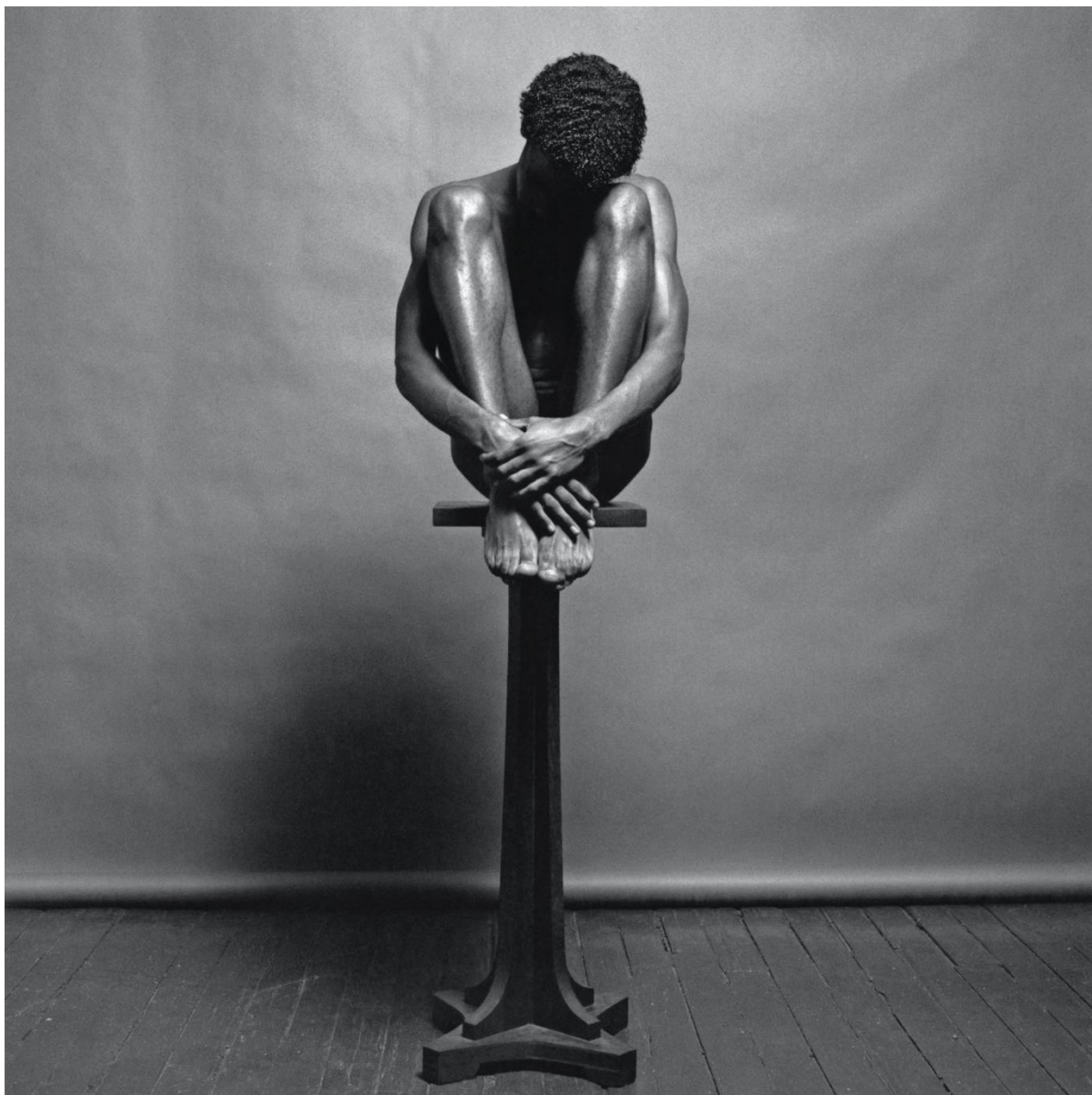


Figure 4: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Philip Prioleau*, 1979 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

Fani-Kayode is likely referring to Mapplethorpe when he describes those “Western photographers [who] have shown that they can desire black males (albeit neurotically)” (276). He distances himself from Mapplethorpe and other such artists, insisting that “the exploitative mythologising of black virility on behalf of the homosexual bourgeoisie is ultimately no different from the vulgar objectification of Africa” (276). One might deduce from his mention of the ‘homosexual bourgeoisie’ that Fani-Kayode is referring to the process of being othered by the gaze of specifically *white*, gay men. Implicit in this is an expression of the difference that (he believes) exists between perceptions of his and Mapplethorpe’s work. He would find support for this belief in Mercer’s observation that “the same statement – the black man is beautiful, say – retains the same denotative meaning, but acquires different connotational values when enunciated by different groups of subjects” (“Just looking” 471). The analogy here is clear: two photographers

from different (ethnic) groups take the same photograph, attempting to convey how ‘the black man is beautiful.’ But the photographs are perceived differently because of their differing identity characteristics.

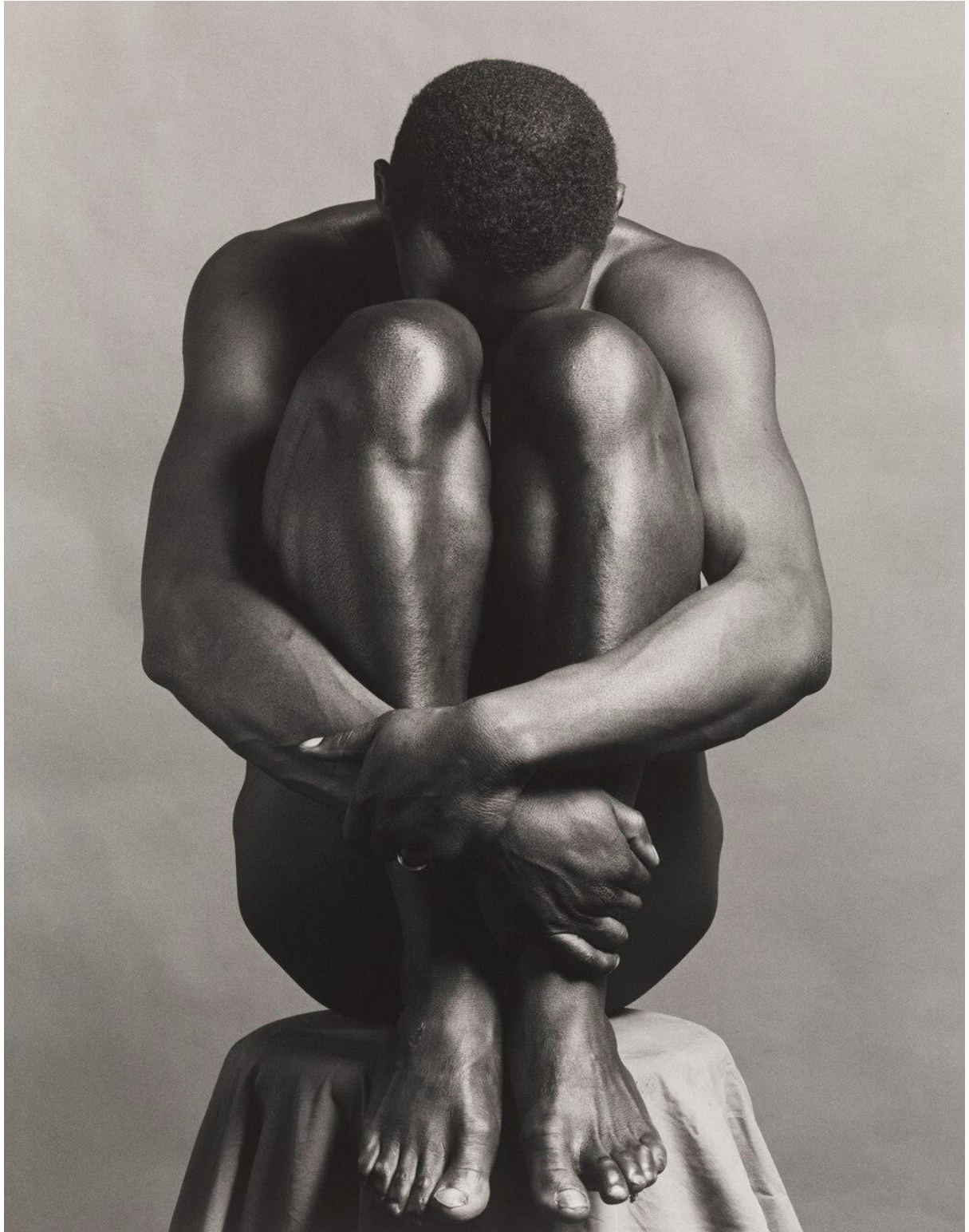


Figure 5: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajito*, 1981 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

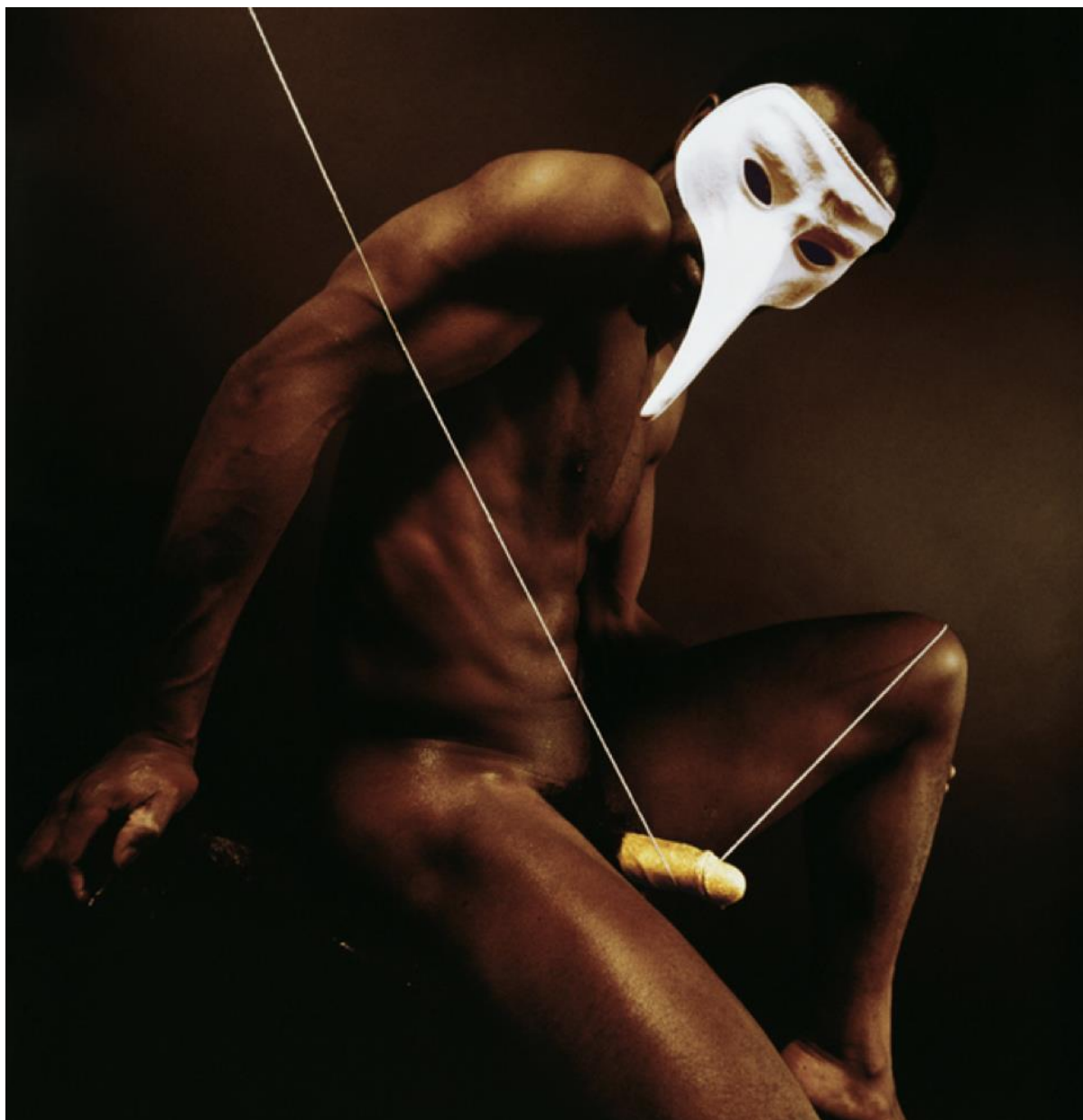


Figure 6: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *The Golden Phallus*, 1989. Courtesy Autograph, London.

This sentiment is evidenced by individual critics' analyses of each artist's photographs. In Fani-Kayode's *The Golden Phallus* (1989) (see Figure 6), the colour of the background is set just so that the flesh appears to melt into it, directing the viewer's focus to two highlights: the mask and the luminescent golden phallus. Any attention directed towards the body occurs in virtue of the striking dynamism of the taut white string. It reaches around and down from the subject's left knee to suspend the golden phallus in the middle of the image. The string runs almost parallel with the subject's muscles, serving to further emphasise their already blatant power and definition. The sheer absurdity of the whole composition combines, finally, with the subject's hidden identity – disguised by a mask that almost resembles one from a masquerade ball – to give the image a pervasive sense of allure. The cocked face is turned towards the viewer directly, but

the latter does not receive any eye contact in return. This is a photograph all about the beauty of the body – and it is intensely erotic. In her visual analysis of *The Golden Phallus*, Doy suggests that the visual prominence of the model's phallus shows the “myth of the ever-erect black member” to be a fallacy and notes the reference in the photograph to the title of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*³ (157). In a similar sort of interpretation, Steven Nelson proposes that *The Golden Phallus* is transgressive in that “its homoeroticism places the black body at the very limit of objecthood” (18). From these critiques, one gets the impression that despite its erotic nature, this photograph is nonetheless liberating and subversive.

Such critiques contrast starkly with the argument put forward by Mercer and the artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien that the presence of the model's ‘exaggerated’ (yet similarly flaccid) phallus in Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980) re-inscribes the “dialectics of white fear and fascination underpinning colonial fantasy” (134). Elsewhere, Mercer emphasises that “such racial fetishism... lubricates the ideological reproduction of ‘colonial fantasy’ in which the white male subject [possesses] desire for mastery, power and control over the racialized and inferiorized black Other” (“Just looking” 465–466). In a similar vein, Judith Butler has claimed that Mapplethorpe's photography engages a certain racist romanticisation of black men's “excessive physicality and sexual readiness, their photographic currency as a sexual sign” (501). The contrast is particularly striking when considering Mercer and Julien's responses to Mapplethorpe's and Fani-Kayode's use of cropping in their images. They suggest that Mapplethorpe's use of cropping is “inviting a scopophilic dissection of parts” so viewers can “scrutinise ‘the goods’ with fetishistic attention to detail” (148). Mapplethorpe's “camera cuts away like a knife” (148). Mercer's analysis of Fani-Kayode's *Bronze Head*, however, makes no mention whatsoever of the supposed violence of cropping, despite describing an image which is equally cropped. Instead, this image supposedly reveals what Freud called “the universal bisexual disposition of the human psyche” and echoes James Baldwin's words “[we] are all androgynous [...] each of us contains the other – male in female, female in male [...] we are part of each other” (*Travel & See*, 116). It should be noted that not all criticism of Mapplethorpe's work takes up this line. Linda Nochlin, in her study of cropping and framing throughout the history of art, suggests that Mapplethorpe's cropping actually de-fetishises, de-sublimates⁴ and domesticates the male organ. She goes on to suggest that Mapplethorpe's technique of cropping, and his conception of ‘the body-in-pieces’, renders suspect

³ Fanon's title aims to invoke the idea that black men's psyches are somehow split in the process of attempting to “pass” in a white-dominated society through processes such as mimicry (see below). Subsequently, they fail to come to terms with their own blackness.

⁴ Nochlin refers to de-sublimation here in the Surrealist (or, more specifically, Batailleian) sense of the word; indicating a desire to reduce, simplify and return to base materialism – and to subsequently transgress.



Figure 7: Anne-Louis Girodet, *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley*, 1799.

the very notion of a unified, unambiguously gendered subject (55). In general, however, it is apparent that Mapplethorpe's work seems to raise two problems that Fani-Kayode's does not: (i)

the perpetuation of “racist myths about black sexuality” – specifically the stereotype that “the black man is nothing more than his penis” (Mercer, “Just Looking” 463) – and (ii) the existence of racial difference between photographer and sitter. I expand upon these in turn.

Stereotypes of the size of black men’s penises are amongst the most pervasive – and fixed – of all racial stereotypes. We are reminded of Fanon’s claim that “one [becomes] no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis... He is turned into a penis” (120). The political problematisation of white artists’ portrayals of the phalluses of black men is not unique to Mapplethorpe, nor is it a recent phenomenon. Consider the visual ploys at work in Girodet’s *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley*⁵ (1797) (see Figure 7). The breeches, cropped below the knee and framed by the dark overcoat, draw the viewer’s attention to the painting’s centre where Belley’s bulging phallus takes pride of place. The shadowed line between his crossed legs then draws the eye upwards toward the crotch while the orthogonal of the crooked elbow and the bust’s plinth step our attention downwards from the upper left, once again toward the centre where the phallus is framed so blatantly between the index and middle fingers. Given that a painting like this – in which the central figure was a *named* black man – had never before been displayed in the Salon⁶, it is easy to read it as a direct allusion to the subject’s possessing sexual excess and virility in virtue of him being black (Musto, 65–66). However, as Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhof notes, it has also been reported that the juxtaposing of Belley’s head with a bust of Raynal (an abolitionist philosopher) might also be interpreted as an argument for emancipation (327).

Contrasting a depiction such as this – one lacking in overt eroticism – with the work of both Fani-Kayode and Mapplethorpe (both of whom were gay) emphasises how representations of the black, male body become infinitely more complex in a homosexual context than a heterosexual one. Since Girodet’s depiction lacks any overt homosexual contextualisation⁷, only a basic unilateral process of othering is at work. The inherent complexity of depictions of the black, male nude in homosexual contexts arises because not only does the straight white male viewer ‘fear’ the size of the black phallus, but the colonising gaze of the *homosexual*, white viewer is likely one of lasciviousness too. *In toto*, this is a white, male gaze that simultaneously desires what it fears. The art critic Douglas Crimp has drawn attention to the significance of this homosexual context in his consideration of Mercer’s own critical engagement with Mapplethorpe’s work.

⁵ Belley was France’s envoy to the colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) where he was formerly enslaved.

⁶ The next time would be Benoist’s famous *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) (see Figure 8).

⁷ This is not to say that Girodet’s depiction of Belley is *closed* to homoerotic readings. Mark Stevens actually makes a connection between Mapplethorpe and Girodet’s depiction of Belley: “Perhaps Girodet was born into the wrong time. He would have done well as a [...] Mapplethorpe” (81).

Crimp argues that, in general, Mapplethorpe's photographs "take advantage" of the institutionally determined relation between artwork and spectator not by "rendering the depicted sitter a homosexual object but [by] momentarily rendering the male spectator a homosexual subject" (27). While this rendering supposedly occurs irrespective of the actual sexuality of the spectator,



Figure 8: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of Madeleine*, 1800.

Crimp shows how Mercer – who is himself black and gay – was forced to recognise that the nature of Mapplethorpe’s gaze and the gaze that his work induces – i.e. that which is connoted with stereotypes about black, male virility and sexual excess – is not dissimilar to his own desiring gaze as a spectator of these images. Hence Crimp’s conclusion about why Mercer later revised his critical position on Mapplethorpe: “if Kobena Mercer [originally] criticized Mapplethorpe’s sexual objectification of black men... his complex revision of his initial criticism was impelled by the recognition of himself not only as the stereotyped object but also as the desiring subject of the representation” (27). Bhabha notes the presence of a similar sort of ambivalence in his conception of the stereotype that was briefly outlined above. He described the stereotype as that which “gives access to an ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it” (107).

Yet the question remains of why no such charges of objectifying the black male body are levelled against Fani-Kayode, despite the striking similarity of his and Mapplethorpe’s photographs. One plausible answer might lie in recognising that the underlying subject/object dynamics at work here result in any (racial) discourse about these artists inevitably focusing on the blackness of Mapplethorpe’s models (*contra* his own whiteness) and the blackness of Fani-Kayode *himself* in relation to the (presumed) whiteness of the viewer. This observation might at first lead one to conclude simply that the race of an artist ought to be considered a primary determinant of how artworks are perceived; but this seems too narrow. For the very same subject/object dynamics might be seen to result in any sexual discourse about both of these artists and their male sitters inevitably focusing on the former’s homosexuality. In virtue of his blackness and homosexuality, then, Fani-Kayode might be said to occupy a position as both subject and object: subject in relation to his (object) sitters and object under the scrutiny of the white, male (homosexual) gaze in virtue of the facts that he himself is a black, gay man and that the nature of his work reflects upon him as its creator. Philip Brian Harper has linked this theoretical “emergence of the black, gay man as both subject and object” with what he characterises as the “widely perceived crisis in the arts” that characterised the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (390). He cites the nation-wide censoring of Marlon Riggs’ video *Tongues Untied* (1989), the controversy following Jennie Livingston’s documentary on the black and Latino drag ball circuit *Paris is Burning* (1991) and the legal battles in 1989 surrounding former Senator Jesse Helms’ attack on Mapplethorpe’s photography and the funding practices of the National Endowment for the Arts as three indicators of this ‘crisis.’

Perhaps the more pertinent question to ask, however, is whether or not Fani-Kayode’s work really does avoid perpetuating the stereotypes in question – even in spite of the fact that no similar charges are levelled against him or his work as are levelled against Mapplethorpe. That

Fani-Kayode has insisted his art does not pander to the same exploitative, mythologising stereotypes is not to say that it does not actually do so. He neglects to consider that while his images may be intended as a form of self-expression or self-representation, the stereotypes associated with black men are so deeply entrenched – and ‘fixed’ – that there is no way of controlling how these representations are perceived. This point reveals a weakness in analyses such as Doy’s account of Fani-Kayode’s *The Golden Phallus* mentioned above. Whether such images of flaccid penises (Mapplethorpe’s *Man in a Polyester Suit* included) ultimately reveal the ‘myth of the ever-erect black member’ to be fallacious or not, the fact remains that for such readings to make sense in the first place, stereotypes like this must already be at work. Hence, the only conclusion to be made here with certainty is that these images have once again brought the myth to the attention of the spectator. This is the case irrespective of whether the image is deemed to constitute an undermining or a perpetuation of the myth itself. In attempting to explain the controversy of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, Harper reminds us that “one man’s efforts at self-representation [can] implicate distortion in the representation of another” (393). This problem relating to the “intentional fallacy”⁸ is one that occurs time and time again in art history and theory. Susan Sontag, for instance, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* echoes this sentiment, observing how one anti-war photograph may nevertheless be read in a different context as a depiction of admirable heroism. Hence, “the photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph” (33). Paying heed to these traps set by the intentional fallacy might lead us to the more plausible conclusion that the primary factor in determining how Fani-Kayode’s artworks are perceived is not his race and sexuality *per se*. Rather, it is the extent to which he possesses *subjectivity* as a result of the interplay between the sexuality and racial identity of the subject as well as the way in which this interplay is socially situated – in other words, how it is affected by stereotyping. Following Harper, I use “subjectivity” in this sense to refer to a person’s capacity to “define the terms of [their] own representation” (393). On this account, it would be the artist’s subjectivity that is ultimately impacted by their being othered or doubly othered, on account of their race and sexuality. The stories contained within photographs have enormous power, and this power is shaped by who tells the stories, and how they are told. According to Harper, it is the perception of this distortion in subjectivity at work in Mapplethorpe’s photographs that has made them “controversial among black gay men... who have

⁸ In their important essay “The Intentional Fallacy,” William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley hold that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (468).

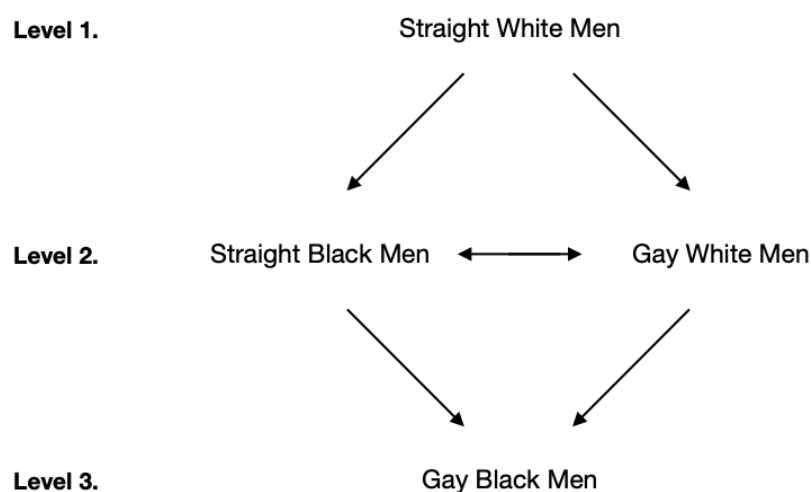


Figure 9: Othering processes

questioned the degree to which Mapplethorpe's black male subjects are 'objectified' – and thus rendered ineffectual – in his photographs" (393).

This finding calls for a more thorough analysis of the specific intersections of queerness and blackness and the subject/object relations between doubly othered artists, their subjects and the viewer. At the outset I noted that an important distinction between the oppression facing black women and black, gay men was that its source was more diffuse in the latter's case. Figure 9 illustrates a basic structure of the five distinct othering processes that I surmise to be at work here. At Level 1 is the ultimate source of oppression, namely, straight white men. At Level 2 are the two groups that are directly othered by straight white men: straight, black men and gay, white men. Each of these groups is othered on account of one aspect of their identity, either their race or their sexuality (the bilateral dynamic between these two groups can also be seen to subsist as one that involves othering). At Level 3 is the group that is doubly othered. Gay, black men are othered by three groups: straight, white men; straight, black men and gay, white men. Each of these groups others gay, black men in different ways. In what remains, I want to make two claims based on this structure of othering to support my primary argument that in order to provide a more adequate model for approaching these black, gay artist subjects and their work, Bhabha's conception of cultural hybrids can be expanded to account for subjects' sexuality in addition to their race.

My first claim is that the ambivalence so central to Bhabha's conception of hybridity is not only *as* prevalent in the othering of gay, black men by straight, black men as it is in the othering of them by gay, white men, but that such ambivalence is actually *compounded* by considering them at their intersection. If ambivalence has the capacity to be turned on its head and act as a tool for liberating culture hybrids, then one can assume that the more ambivalence that exists in a given system of othering, the more opportunity there is to subvert the system of power and

oppression that gave rise to it. Hence, not only is an expanded conception of Bhabha's theory of hybridity valuable for the doubly othered subjects in question here, it also constitutes an increased effectiveness of the theory as a whole to model subversiveness. Figure 9 illustrates the specific sources from which this additional ambivalence arises. Moving from Level 2 to Level 3, one sees that gay, black men are othered by straight, black men not just because of their homosexuality but because of the latter's association with whiteness. According to Doy, homosexuality is "sometimes seen [as] a white man's disease" in black communities, "a threat to the... macho image of black men" (163). She further observes that much of the importance of Fani-Kayode's work comes from the fact that it depicts "the same-sex desire which is sometimes repressed by black culture" (163). This in turn is the result of straight, black men being othered by straight, white men not just because of their blackness, but through their associating blackness with effeminacy in order to construct their subsequent inferiority⁹. As Joane Nagel explains, having to be measured against the 'superior' white male has ultimately led to the exaggeration of black masculinity (114) and the subsequent rejection of specifically black homosexuality. Herman Gray has also suggested that the majority of images depicting black men in popular visual culture now hinge on machismo, and therefore seemingly reject any signs of queerness or effeminacy (402). Evidence of this also exists throughout African and African American literature. That allusions to queerness or effeminacy are met with hostility within some areas of black culture is evidenced, for example, by the writer James Baldwin's homosexuality being attacked as "somehow un-black" by Eldridge Cleaver in the context of them both campaigning in the civil rights movement (Doy 123). Meanwhile, in the fictional realm, Okonkwo¹⁰, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's acclaimed *Things Fall Apart*, is framed as the quintessential 'strong man', and is ruled by a profound fear of displaying weakness. According to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in an introduction to the novel, Okonkwo's insecurities result in a relentless harshness and an extremist view of masculinity (ix). In this same vein, Dwight McBride suggests that the underlying problem with constructing an 'authentic' black masculinity is that it essentially tends to operate in terms of inclusion/exclusion by "allowing race to override sexual orientation, gender, class and other disparities" between black people (365–366).

Alongside this exaggeration of masculinity, and somewhat in contradiction to it, is gay, white men's othering of gay, black men: simultaneously hyper-sexualising them by emphasising

⁹ There is nothing unique about this feminising social relation between white and black people. Chong-suk Han has demonstrated a similar relation occurring between white and Asian men too: he therefore argues that the historical 'feminisation' of the East is rearticulated by the social construction of gay Asian men as the 'feminine' counterparts of 'masculine' gay white men (2006, 13–17).

¹⁰ Okonkwo is perhaps the best-known character in English translation of modern African literature.

their virility and desirability – as in Mercer’s claims regarding Mapplethorpe’s photographs (“Just looking” 465) – and sidelining them from the standard processes of mimicking the straight, white man mentioned above (Tom of Finland, for example, never depicted black men). Harper also admits that the “‘gay community’ [has been] conceived as white, wealthy, and male” since the Stonewall riots of 1969 (392), while Doy notes that “because of racism among some white, gay men, black, gay artists have tended to situate themselves within the black community rather than the gay community” (160). Hence I arrive at the crux of my first claim: the discovery of what has elsewhere been termed the “profound tension implicit in contemporary black, gay male identity” (Harper 392) and the “fundamental ambivalence of racial or colonial fantasy” (Mercer and Julien 146). So complex are the processes of othering at work in constituting the social identity of gay, black subjects that clear contradictions arise in stereotypes associating blackness with both femininity *and* masculinity and associating queerness with both whiteness *and* blackness. The oscillation between different modes of othering between erotic idealisation and anxiety in defence of the imperial ego (Mercer and Julien 146) reveals the stereotypes associated with black, gay, artistic production to be constantly in flux – and hence, at their core, entirely arbitrary. This situation strikes another parallel with Bhabha’s observations about identities being built on ambivalence, predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as on anxiety and defence (107).

The second claim I want to make in support of my overall argument is that Bhabha’s theory of mimicry (which is intrinsically related to his conception of cultural hybridity) can be applied to “queer subcultures” just as it is to “black subcultures.” For Bhabha, mimicry is the desire for a “recognizable Other... that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). In describing what he means by the term, Bhabha references a passage from V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men*, spoken by the narrator, Ralph Singh: “We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World” (416). The implicit contradiction within mimicry arises from the coloniser’s desire for their subjects to become increasingly similar to them (more Westernised), juxtaposed with the mutual knowledge that mimicry is always imperfect. Bhabha shows that the mimic men of the colonial periphery are, from the perspective of the coloniser, ever to remain people who are “not quite, not white... *almost the same but not white*” (Bhabha, 128). Hence mimicry is “constructed around an *ambivalence*” that begins to arise as the two groups appear to coalesce. What is absolutely central to mimicry is that it “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122). The parallel between colonial mimicry and the process of othering homosexuality can most easily be drawn with reference to the rise of so-called ‘homomascularity’ in the gay ‘clone’ era of the 70s and 80s. Gay men’s response to being othered was to mimic (with a touch of irony of course) the trope of the ‘hypermasculine’ straight, white man. This movement is typified by images produced by Tom of Finland, one of which in particular seems to have influenced Fani-Kayode’s *Bronze Head* (see Figures 10 and 11). Bhabha’s

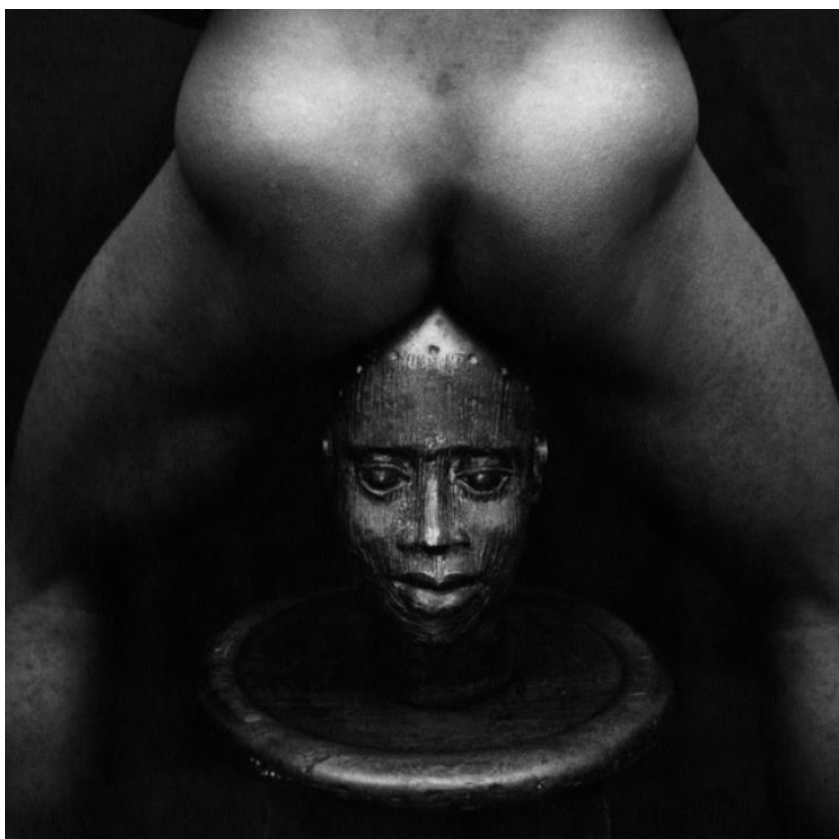


Figure 10: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Bronze Head*, 1987. Courtesy Autograph, London.

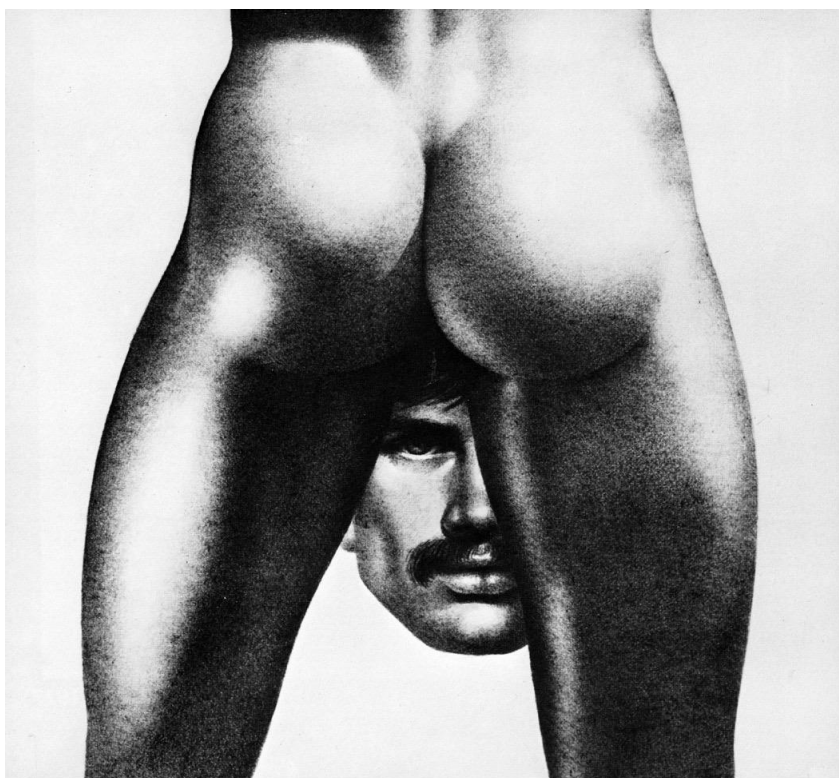


Figure 11: Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, c. 1970s.

theory of mimicry seems to capture *both* othering relationships between the first and second levels of Figure 9. Recall further that mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence are conceived by Bhabha as fundamentally empowering concepts through which subjects can subvert overarching, dominant power structures. Considering sexuality as an aspect of hybridity alongside race only multiplies the ambivalence of stereotypes, ultimately carving out further theoretical space for artists like Fani-Kayode to “play with identities, reconstruct themselves and destroy stereotypes” (Doy 134).

I have argued here that the phenomenon of being doubly othered, on account of one’s race and one’s sexuality, constitutes a peculiar case wherein the subject in question falls into a gap, as it were, between queer theory and postcolonial theory. In order to ‘theorise’ gay, black men – and their cultural production – out of this gap, the *specific* nuances of the obfuscatory

stereotypes that oppress and ostracise them must be addressed in a manner that is attentive to their being *doubly* othered. An expanded understanding of Bhabha's hybridity, one that takes account of sexuality, has the potential to transform what would otherwise remain a gap into a space in which a distinctly gay, black culture might continue to flourish.

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