

## 28 Looking for Trouble

Kobena Mercer

*Lawd, Jesse, I can't believe what I'm seeing.*

Mrs. Helms

*Look, a Negro! Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!*

Frantz Fanon

To shock was always the key verb in the avant-garde vocabulary. Over the past year, the shocking eroticism of Robert Mapplethorpe's exquisite and perverse photography has been at the center of a major controversy in the United States concerning public funding of contemporary art. Led by Senator Jesse Helms, the campaign to prevent the National Endowment for the Arts from funding exhibitions of so-called "obscene and indecent materials" has helped bring Mapplethorpe's work to the attention of a wider public audience. Paradoxically, Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in March 1989, now enjoys enhanced notoriety and a far wider audience than he ever did during his twenty years of art practice on the margins of the New York avant-garde. Based on the retrospective show held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988, this paperback edition of the catalogue is therefore particularly timely as it makes it possible to stand back and reassess the aesthetic and political issues at stake in the recent exhibition history of Mapplethorpe's sublime "immoral trash."

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Undoubtedly, it is the question of sexual representation that intersects across the conflicting political readings which have been produced in response to Mapplethorpe's homoerotic work. More than the still lifes of dead flowers or the portraits of art-world celebrities, it is the photographs depicting gay sadomasochism and the nude studies of black men that have caused all the trouble. To enter into the "dark" world of pleasure and danger mapped out in Mapplethorpe's erotica, we cannot assume that black audiences are somehow exempt from its modernist "shock effect," although it seems black voices have been curiously silent and muted in the recent furor. In my own case, however, I can still quite vividly recall my first encounter with Mapplethorpe's black male nudes precisely because I was so shocked by what I saw! The profile of a black man, whose head was cropped or "decapitated," so to speak, holding his semitumescent penis through the y-fronts of his underpants: which is the first image that confronts you in *Black Males* (1982).

When a friend lent me his copy of the book it circulated between us as an illicit and highly problematic object of desire. We were fascinated by the beautiful bodies and drawn in by the pleasure of looking as we went over the repertoire of images again and again. We wanted to look, but we didn't always find what we wanted to see. We were, of course, disturbed by the racial dimension of the imagery and, above all, angered by the aesthetic objectification that reduced these black male bodies to abstract visual "things," silenced in their own right as subjects and serving only to enhance the name of the white gay male artist in the privileged world of art photography. In other words, we were stuck in an intransitive "structure of feeling"; caught out in a liminal experience of textual ambivalence.

In an attempt to make sense of this experience I drew on elements of feminist cultural theory to loosen the grip of this uncomfortable, and ambivalent, fascination. The first thing to notice about Mapplethorpe's black males – so obvious, it goes without saying – is that all the men are *nude*. Framed within such generic conventions of the fine art nude, their bodies are aestheticized and eroticized as "objects" of the gaze and thus offer an erotic source of pleasure in the act of looking. But whose pleasure is being served? Regarding the position of women in dominant regimes of visual representation, feminist theory has shown that the female image functions predominantly as a mirror image of what men want to see. In the *mise-en-scène* of heterosexual wish fulfillment, the visual depiction of the female nude serves primarily to stabilize the phallogentric fantasy in which the omnipotent male gaze sees but is never itself seen. The binary relations of seeing/being seen that structure dominant regimes of representation in Western traditions are organized by the subject/object dichotomy in which, to put it crudely, men look and women are there to be looked at. However, in Mapplethorpe's case, the fact that both artist and model are male sets up a tension of sameness which thereby transfers the frisson of "difference" from gendered to racialized polarity. The black/white duality overdetermines the subject/object dichotomy of seeing/being seen.

In this sense, what is represented in the pictorial space of Mapplethorpe's photographs is a "look," or a certain "way of looking," in which the pictures reveal more about the absent and invisible white male subject who is the agent of representation



than they do about the black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted. Insofar as the nude studies facilitate the projection of certain sexual and racial fantasies about the “difference” that black masculinity is assumed to embody, they reveal the tracing of desire on the part of the I/eye placed at the center of the camera’s monocular perspective. On this view, the position to which the spectator is invited to identify can be described as a white male subject-position, not so much because Robert Mapplethorpe is himself white and male, but because of the fantasy of mastery inscribed in the “look” which implies a hierarchical ordering of racial identity historically congruent with the power and privilege of hegemonic white masculinity. Through a combination of formal conventions – the posing and posture of the body in the studio; strong chiaroscuro lighting; the cropping, framing, and fragmentation of body parts – the fantasy of mastery in Mapplethorpe’s “look” structures the viewer’s affective disposition towards the image. Moreover, as any social or historical contextualization is effaced and withheld from the pictorial frame, the cool distance of the detached gaze enables the circulation of fantasies that saturate the black man’s body in sexual predicates. Whereas the gay sadomasochism photographs portray a subcultural sexuality that consists of “doing” something, the black men are defined and confined to “being” purely sexual and nothing but sexual, hence hypersexual, endowed with an excess of sexuality. In pictures like *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), apart from his hands, it is the penis and the penis alone that identifies the model as a black man (figure 28.1).

Considering the way in which the glossy allure of the high-quality monochrome print becomes consubstantial with the shiny texture of black skin, I argued that fetishism is an important element in the pleasures (and displeasures) that Mapplethorpe brings into play. Such fetishism not only eroticizes the most visible aspect of racial difference – skin color – but also lubricates the ideological reproduction of “colonial fantasy” based on the desire for mastery and power over the racialized Other. Hence, alongside the codes of the fine art nude, Mapplethorpe seems to appropriate the regulative function of the commonplace stereotype – the black man as athlete, savage, or mugger – in order to stabilize the masculine economy of the “look” and to thereby “fix” the black subject in its place as the object that holds a mirror to white male fears and fantasies. According to the literary critic Homi Bhabha, “an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness.” As in the serialized shots of body-builder Lady Lisa Lyon, in which Mapplethorpe’s “look” processes her body through a thousand cultural stereotypes of femininity, the obsessive undercurrent in his black nudes would appear to confirm this emphasis on fixity. The scopic fixation on the signifying difference of black skin thus implies a kind of “negrophilia,” an aesthetic idealization of racial Otherness that merely inverts and reverses the binary axis of the repressed fears and anxieties that are projected onto the Other in the psychic representations of “negrophobia.” Both positions, whether they overvalue or devalue the visible signs of blackness, inhabit the shared space of colonial fantasy. These elements for a psychoanalytic reading of racial fetishization in visual representation are forcefully brought together in a photograph such as *Man in a Polyester Suit*.





Figure 28.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980. Copyright © The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, used with permission.

The use of framing and scale emphasizes the sheer size of the big black penis. As Fanon said, diagnosing the terrifying 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.” By virtue of the purely formal device of scale, Mapplethorpe summons up from the political unconscious one of the deepest mythological fears in the supremacist imagination: namely, the belief that all black men have monstrously huge willies. In the fantasmatic space of the supremacist imaginary, the big black phallus is perceived as a threat not only to the white master (who shrinks in impotence from the thought that the subordinate black male is more sexually powerful than he), but to civilization itself, since the “bad object” represents a danger to white womanhood and therefore the threat of miscegenation, eugenic pollution, and racial degeneration. Historically, white males eliminated the overwhelming anxiety which black male sexuality is constantly



constructed to incite through rituals of aggression and negation in which the lynching of black American men routinely involved the literal castration of the Other's strange fruit. The historical myth of penis size amounts to a "primal fantasy" in that it is shared and collective in nature and, moreover, so pervasive that the modern science of sexology repeatedly embarked upon the task of measuring empirical pricks to demonstrate its ideological untruth. Now that liberal orthodoxy provides no available legitimation for the phantasm of such racial folk myths, it is as if Mapplethorpe's picture enacts a disavowal of the wish fulfillment inscribed in the myth: *I know* (it's not true that all black guys have big willies), *but* (nevertheless, in my photographs they do).

In the picture, the binarisms of everyday racial discourse are reproduced by the jokey irony of the contrast between the black man's private parts and the public respectability signified by the three-piece business suit. The oppositions hidden/exposed and denuded/clothed play upon the Manichean oppositions of nature/culture and savage/civilized to bring about a condensation of libidinal looking. The binarisms repeat the assumption that hypersexuality is the essential "nature" of the black man, while the cheap and tacky polyester suit confirms his failure to gain access to "culture." The camouflage of respectability fails to conceal the fact that the Other originates, like his dick, from somewhere anterior to civilization. However, while the Freudian concept of fetishism allows us to investigate the fears and fantasies that make this picture so shocking to behold, because it is grounded in the Oedipal scenario that privileges the normative developmental path of heterosexual gender identity, it is not so useful as an analytic tool for opening the perverse economy of the homoerotic imaginary. The analogy drawn from feminism enables recognition of similar patterns in the objectification and "othering" of race and gender in dominant regimes of representation: but as a gay artist, Mapplethorpe is hardly representative of the hegemonic model of heterosexual white male identity which has historically been the privileged subject and agent in control of the apparatus of visual representation. Despite its value in cultural criticism, the residual moralistic connotation of the term *fetishism* tends to flatten out the affective ambivalence that viewers of Mapplethorpe's work experience as its characteristic "shock effect."

Indeed, in recognition of this intractable ambivalence that Mapplethorpe arouses with such perverse precision, I have come to change my mind about my earlier reading of his racial fetishism. To put it another way: the textual ambivalence of the black nude photographs is strictly undecidable because Mapplethorpe's photographs do not provide an unequivocal yes/no answer to the question of whether they reinforce or undermine commonplace racist stereotypes – rather, he throws the binary structure of the question back to the spectator, where it is torn apart in the disruptive "shock effect." The shock of recognition of the unconscious sex-race fantasies is experienced precisely as an emotional disturbance which troubles the spectator's secure sense of identity. As reader-response theory shows, we habitually attempt to resolve such textual ambivalence by appealing to authorial intentions; yet, as the "death of the author" argument put forward by poststructuralism has also shown, authorial intentions can never finally determine the meaning or value of a text because readers play



an interactive role in determining the range of meanings that can be derived from a polyvocal, modernist, text.

In our case, the recent actual death of the author entails a reconsideration of the subject-positions in Mapplethorpe's theater of racial/sexual fantasy, and requires that we move towards a more relational and dialogic view of the violent kind of ambivalence which arises at the interface between the social and the emotional.

Once we accept the role of the reader, I should come out with regard to the specificity of my own subject-position as a black gay reader in Mapplethorpe's text. Looking back at the angry tone of my earlier analysis of objectification and fetishization, it expressed only one aspect of the ambivalent structure of feeling I experienced in that initial "shock." On the one hand, I was angry and emphasized the implicitly exploitative process of racial othering because I felt identified with the black men depicted in the field of vision; an emotional tie or identification that might best be described, again in Fanon's words, as the 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." Subject to the isolation effect, whereby it is only ever one black man who occupies the field of vision at any one time (thus enabling the fantasy of mastery by denying the representation of a collective and contextualized black male identity), the black models seemed to become mere raw material, to be sculpted and molded by the agency of the white artist into an abstract and idealized aesthetic form – as in the picture of Derrick Cross: with the tilt of the pelvis, the black man's bum becomes a Brancusi (figure 28.2). It was my anger at the process of "ironic" appropriation that informed the description of Mapplethorpe's fetishism as resulting in the reduction of beautiful black male bodies to abject, alienated "things," each enslaved like a juju doll in the white male imaginary to arouse its unspeakable fantasies of racial Otherness.

But now I am not so sure whether the perverse strategy of visual fetishism is necessarily a bad thing, in the sense that as the locus of the destabilizing "shock effect" it encourages the viewer to examine his or her own implication in the fantasies that the images arouse. Once I acknowledge my own implication in the image reservoir as a gay subject, as a desiring subject for whom the aestheticized object of the look represents an object choice already there in my own fantasies, then I am forced to confront the unwelcome fact that as a spectator I actually inhabit the same position in the fantasy of mastery which I said earlier was that of the hegemonic white male subject! There must be some way out of here, said the joker to the thief. I now wonder, as I wander back through the text, whether the anger was not also intermixed, on the other hand, with the expression of envy and jealousy?

If I shared the same desire to look, which would position me in the same place as that attributed to the white (gay) male author, the anger becomes intelligible as the expression of a certain aggressive rivalry over the same unobtainable object of desire, predicated on a shared homosexual identification. If this was the case, the implication is not simply that black subjects are equally "interpellated" into the psychic structures of social fantasy, but that by projecting my frustration onto the author I was myself involved in a denial or disavowal of the emotional disturbance that Mapplethorpe's



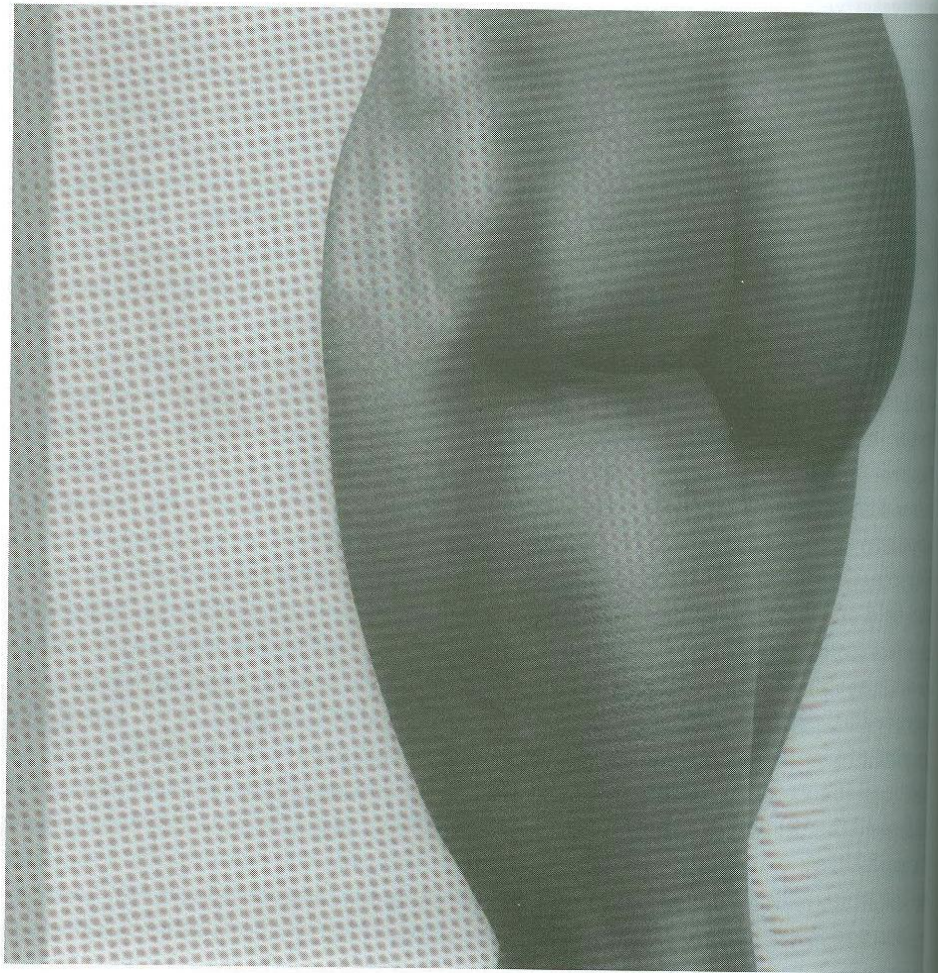


Figure 28.2 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Derrick Cross*, 1983. Copyright © The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, used with permission.

pictures provoked. I refuse to believe that black gay male readers somehow have privileged access to this uncomfortable structure of feeling – the point, rather, is to recognize that Mapplethorpe’s work is powerful and disturbing precisely because it forces such acknowledgment of the ambivalence of identity and identification we actually inhabit in living with difference. In rereading the nude studies and changing my mind, I would say that my ambivalent positioning as a black gay reader entailed two contradictory identifications “lived” at one and the same time. Insofar as the anger and envy were an effect of my identifications with both object and subject of the look, I inhabited a “stereophonic” space (in Barthes’s phrase) that was subject to closure in the earlier reading by simply projecting the ambivalence onto the author.

It was the death of the author, and the sense of loss by which the AIDS crisis has affected all our lives, that made me reread the subversive and deconstructive



dimension of Mapplethorpe's modernist erotica. Previously, I argued that the fixative function of the stereotype played the decisive role in reproducing colonial fantasy: now, however, in relation to Mapplethorpe's authorial identity as an explicitly gay artist (located, like other gay artists, on the margins of mainstream art-world institutions), it becomes possible, and necessary, to reverse that view and recognize the way in which his aesthetic strategy begins to subvert the hierarchy of the cultural codes that separate the pure and noble values of the fine art nude from the filthy and degraded form of the commonplace racist stereotype.

The nude is one of the most valued genres in Western art history because the human figure embodies the central values of liberal humanism. In this sense, the model of physical perfection embodied in classical Greek sculpture serves as the mythological origin of the ethnocentric fantasy that there was only one "race" of human beings who represented what was good and true and beautiful. In Enlightenment aesthetics, the Negro was none of these: ugly, animalistic, and ultimately inhuman, the black subject, whether male or female, was necessarily excluded from access to aesthetic idealization on account of its Otherness. The reason why that forgotten slogan of the sixties – "Black Is Beautiful" – had so much political and existential force was precisely because as a statement of ontology it subverted the naturalized hegemony of supremacist ideology which made the linguistic conjunction of the two terms logically "unthinkable." In the discourse of Western aesthetics, as Kant and Hegel both emphasized, it was unthinkable that Africans could embody the aesthetic ideal by which the narcissistic self-image of the West saw itself at the transcendental center of world civilization. The a priori exclusion of the racial Other was not unrelated to the hierarchical separation of "art" from "everyday life," as the value invested in high culture necessarily depends on the denial of value in what is regarded as low culture.

In his own perverse way, Mapplethorpe invites us to see hidden intertextual connections in the dominant regimes of the representation of racial and sexual difference. By virtue of a strategy of promiscuous intertextuality, whereby the over-valued genre of the fine art nude is "contaminated" by the connotative yield of racist fears and fantasies secreted into mass media stereotypes, he shows the interdependency between systems of representation at opposite ends of the hierarchy of aesthetic and cultural value. The pure and the polluted fold together in the same pictorial space, which is to suggest that what is experienced in the viewer's salient "shock effect" is the disruption of our normative expectations and the radical unfixing of the spectator's ideological positioning. The responses of Senator and Mrs. Helms would seem to confirm this view. What is so troubling about the black male nudes is that Mapplethorpe stages the return of the repressed in the ethnocentric unconscious. The psychic/social boundary that separates "high" and "low" culture is transgressed and decentered precisely by the superimposition of two ways of looking, which thus throws the spectator into the flux of uncertainty and undecidability, experienced as the feeling of ambivalence and disturbance in which one's subject-position has been called into question.

In social, economic, and political terms, black males constitute one of the "lowest" social classes in the United States: disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and disempowered



as a distinct group identity in the late capitalist underclass. Yet in Mapplethorpe's studio, some of the men who in all probability came from this underclass are elevated onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal. Paradoxically, the humanist model of physical beauty said to originate with the Greeks is brought to life by the grace of men who were probably too busy hustling a means of daily survival to be bothered with an appreciation of ancient sculptures in their local art museum. Mapplethorpe's supremely ironic achievement as a postmodern "society photographer" is to render visible such "invisible men" (in Ralph Ellison's phrase) within a cultural system of representation – art photography – that always historically denied their existence. As he put it in an interview before his death,

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.

As Ingrid Sischy notes, Mapplethorpe's passion as a photographer came "from subjects that have been forced by our culture to be hidden like secrets." Homosexuality is often forced into hiding as a dirty little secret (and not just in Western societies, either), and I would therefore add that what Mapplethorpe achieved in his art was not simply the making visible of the psychic and social splitting that is normally repressed into invisibility, but that he used his homosexuality as a creative resource with which to explore and open up a politics of marginality across the multiform relations of class, race, gender, and sexuality in which it is actually lived.

In this review I have focused on the black nudes, to the exclusion of other aspects of his oeuvre, for two reasons. First, because it seems to me they represent a culmination of an aesthetic strategy. During the 1970s, Mapplethorpe's homoerotica paralleled the development of an urban gay male subculture: what makes the "difficult" sadomasochism pictures from the late seventies so disturbing, after all, is the nonchalant matter-of-factness of the author's nonjudgmental stance, which throws the question of aesthetic or moral judgment back into the field of the spectator. During this period, Mapplethorpe kept the erotica separate from the formalist concerns seen in his sculptural approach to the pictorial frame and in the figuration of lighting in the floral still lifes. The black nude studies are shaped by a synthesis between these two tendencies: the sense of ambivalence is exacerbated by the way the "cool" technology of neoclassical lines and minimalist space is brought to bear on the "hot" eroticism of the sex-race phantasm that haunts the representational space of the scene.

In this respect, we should acknowledge the collaborative relationship between the privileged white male artist on the margins of the avant-garde and the anonymous black male models on the margins of the late modern underclass. It may not have been entirely equal, but in the specific historical context of the "imagined community" created by the new social movements over the past twenty years, the photographs can be read as a document of relations of mutuality under shared conditions of marginality, which is something Mapplethorpe alluded to when he remarked, "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." The AIDS crisis has changed all our lives, in the black communities of Europe and America as much as in Africa and the Caribbean. In this context, when mourning and melancholia become routine, what does it mean to acknowledge the loss of this strange, marginal, white gay male photographer?

By posing the question like this, I want to suggest that Mapplethorpe confronts black spectators and critics with a unique and difficult intellectual challenge. Can we afford to assume that black artists have privileged access to insights into the politics of race and racism simply by virtue of being black? Stuart Hall's often-quoted remarks on "the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject" point to the legacy of essentialism in black cultural politics. His argument, that the aesthetic or political value of a text cannot be guaranteed by the racial or ethnic identity of the author who creates it, has disturbing consequences for the commonsense "theory" we habitually practice as black spectators, audiences, and critics: it means we can no longer have recourse to empirical evidence about the author's quotient of melanin to decide the aesthetic or political value of a text.

Recent works by black gay artists engage with these questions directly. Black British filmmaker Isaac Julien, whose *Looking for Langston* (1989) initiates an archeological inquiry into the enigmatic sexuality of Langston Hughes in the era of the Harlem Renaissance, and Nigerian-British photographer Rotimi Fani-Fayode, whose first published collection, *Black Male/White Male* (1988), opens an aperture onto an Afrocentric homoerotic image world, are directly engaged in a critically dialogic relationship with Mapplethorpe's work. It is through this critical dialogue that they have negotiated a mode of enunciation for black gay male subjectivity in the visual arts, which, against the quirky assumption that all black men are supposedly heterosexual, is something to celebrate indeed. But more than mere "celebration," this new wave of cultural work, which has developed in black lesbian and gay communities alongside the impact of black women's voices over the last decade, enables us to theorize a more pluralistic conception of identity in the cultural politics of race and ethnicity.

Robert Mapplethorpe was not a black artist: but on the rereading I have put forward, his subversive use of visual fetishism can be seen as a strategic move that reveals what is "unconscious" in the cultural construction of whiteness as a "racial" identity. By laying bare the supplementary relationship between the purified fine art nude and the polluted mass culture stereotype, he confronts white identity with its interdependency on the Otherness that allows it to be constituted as such. In other words, the trope of visual fetishism paradoxically decenters and denaturalizes whiteness by showing its dependence on what is denied as Other to it. Writing in the 1940s, an eccentric organic intellectual from the British West Indies, J. A. Rogers, assembled a heterogeneous collection of "facts" and narratives in evidence of the black presence in Western history, ordinarily effaced in school textbooks. In *Your History* (1940), one of these hidden stories concerns the origins of classical Greek sculpture – "Several sculptors and scientists have said that the finest physiques in the world are to be found among the Negro peoples. Dr. Sargeant, Director of Physical Culture at



Harvard University, said in 1903 that he thought the Greeks modeled the bodies of some of their finest statues from Negroes and that the Apollo Belvedere, the most superb of all, was modeled from a Negro." In the light of recent research such as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, there is probably no reason to be shocked or surprised at what Rogers uncovered: that Western ethnocentrism, predicated on the desire for mastery, entails the denial and disavowal of that upon which it depends for its existence and identity. Maybe Mapplethorpe has done something similar each time his images have shocked and frightened and disturbed us: by showing, and giving to be seen, that which is repressed and denied as Other as a condition of existence of an identity based on the desire for mastery.

I have another reason for concentrating on the nude studies, especially in the current context where the voices and visions of black lesbian and gay artists, among others, have widened and pluralized theoretical debates about sexuality, desire, and representation. A symptomatic reading of the relative silence of black voices in the Mapplethorpe/NEA controversy suggests that questions of repression, denial, and disavowal bear directly on the social relations of black culture itself. During the mid-eighties moral panic on AIDS, when media scapegoating switched from urban gays and turned in the direction of Haiti and Africa, one prevalent response within diaspora societies was a rhetoric of denial. All too often, the repudiation of racial stigmatization was based on the homophobic premise that homosexuality, and therefore AIDS, is a "white man's disease" – even though we could all see that black people were dying. This cruel rhetoric of denial, like the psychic mechanism of disavowal (the refusal to believe) on which it is based, can only imply a negation of diversity and difference in black society.

It was after Mapplethorpe's death that the New Right initiative began, first in protest against a second exhibition of "The Perfect Moment" in Philadelphia, and then given further momentum by the decision of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington to cancel its exhibition of the show, which was supported by NEA grants. Like the Salman Rushdie affair in Britain, the public debates about the politics of representation have tended to polarize into the stark dichotomy of censorship versus freedom of expression, yet this crude binary frontier serves only to obscure the complex field of antagonism, brought to light in Cincinnati earlier this year when antipornography feminists joined forces with the city police department in an attempt to foreclose the show. The politics at stake cannot be reduced to the stereotype of bigoted philistines on the one side versus cultured liberals on the other, because what is at stake in the everyday postmodern politics of difference is the fact that the new social actors of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are just as capable of antidemocratic politics as the old social actors of class, party, and nation-state.

I should emphasize that I've changed my mind about Mapplethorpe's shocking eroticism not for the fun of it, but because I have no particular desire to form an alliance with the New Right. We have seen how the initial emancipatory aims of feminist antipornography arguments have been appropriated, translated, and rearticulated into the coercive cultural agenda of the New Right. Paradoxically, the success of late-seventies radical feminism lies in the way that reductive arguments about



representation have been literally translated into the official discourse of the state, such as the Report of the Meese Commission in 1986. Such alliances are rarely controlled by authorial intentions, yet feminist discourses have helped to strengthen and extend neoconservative definitions of "offensive" material into more and more areas of popular culture. In contemporary rap music, for instance, "explicit lyrics" warning labels indicate the extension of what should be censored by consent. The worrying thing about the original 1989 Helms amendment was that it sought a broader remit for cultural censorship not only on the traditional moral grounds of "obscenity and indecency," but on the new cultural grounds of "offensiveness" to minorities. Helms said he objected to publicly funded art that "denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, or national origin." By means of such a rhetorical move the discourse of liberal antidiscrimination is reversed and reappropriated to promote a politics of coercion based on the denial of difference. With ambivalent adversaries like that, it becomes possible for a reductive "antiracist" reading of Mapplethorpe's racial fetishism, however progressively intended, to serve the antidemocratic aims of the Right.

The fact that Mapplethorpe's photographs are open to a range of antagonistic political readings means that different actors are in a struggle to hegemonize one preferred version over another. The risky business of ambivalence by which his images can elicit a homophobic reading as easily as a homoerotic one, can confirm a racist reading as much as produce an antiracist one, suggests that indeterminacy doesn't happen "inside" the text, but in the social relations of difference that different readers bring to bear on the text, in the worldly relations "between."