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DISTORTED LOVE: MAPPLETHORPE, THE NEO/CLASSICAL
SCULPTURAL BLACK NUDE, AND VISUAL CULTURES OF
TRANSATLANTIC ENSLAVEMENT

LINDSAY NIXON

Abstract: *In the fall of 2016 and the winter of 2017, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibited a retrospective of photography by Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) entitled "Focus: Perfection." Tenets of queer possibility exhibited in the "Sculptural Body" portion of "Focus: Perfection" depicted a white modernity that reproduced the biopolitics of the transatlantic slave trade among contemporary white and Black queer peoples in America—namely, in New York's queer community—through the reinforcement and circulation of imagery depicting sexualized Black peoples in psychic and physical bondage. With his photographs depicting the body parts of Black men, Mapplethorpe reifies the biopolitics of the transatlantic slave trade in two ways. First, the classical use of marble as sculptural material, or in Mapplethorpe's case the neoclassical use of photographed skin as sculptural material that references the classical use of marble, adheres to aesthetic principles devised from Western, colonial discourse that sexualize and degrade Black bodies. Secondly, Mapplethorpe reproduces what Michal Hatt has called a "structure of spectatorship." By constructing Black men's bodies in inherent opposition to whiteness, no matter how idealized, it is a white audience that is presumed as the patron of Mapplethorpe's sculptural photography of Black men. Given the themes of sadomasochism throughout Mapplethorpe's photographs of Black men, these images outright reference fantasies of domination from an era transatlantic enslavement in the U.S. With "Focus: Perfection," the MMFA unwittingly condoned Mapplethorpe's por-*

Résumé: *En automne 2016 et en hiver 2017, le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal a présenté une rétrospective de la photographie de Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) intitulée "Focus: Perfection." Certains principes de la possibilité queer exposés dans la section "Sculptural Body" de "Focus: Perfection" décrivaient une modernité blanche qui reproduisait la biopolitique de la traite transatlantique des esclaves parmi les communautés queer blanche et Noire en Amérique—spécifiquement dans la communauté queer de New York—par le renforcement et la circulation d'une imagerie des Noirs sexualisés dans un asservissement psychique et physique. A travers ses photos représentant les parties du corps d'hommes noirs, Mapplethorpe concrétise les aspects biopolitiques de la traite transatlantique des esclaves de deux manières. En premier lieu, l'utilisation classique du marbre comme matériau sculptural, ou dans le cas de Mapplethorpe l'emploi classique de la peau photographiée comme un matériau sculptural qui fait référence à l'emploi classique du marbre, adhère à des principes esthétiques inspirés d'un discours colonial occidental qui sexualise et avilit les corps Noirs. En second lieu Mapplethorpe reproduit ce que Michael Hatt a appelé une "structure de spectacle." La construction de corps d'hommes Noirs en opposition inhérente à la couleur blanche, aussi idéalisée qu'elle puisse être, suggère bien que c'est un public blanc qui vient voir la photographie sculpturale des hommes Noirs de Mapplethorpe. Etant donné les thèmes de sadomasochisme qui se trouvent dans les photographies d'hommes Noirs de Mapplethorpe, ces images font directement référence aux fantasmes de domination d'une ère d'asservissement transatlantique aux Etats-Unis. Avec "Focus:Perfection," le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal accepte sans le vouloir la représentation par Map-*

In the fall of 2016 and the winter of 2017, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibited a retrospective of photography by Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) entitled “Focus: Perfection.” In *Phillip Prioleau* (Figure 1), the promotional image for the exhibition, a Black man is photographed turned away from viewer so only his back is visible. His hands are reaching up and to his sides, parting a white curtain that also falls to each of his sides. The whiteness of the curtain is intended to highly contrast with the Black skin of the man photographed, who bends his neck and extends it, further still, away from the viewer so it disappears into the darkness of the parted curtain.

In *Phillip Prioleau*, the photographed has been rendered faceless by photographer Mapplethorpe. We, the viewer, know we are not looking at a portrait because there is no face or profile present in the image. No humanity, life, or personal details represent Phillip in all his complexities. Phillip has had his beautiful life erased by Mapplethorpe: the way his family, chosen or otherwise, was touched by the AIDS crisis (if he is, indeed, a gay man from New York like many of the other men Mapplethorpe photographed) (“Focus: Perfection”); the histories of enslavement in his kinship lines; and the communities who loved him into the person he was when photographed. Mapplethorpe’s rendering of Phillip as voiceless figure—and the MMFA’s propagation of *Phillip Prioleau* as promotional image—would turn out to be a bad omen for the rest of the show.

“Focus: Perfection” depicted what José Esteban Muñoz has called queer possibility: utopic spaces wherein previously “degenerate” bodies regenerate and come to life through radical forms of queer self-making (to self-actualize a disruption to normativity at the embodied level) (11). But the tenets of queer possibility exhibited in the “Sculptural Body” portion of “Focus: Perfection” depicted a white modernity (Lauria Morgensen 3) that reproduces the biopolitics of the transatlantic slave trade among contemporary white and Black queer peoples in America—namely, in New York’s queer community—through the reinforcement and circulation of imagery depicting sexualized Black peoples in psychic and physical bondage.

THE NEO/CLASSICAL BLACK NUDE AND VISUAL CULTURES OF ENSLAVEMENT

Of the various sections of the gallery sectioned off for “Focus: Perfection,” curators Britt Salvesen and Paul Martinea chose to highlight a theme in Mapplethorpe’s photographs they called “the sculptural body” (Figure 2):

Mapplethorpe speculated that if he had been born in an earlier era, he might have been a sculptor rather than a photographer. In his chosen medium, Mapplethorpe underscored the powerful physical presence of his well-proportioned models with an obsessive attention to detail—from the precision of their statuesque poses to the technical sophistication of the lighting. While Mapplethorpe’s nude figure studies appear to be the cool and distanced observations of a photographer who prized perfection in form above all else, they also fuse a classical sensibility with a palpable sexual intensity (“Focus: Perfection”).

Salvesen and Martinea presented several densely displayed sections of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, arguing that they capture the curves and lines of the human body photographed as beautifully as seen in renaissance sculpture. However, Mapplethorpe’s expressions of the sculptural body predominantly featuring Black men, save a few photographs that presented hyperwhitened bodies and delicate white flowers, to contrast with the Black bodies present (Figure 3). Indeed, there is a certain tactility to Mapplethorpe’s photography that makes it sculptural in the ways it is known to the viewer, an illusion of physicality that Johann Gottfried Herder has called the “tactile knowledge of bodies (34).” Mapplethorpe’s work is sculptural in nature because it is physically felt, as if you could reach out and move your hand over the bodies he portrays.

The curators likely drew their positioning of the Black body as sculptural medium from the popular 1990s art book, *The Black Book*, a collection of Mapplethorpe’s photographs of Black men. Salvesen and Martinea boast that Mapplethorpe is “one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century ... renown for his masterful com-

positions and subjects that have compelled new reflection on questions of gender, race and sexuality” (“Focus: Perfection”). Curiously, this is the only mention of race throughout the exhibit, except for a copy of *The Black Book* in the gallery gift shop—curious because so much of the sculptural body is comprised of photographs of Black men. *The Black Book* contains pages and pages of close up shots of different parts of Black bodies. Several Black men are photographed within its pages, posed and lit like statues, stripped naked, and decontextualized of any identity outside of their form.

The curators argue that, using black-and-white photography, Mapplethorpe intentionally distorted, and perhaps perverted (considering his vast body of work portraying gay BDSM subcultures), the values and aesthetics of sculptural classicism. Mapplethorpe paid attention to order, proportion, balance, harmony, decorum, and avoidance of excess. His clear mastery of the formal aspects of his craft, his meticulous posing, framing, and lighting of subjects, all bring an aforementioned sculptural tactility to his photographs. Mapplethorpe’s photographic subjects are portrayed with an elegance and symmetry evocative of Greco-Roman idealizations of the perfect form (Holberton). Yet Mapplethorpe intentionally borrows from classicism here not to further valorize the ideals of Western antiquity but to desecrate them, presenting instead his own queer ideal (Katz 261). Classicism’s idealizations of white masculinities become a confrontational, homoerotic imaginary of Mapplethorpe’s devising. In the vein of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, curators Salvesen and Martinea praise Mapplethorpe as a visionary of “queer classicism” (Katz).

Queer herein refers to, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 8). It should be noted that queer has come to mean much more than gender deviance within academic thought. Queer theorist Lee Edelman, for instant, would argue that “queer” is a position that has nothing to do with sexuality and could be ascribed to anyone who resists intelligibility within the symbolic order; who possess no (neoliberal) futures, only a certain death slowly repeating. In the vein if Edelman, the queer could even be said to be Black individuals themselves in post-slavery, anti-Black U.S.

But Salvensen and Martinea are understand and apply “queer” in the style of Judith Butler: as a disruption of normative gender and sexuality. Butler argues that gender disruption is often enacted through a concerted, embodied resistance to gender performativity—a stylized repetition of acts and discursively predetermined gender conventions. Queer liberatory strategies can manifest on the body through the disruption of normative gender scripts, through self-determined gender performance (self-making) (Butler xii). Butler was concerned with how identity manifests through discourses, drawing from Foucault’s usage of the term to develop her own gendered theory about scripts. Foucault argued in his book *The Archeology of Knowledge* that discourses are a manner of speaking. Words, speech, and language are coded with naturalized social differentiations, and therefore reify hierarchies of power within social and institutional relationships.

However, in their curation of a particular section of Mapplethorpe’s work under a theme of the “sculptural body” to exemplify his brand of “queer” classicism, Salvensen and Martinea unintentionally reproduced a visual culture of transatlantic enslavement particular to the U.S. Namely, Mapplethorpe deconstructs the bodies of Black men as merely the sum of their physical parts, and primarily for a white spectatorship. The Black men, or rather the body parts of Black men, Mapplethorpe presents with his sculptural photography are stripped nude (Figure 4-10), often with parts of their bodies like their buttocks (Figure 8) and penises (Figure 10) prominently and fetishistically lit and showcased. The models in Mapplethorpe’s “sculptural body” photographs are just that: subjects lacking ownership over their bodies, without subjectivities, known to us through their tactile materiality, and decidedly so, as Mapplethorpe has meticulously framed, posed, lighted, and shot the photographs as such.

With his photographs depicting the body parts of Black men, Mapplethorpe reifies the biopolitics of the transatlantic slave trade in two ways. First, the classical use of marble as sculptural material, or in Mapplethorpe’s case the neoclassical use of photographed skin as sculptural material that references the classical use of marble, adheres to aesthetic principles devised from Western, colonial discourse that sexualize and degrade Black bodies (Nelson). In drawing from the artistic conventions of the classical period, Mapplethorpe references

the white marble often used as material for classical and sculpture, which art historian Charmaine Nelson argues “functioned to mediate the representation of the racialized body in ways that preserved a moral imperative essential to the ideals of nineteenth-century neoclassicism (Nelson).” Classical art denounced the biological body, seen as the sexual and racial body, denoted by the lack of any coloration whatsoever of the sculptural form (Nelson). In order to present the Black body as idealized, divine muse for his neoclassical sculptural photography, Mapplethorpe makes visual reference to a Western logic of dominance that functions through dehumanizing, racializing, and degrading Black peoples and communities. Mapplethorpe has forced the Black men he photographed to embody said connotations of racialized sexualization.

Mapplethorpe also unwittingly makes visual reference to 19th-century neoclassical public sculpture in the U.S. that depicted Black citizens emancipating from the bondage of chattel slavery with the aid of white liberal political figures who supposedly led the crusade for abolition (Hatt 429). The intention behind emancipation-era public sculpture depicting Black nudes was a liberal one, grounded in the settler colonial, nationalistic desire to make monument of American histories such as emancipation (Hatt 205). One such sculpture is Thomas Ball’s *Emancipation Group* (Figure 11). *Emancipation Group* depicts Abraham Lincoln, a lone authoritative figure, clothed and regal, freeing enslaved Black citizens who are depicted as a naked Black man crouching at Lincoln’s feet. Michael Hatt argues that during the 1860s in the U.S., alongside the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, public sculptures were produced that depicted enslaved Black peoples with “ideal ... classicized” bodies (Hatt 198). Though the intention of emancipation-era sculptural nudes of enslaved Black peoples was to present the Black body in idealized form and therefore emulated the classical form closely, the positionality in *Emancipation Group* of Lincoln as towering of the Black man he frees, who crouches at his feet, signifies a significant power differentiation between the two regardless of the sculpture’s liberal intentions. Similarly, Mapplethorpe makes himself the good liberal white (gay), who is supposedly freeing the gay Black men he photographs from the racial dynamics of 1980s U.S. Mapplethorpe reifies his subject position as owner of the men he iron-

ically portrays in bondage, though Salvensen and Martinea assure the viewer again and again that the images are appreciative and liberating.

Hatt contends biopolitical control was at the core of neoclassical public sculpture depicting enslaved Black nudes in the U.S. produced during the 1860s:

In order to understand what is at stake here we need to think of the nude as a set of bodies, a system of corporeal classification that can distinguish the acceptable, controlled body from the excessive and indecent one. The nude is not simply a representation of the body, but a measure of corporeal decorum (Hatt 201).

The depiction of Black nudes in 19th-century public sculpture was an underhanded and ironic exertion of control over emancipated Black communities. Though 19th-century public sculpture that depicted Black nudes was positioned as portraying a liberal project of freeing enslaved Black citizens, sculptures like *Emancipation Group* are a visualization of new hierarchies of power in an era of emancipation, wherein white citizens wanted to reinforce their power and privilege as a ruling class over Black communities. Further, the depiction of the Black nude as neoclassical ideal in emancipation-era public sculpture was a false idealization because of a “paradox of recognition (Hatt 205).” In order to depict Black peoples as equal to white peoples, and thereby worthy of emancipation, the sculptural depiction of Black men in a classical aesthetic distinguishes the bodies of Black men in opposition to white men and masculinities—what Hatt calls “racial difference ... understood through corporeal difference (Hatt 200).”

Mapplethorpe, too, reifies the biopolitics of the transatlantic slave trade by reproducing what Michal Hatt has called a “structure of spectatorship (Hatt 200).” By constructing Black men’s bodies in inherent opposition to whiteness, no matter how idealized, it is a white audience that is presumed as the patron of Mapplethorpe’s sculptural photography of Black men. Black men’s body parts are deconstructed for the consumptive gaze of the white viewer, who seek to own the Black men photographed by Mapplethorpe through deconstruction and intimate knowledge of their bodies. A psychic and symbolic portrayal of Black

men in bondage is partially the result of such a patronage, spectatorship, and consumptive gaze. Mapplethorpe codes his brand of bondage and confrontational queer desire with a sexualized consumption, what Hatt might argue constitutes an attempt to render the Black body as ideal while actually dehumanizing Black communities (Hatt 106).

An example of desire-coded idealization of a deconstructed Black body can be seen in Mapplethorpe's photograph *Dennis Speight, New York City, 1980* (Figure 10). The image is a close-up of a fully erect phallus, completely removed from any context other than to glorify its size. Mapplethorpe, and the white spectator by proxy, both desires and is horrified with this phallus that is so different than a white man's phallus (Foster 448). The Black man photographed in *Dennis Speight, New York City* is not portrayed—only his phallus. By constructing a white spectatorship over the Black men present in Mapplethorpe's sculptural photography, spectators who seek to deconstruct the Black men photographed and exert visual ownership, Mapplethorpe unknowingly (but nevertheless violently) references a history of sexual exploitation of Black men during the transatlantic slave trade, wherein Black men were positioned as inherently sexually available and consumable (Foster 449).

During the 19th century, pro-slavery Anglo-American communities adopted the rhetoric that Black men were hypersexual, prone to "sexual indulgence," and driven by their desire for white women (Foster 451). The Anglo-American mythos that Black men were criminal because of their inherently sexual nature and lack of self-control correlated with the apparent purity, delicate nature, and innocence of white women, who were portrayed as vulnerable to the desires of supposedly sexually precocious Black men (Foster 451-451). In reality, though white women were not socially, economically, or politically equal to white men in the U.S. during the 18th century, they still wielded power over enslaved Black peoples, and in violent ways.

Using a selection of sources on slavery such as newspapers, court records, slave owners' journals, abolitionist literature, and the testimony of former enslaved peoples, Thomas A. Foster has argued that, "enslaved Black men [in the U.S.] were sexually assaulted by both white men and white women," though sexual violence perpetrated

against Black enslaved men is often downplayed, underrecognized, and outright ignored by scholars researching the transatlantic slave trade (Foster 447-448). Foster found that, during antebellum slavery in the southern U.S., enslaved Black men were evidenced to have endured sexual assault in the form of “physical penetrative assault, forced reproduction, sexual coercion and manipulation, and psychic abuse (Foster 447).”

Mapplethorpe’s choice to objectify, dehumanize, and sexualize the Black men in his sculptural photography is an assertion of domination over the Black body. Mapplethorpe evokes a history of classical sculpture—and the anti-Black ideologies at its core—that continue to make the Black male body an object inherently available for white ownership through voyeuristic spectatorship. With his sculptural photography, whether intended or not, Mapplethorpe conveys the Black body as something other—as commodifiable and consumable for a normative class of white U.S. citizens.

QUEER UTOPIA AND TRANSATLANTIC ENSLAVEMENT

“**F**ocus: Perfection” exhibits what José Esteban Muñoz has called queer possibility and utopia: a space wherein previously degenerate (queer) bodies regenerate and come to life through radical, utopic forms of self-making (Muñoz 11). Similarly, Jack Halberstam calls queerness a fierce love that can only be shared amongst the gender weirdos deemed deviant by cis- and hetero-normative scripts that reproduce on the body (Halberstam). Queer possibility is the defiant drive towards a queer utopia from within a colonial biopolitical death machine that attempts to eradicate queer life through hetero- and cis- normative modes of control. At its core, queer possibility imagines ways to self-actualize new worlds, outside of the imposition of the Western gender binary and its subsequent hetero-normative relationalities.

Mapplethorpe has been widely regarded as a queer art idol, his work often praised for capturing the complexities of gender and sexuality as presented through his community of friends and collaborators from the artistic hotbed of 1980s New York. Because Mapplethorpe’s body of work and whole life was tied up in New York’s Chelsea community,

which was hit particularly hard by the AIDS crisis, his art has become canonized as a representation of this moment in queer history. In the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis, right-wing homophobic discourse was pervasive in the U.S., and art was a battleground upon which anti-gay discourses were mobilized. The release of *The Black Book* in July 1988, a series of black-and-white photographs shot by Mapplethorpe featuring Black men in eroticized classical poses, caused an uproar of controversy resulting in religious protests, the congress cutting money to artists, Senator Jesse Helms criticizing Mapplethorpe by calling him a “known homosexual,” and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington dropping a show of Mapplethorpe’s work (Cotter). Cultural thinkers and curators haven’t shied away from connecting Mapplethorpe’s brand of queer classicism to political discourse about AIDS in the 1980s, applauding him for “having won the culture wars (Timburg).”

Yet Mapplethorpe’s queer possibility is a modernity claimed for white queers only (Lauria Morgensen 3). The subjectivity of queer life, and deamination and domination of Black life, is most apparent in Mapplethorpe’s work through a comparison of the white and Black individuals he photographed. The Black individuals in Mapplethorpe’s photos are portrayed in stark contrast with the photos of white sitters throughout the gallery, presented through a humanizing and (queer) subject-making lens for which Mapplethorpe is known for. Mapplethorpe’s fetishistic and consumptive portrayal of the Black body is most apparent in contrast to his portraiture featuring members of New York City’s Chelsea neighborhood, wherein some of his subjects appear nude and semi-nude yet are not housed in the “red light” section of the gallery like many of the photos featuring nude Black bodies.

In Mapplethorpe’s portrait of friend, sometimes lover, and frequent collaborator Patti Smith, *Patti Smith 1978* (Figure 8), Smith is animated and engaged with the viewer (Smith). Smith’s photograph is framed in a way that acknowledges her environment and that she is an actor within it. A cat sits slightly behind Smith’s shoulder in a window sill, and we imagine her in a run-down Chelsea apartment. Smith gazes at us with existential angst, raising a pair of scissors to her hair in a sort of anarchic statement against its materiality and all its loaded representations of white femininity. What’s clear is that Smith is in control of her

environment, engaged, and an actor in a world that is affected by her presence.

In this universe of actors and the acted upon, *Bob Love, 1979* (Figure 12) stands in stark contrast to a work like *Patti Smith 1978*, with the hollow, vacant look of the subject and the almost scientific posturing. Love is stripped naked, meant only to portray the glorified proportions of his body, void of any other context. Love's body is lit in a way that illuminates the darkness of his skin while accentuating the curves of his body and the length of his penis. The photo is strikingly familiar to photographs used for the "study" of scientific racism, like the 1850 series commissioned by Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz, completed by daguerreotypist Joseph Zealy, in an attempt to prove the theory of polygenesis (Rogers).

Mapplethorpe seemed to have a particular interest in the posing of Black men controversially to evoke histories of transatlantic slavery and anti-Black racism. As Wesley Morris has commented:

To spend time with Mapplethorpe's work now is to find in it a kind of distorted love—what that German guy came all the way to America to discover. Mapplethorpe found most bodies beautiful and otherworldly, but especially black ones. He lit dark skin so it looked like wet paint and arranged subjects until they became furniture or evoked slave auctions. That naïve, dehumanizing wonder complicates what, at the time, was the radical, defiant feat of inscribing black men—black gay men—into portraiture. It strikes a peculiarly foundational American note: This was another white man looking at black men, with effrontery but also with want. You can locate a sense of ownership, of possession, in many of the images. Two of Mapplethorpe's last relationships were with black men. Any eroticism in the photos might have come from the possibility that, sexually, he himself was possessed (Morris).

The evoked slave auction Morris speaks to is undoubtedly *Hooded Man* (Figure 13). *Hooded Man* is a visceral photograph, portraying a hooded Black man who is, again, in bondage. Despite the intense subject matter, it would seem curators Salvesen and Martinea were over-

taken by an erotic fascination with the photograph much like Mapplethorpe, as it was housed in “red light” portion of the gallery, complete with content warnings and surrounded by work that displayed graphic sadomasochistic acts.

Hooded Man is a difficult image to unpack. The man photographed has been symbolically bound and displayed, as if at an auction of enslaved peoples, ready to be inspected for sale. What makes the *Hooded Man* even more complex is its homoerotic undertones. In the catalogue for the “Focus: Perfection,” Jonathan D. Katz even goes so far as to compare the photographed figure to his “legendary phallus (Katz 257),” citing that Mapplethorpe has in essence transformed the figure’s body into a giant, uncircumcised penis.

The hypersexualization of Black men in the U.S. during the transatlantic slave trade and consequent social attitudes frequently led to the phallic abuse of enslaved Black men, often in the form of castration or other sexualized forms of abuse such as sexual-sadomasochistic whipping of enslaved peoples and forcing enslaved men to procreate (Foster 451). Given the themes of sadomasochism throughout Mapplethorpe’s photographs of Black men, these images outright reference “fantasies of domination” from an era transatlantic enslavement in the U.S. Mapplethorpe portrays Black men in bondage, who are now available to be owned by Mapplethorpe’s presumed white viewership through intimate knowledge of, and control over, their bodies and sexual lives (Foster 450).

By evoking histories of transatlantic enslavement in his photographs depicting Black men, *Hooded Man* is rendered akin to colonially legitimated sexual violence. Mapplethorpe and the Black men he photographs are not equals unified under a shared vision of queer utopia. In fact, the open circulation of sexual desire as something to be freely expressed within queer community, an assumed limitless *carte blanche* of sexual expressivity, has opened the space for Mapplethorpe to project his own ethic of domination on the Black men he photographed and sought to consume through his camera lens. Further, identity politics surrounding Mapplethorpe’s life as a queer man in 1990s New York during the AIDS crisis are likely what long sheltered him from critique about his racialized and sexualized depictions of Black men among

white-dominated art industries, though critique of Mapplethorpe has been prolific among Black communities.

CONCLUSION

The fact that fetishistic portrayals of the Black communities are still being shown in major art institutions in 2017, with little to no attentiveness to issues of race, is troubling. Black artists and cultural thinkers have been speaking to the highly derogatory nature of Mapplethorpe's work for decades. Notably, from 1991 through 1993, Glenn Ligon created a body of work called *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (Figure 14), now housed in the Guggenheim permanent collection. Ligon reflected on seeing Mapplethorpe's work in 1986, stating that he saw the men in *The Black Book* were “ambivalent,” “de-contextualized,” and “objects for Mapplethorpe's camera.” After seeing Mapplethorpe's photographs of Black men, Ligon compiled possible responses to Mapplethorpe's work—some from interviews with peers, and others pulled from Black theorists and activists. Ligon presents the responses he compiled in panels positioned in between images from pages of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, the margins here denoting both the physical space of the book and the voices who Mapplethorpe pushed to the margins with his representations.

Knowing Ligon's powerful response to Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* has been recognized and collected by such a prominent gallery raises the question of why Mapplethorpe's work was curated around the (Black) sculptural body, at all? Some might argue that a reparative project seeking out positive representations of queer love and life in Mapplethorpe's work is possible. But this is the ultimate gaslight of queer utopias, isn't it? Queer utopia in Mapplethorpe's art is defined by a white spectatorship and sensibility that unconsciously reinforces white supremacist structural power in supposedly radical queer aesthetics, including legacy of Black death associated with the contemporary biopolitics of transatlantic enslavement.

Jin Haritaworn has traced this relationship between the generation of queer white life and the death of racialized life, describing how “formerly degenerate [queer] bodies come to life” in class-poor neighborhoods often populated by racialized communities (such as Chelsea,

New York where Mapplethorpe resided), and how these regenerative processes result in the social death of low income communities of colour who are displaced by queer gentrification. Mapplethorpe's photographs reproduce a visual culture of enslavement and anti-Black racism in the U.S., derived from a long history of transatlantic slavery. Social inequality is perpetuated within and among queer peoples, a phenomena that has been called queer necropolitics—the differential embodied life of queers of colour and queer white settlers (Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco).

The Black men in Mapplethorpe's photographs are animated corpses, ghosts even: extinct, dying, and of the past—incapable of enacting and embodying the sexual and gender modernity of white queer communities (Lauria Morgensen). Mapplethorpe's queer utopia is irrespirable from Black death. Here, in Mapplethorpe's Chelsea, Black men are reduced to the sum of their body parts, biopolitically and materially bound to the death drive ascribed to Black communities in the U.S. resultant of a history of enslavement within its borders (Sexton 27, 28).

Why do we return to Mapplethorpe's work at all, knowing the troubled images that exist in his catalogue? Knowing that, even from a reparative standpoint, Mapplethorpe's work is Black death repeating itself, forever (Edelman 4). With a Mapplethorpe biopic coming out this year, perhaps it's time for queer communities to ask how we can be responsible to our Black queer kin in refusing the circulation of an aesthetic of bondage and enslavement. However difficult, perhaps it's time to let go of the white spectatorship the defines Mapplethorpe's work and queer aesthetics, generally.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Phillip Prioleau, 1982, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print, 15.3 in. x 15.3 in.



THE SCULPTURAL BODY

Mapplethorpe speculated that if he had been born in an earlier era, he might have been a sculptor rather than a photographer. In his chosen medium, Mapplethorpe underscored the powerful physical presence of his well-proportioned models with an obsessive attention to detail – from the precision of their statuesque poses to the technical sophistication of the lighting. While Mapplethorpe's nude figure studies appear to be the cool and distanced observations of a photographer who prized perfection in form above all else, they also fuse a classical sensibility with a palpable sexual intensity.

Figure 2: "The Sculptural Body," *Focus/Perfection*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/past/focus-perfection/>.



Figure 3: Installation shot of Focus:Perfection (courtesy of the writer).

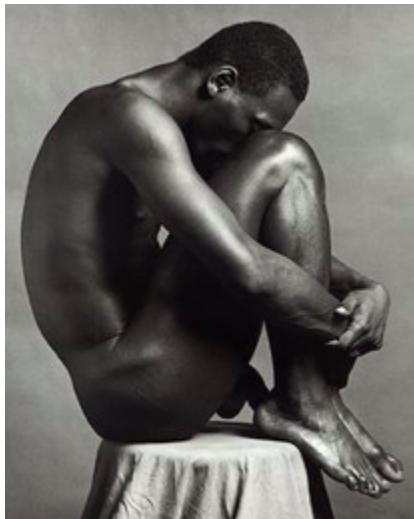


Figure 4: *Ajitto*, 1981, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 18 in. x 14 in. (courtesy of the Lindsay Nixon).

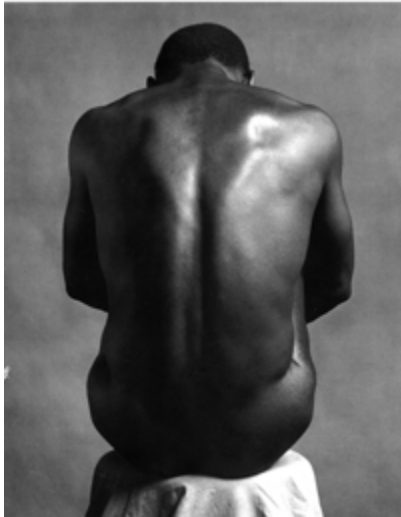


Figure 5: *Ajitto*, 1981, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 18 in. x 14 in.

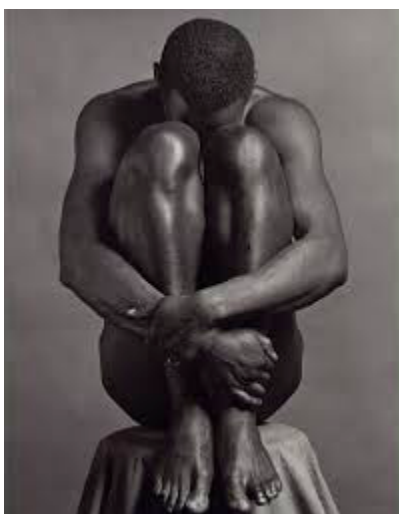


Figure 6: *Ajitto*, 1981, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 18 in x 14 in.



Figure 7: Derrick Cross, 1983, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 29.5 in. x 24.4 in.

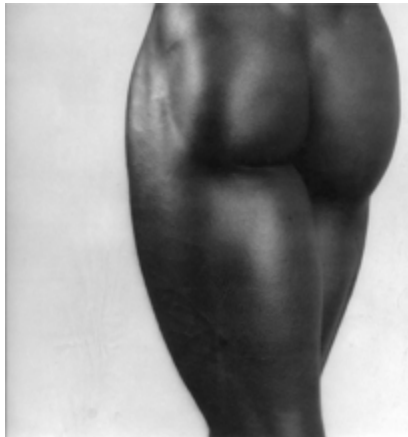


Figure 8: Derrick Cross, 1983, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 29.5 in. x 24.4 in.



Figure 9: Derrick Cross, 1983, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 29.5 in. x 24.4 in.



Figure 10: Dennis Speight, New York City, 1980, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 7.5 in. x 7.3 in.



Figure 11: Thomas Ball, Emancipation Group, 1875, bronze, Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C.

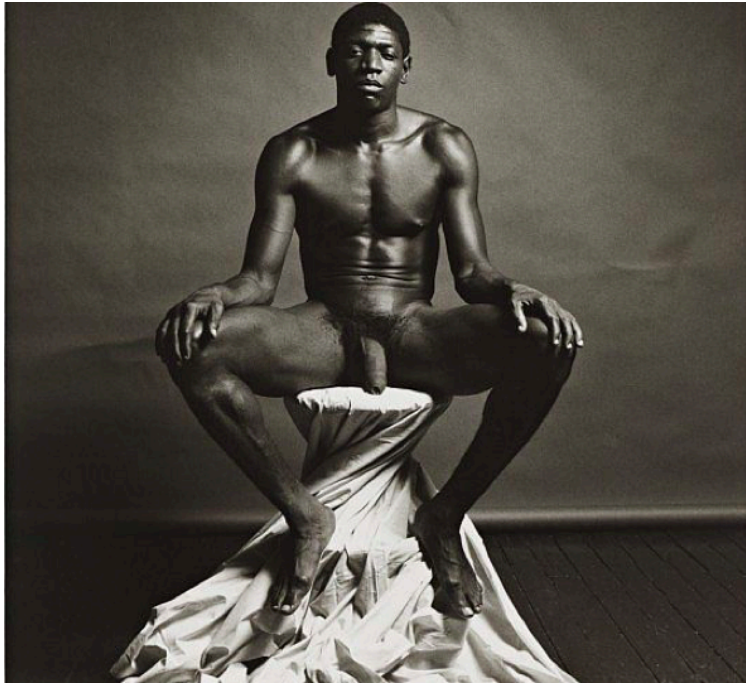


Figure 12: Bob Love, 1979, 1979, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 612 x 587 mm.



Figure 13: *Hooded Man*, 1980, Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 19.1 x 19.1 cm.



Figure 14: Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–1993. Ninety-one offset prints, 11½ x 11½ in.; seventy-eight text pages, 5¼ x 7¼ in.

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