

## **Performative Remnants**

**Re-reading the Black Male Body in Mapplethorpe's *Black Book***

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## **I : Making Discursive Room for the Black Body**

A man, cloaked in a leopard skin and holding a bamboo spear, stares out of the page, meeting our gaze. His torso is turned towards us at a three-fourths angle, and his expression is obstinate and intense. While the leopard skin and spear help to imagine this body within colonial iconography, the body of the model was—not long after the *Black Book*'s publication—being jostled in external critical debates about Mapplethorpe's photographic practice and its relationship to racial fetishism.

Two of the most notable contributions to this critical discourse were produced by Kobena Mercer, in essays published in 1986, following the publication of the *Black Book* and after in 1989. Jane M. Gaines investigation of the various readerships cathected to the *Black Book* and Thomas Yingling's 1990 complex defense of Mapplethorpe's practice further enrich this debate. Also notable is Peggy Phelan's chapter in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, which understands the use of the black male body in Mapplethorpe's portraiture as a screen for the artist's subjectivity. José Esteban Muñoz's 1999 investigation into the possibility of an anti-racist dis-identification with Mapplethorpe's images stands as the most recent investigation of the *Black Book*'s numerous possibilities. These contributions are each important for the way that they engage the complex theoretical, political and racial dynamics of Mapplethorpe's photography.

This brief chronology of scholarly works on the *Black Book* might suggest that the text's ability to inspire and catalyze complex debates has been exhausted. Indeed, was idea had already been suggested around the time Mapplethorpe had died in 1989. Curiously, Gaines laments in the first line of her essay: "Can there be anything left to say about Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious

black male nudes?”<sup>1</sup> This statement, published in 1992, clearly suggests that the possibility for more to be said or written about the black male body in this case was understood as quickly vanishing. Gaines essay in *New Formations* responds to Kobena Mercer’s “Looking for Trouble,” its author’s 1991 critical re-appraisal of Mapplethorpe’s work. In his essay, Mercer argues that Mapplethorpe’s death occasions a critical re-appraisal of his work. “In our case,” he writes, “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.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes writings about the death of the author, Mercer pivots from his prior excoriation of Mapplethorpe’s work towards an appreciation centered on his ability “[to show] that which is repressed and denied as Other as a condition of existence of an identity based on the desire for mastery.”<sup>3</sup>

The social and political circumstances of Mercer’s writing provide a necessary view into his re-reading of Mapplethorpe’s black nude portraits, as they form an explicit motivation for his argumentative shift. Robert Mapplethorpe’s work catalyzed both “homophobic and homoerotic reactions” in viewing publics, leading to a pivotal political controversy whose dueling sides remain ingrained in contemporary memory of the artist’s oeuvre.<sup>4</sup> Enmeshed in this controversy were Senator Jesse Helms, Mapplethorpe’s work, the institutions that supported it and critics of

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<sup>1</sup> Jane M. Gaines. “Competing Glances: Who Is Reading Robert Mapplethorpe’s Black Book?” *New Formations*, no. 16 (Summer 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Kobena Mercer. “Looking for Trouble.” *Transition*, no. 51 (1991): 189. Accessed February 5, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Mapplethorpe who examined his work's racial dimensions. As this controversy developed, Mercer noted the way in which the American New Right began to appropriate leftist and feminist critiques of pornographic work, subsuming it as "the official discourse of the state."<sup>5</sup> Resisting such a co-option, Mercer pivots out of a will to evade "[forming] an alliance with the New Right."<sup>6</sup> His argument in "Looking For Trouble"—which moves to valorize Mapplethorpe's artistic practice—is thus a maneuver in its own right, designed to navigate the sociopolitical terrain of its context.

Paradoxically, the figure of the Artist looms large in Mercer's 1991 essay. At the same time that Barthes' theorization of the death of the author is invoked, Mapplethorpe's centrality is reasserted. At times in this critical debate, Mapplethorpe's controversial legacy established an obstacle around which argumentation was forced to circumnavigate. Elsewhere, the guiding question is what Mapplethorpe succeeded at doing or failed to do in producing his artwork. Indeed, the notion of the artist or author's death as the catalyst for re-reading a text situates his figure prominently in the discourse around it, even as the text's interlocutors execute re-evaluations of his *oeuvre*, as Mercer and Gaines did. Even beyond death, the artist's life continued to inscribe itself in secondary writings, articulating the epistemological basis for what was critically and conceptually possible. Mapplethorpe's prominence within these critical discourses was in part of a product of the contextual circumstances in which it was produced. However, it also emerges as a rhetorical or discursive problematic within understandings of an artist's work: that the figure of the artist/author forecloses possibilities for the construction of alternate narratives about what occurs between *The Black Book's* pages. The eminence of the artist's presence in discussion of

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<sup>5</sup> Mercer, *Looking for Trouble*, 196.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

*The Black Book* is not limited to Mercer, of course, but is a hallmark of nearly all existent scholarship on the text.

Nowhere does this problem emerge more starkly than in Peggy Phelan's text on performance, *Unmarked*. Phelan turns to the image *Leland Richard* from 1980, in which the model clenches his fist as his back faces the camera:

In his photographs of black men, Mapplethorpe tries to suggest a symmetrical relationship between the visible image of the black man in the frame and the invisible image of the white man behind the camera. In *Leland Richard* (1980), he suggests the possibility that the pose performed by his model, fists behind his back, is also an imitation of Mapplethorpe's own pose as the photographer behind his lens holding a time release shutter.<sup>7</sup>

In Phelan's account, Mapplethorpe articulates his artistic subjectivity through the body of the model, as the fist establishes a mirroring link between artist and model. Phelan's argument around this photograph is that it exposes the extent to which the black body—as Other—acts as a psychological screen for the will of the artist. It does not appear that Phelan's analysis here is intended to reify the cult of Mapplethorpe's artistry or genius, since she claims that this symmetry between model and artist ultimately breaks down due to “the history and practice of racism” that underlies this photograph.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as is the case in much of the scholarship on Mapplethorpe's practice, critique is constrained by the language through which it is expressed.

While Phelan's consideration of Mapplethorpe's portraiture of black men illustrates these methodological limitations, it also hints at the way in which they might be transcended. Pausing at “the pose performed by his model,” we can observe these constraints at work. In the same breath

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<sup>7</sup> Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

that Phelan argues that the pose is an action carried out by the model, the imperative of Mapplethorpe's subjectivity overrides this performance. In effect, the model's actions become Mapplethorpe's actions; the model becomes Mapplethorpe's surrogate body. This erasure has both methodological and ontological consequences. On one hand, it forecloses alternate narratives of the photographs' genesis by leaving behind the model's action; further, in this forgetting, the model's performance is overwritten by the towering work of the artist, as a marginalia or trace.

The present writing takes as its goal to understand the ways in which these same performative traces—left by the black male body, collected throughout *The Black Book*—may point to a contrary history of their creation. Interestingly for this project, this attention to what can or cannot be left behind plays a large role in Phelan's conception of performance. Elsewhere in *Unmarked*, Phelan makes the claim that “there are no left-overs.”<sup>9</sup> She argues: “Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations.”<sup>10</sup> For Phelan, performance's firm alliance with the present allows it evade economic co-optation through capitalist reproduction. In defending performance's anti-capitalist maneuver, Phelan elides the other possibilities that performance encapsulates, which cannot be so easily disentangle it the economies that dominate *The Black Book*, which are erotic, ontological and economic in nature. Phelan's dichotomous ontology of performance, I will show, cannot keep up with black life's maneuvers, which undo settled binaries: subject or object; dead or alive; part or whole.

## **II : The Pose and Black Performance's Ontology**

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<sup>9</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



“The savage black man with a spear. That to me is a kind of racist shot. And of course Mapplethorpe is on the other side of the camera: the lion tamer. But at the same time, the truth in the shot is that this is a dude in the ‘wrong nigga to fuck with’ category. The guys like... ‘You’re not going to fuck with this homeboy.’” —**artist Gary Simmons on a photograph in *The Black Book***<sup>11</sup>

The first line of theorist Fred Moten’s 2003 text *In the Break* takes us to the site of this undoing: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”<sup>12</sup> Responding to Karl Marx’s suggestion in *Capital* that commodities do not speak, Moten deploys “object” as a term that alludes to the black body’s violent becoming under transatlantic slavery and its commodification as an economic tool.<sup>13</sup> Charting the dimensions of resistance to this objectification, Moten studies the performance of a woman within the confines of this enslavement: Frederick Douglass’ Aunt Hester, whose shrieks at the hand of a slave master are recorded in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Aunt Hester’s scream marks the capacity of the racialized, sexualized and commodified object to resist the confines that bind it, because it removes the object’s speech “outside of the confines of [linguistic] meaning,” a realm of surveilled legibility.<sup>14</sup> The scream emerges from the corporeal effect of violence, but gestures towards liberation from these forces. It not only points to the possibility of something outside the discourse

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ligon, Glenn. *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (New York, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Fred Moten. *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

that structures the black woman as a species of inert commodity, but also represents a performance has been reproduced through time. Connecting Aunt Hester to other reproducers of this technique like James Brown, Moten argues: “Where shriek turns speech turns song...lies the trace of our descent.”<sup>15</sup>

Moten’s productive analysis of the shriek or scream establishes a number of challenges to Phelan’s concept of performance’s marriage to the present. In Moten’s conception, black people reproduce resistance as the continuation of a performative legacy that refuses limitation to one time. This suggests that the black body—the physical means of performance—itself cannot be located on one side of the temporal divide. Following Saidiya Hartman’s emphasis on “the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead,” one could argue that the black body’s flesh bears the index of past violence in the present.<sup>16</sup> The black body might then be established as the site of this temporal undoing. Additionally, Moten in indirect reference to Phelan’s text, questions whether performance can ever be outside the economy of reproduction.<sup>17</sup> I understand this to highlight the economic factors that structure the staging and reception of performance, on one level. Fittingly for an investigation of *The Black Book*, the performances of those men who made its pages were economic exchanges. Each model signed a contractual model release with Mapplethorpe, allowing for the reproduction of their image in various forms, such as in gallery

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<sup>15</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1-14. Accessed March 1, 2016. Black Studies Center.

<sup>17</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 4. For Moten, the question of whether performance can exist outside an economy of reproduction directly addresses Peggy Phelan’s thesis about performance’s ontology in her text *Unmarked* (1993). Moten sees this as a major element of his critical motivations in *In the Break*. The critical debate that Moten, Hartman and Phelan continued into the early 2000s was critical to this writing.

spaces or in one of the artist's many photobooks.<sup>18</sup> However, Moten's theorization also opens up a more pointed line of inquiry: What does performance look like for those whose existence is forged through the intermingling of economic exchange and extreme violence? And what conceptualization of performance's ontology might accommodate this problem?

Though Fred Moten's critical intervention introduces a productive framework for re-reading *The Black Book*, it also poses a problem for the analysis of the photographs within it. Moten's account of performance stresses sound and speech as tools for resistance. Moreover, when Moten engages performance through photography in a rich, creative analysis of Emmett Till's disfigured face, he stresses the neglected "phonic materiality" and "reverberations" audible in the image.<sup>19</sup> This is linked to a deeper critique of the ocularcentrism "that generally—perhaps necessarily—shapes theories of the nature of photography and our experience of photography."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund White. "Robert Mapplethorpe." In *Arts and Letters*, 300-02 (New York: Cleis Press, 2006). The exchange of the photograph as a form of payment followed a sexual exchange between Mapplethorpe and the model. In this way, the model release forms themselves evidence a sexual economy in which these photographs were produced, one that was always already about capitalist exchange as it as about erotic exchange. Upwards of 100 old model releases from 1978 to 1982 are also included in the recently established Getty archive; due to privacy concerns, however, a portion of this information will remain sealed until 2061. Old model releases, 1978-1982, box 164, folder 6, Robert Mapplethorpe Photos and Papers, Getty Research Institute, Archives Department. Accessed via finding aid.

<sup>19</sup> Moten, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 197. For Moten, the focus on visual evidence—through a semiotic lens—in photography, as in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, "privileges the analytic-interpretative reduction of phonic materiality and/or nonmeaning over something like a mimetic improvisation of and with that materiality that moves in excess of meaning." Where semiotics reads the photograph in linguistic terms, he is proposing an alternate way of engaging the photograph that accommodates the non-linguistic sonic content throughout the history of blackness. He quotes Édouard Glissant in the introduction in a way that points the urgency of this intervention into theories and histories of photography: "Din is discourse." Though this project does not directly engage the issue of sound versus vision, it does adapt from *In the Break* an attention to the photography's alternate modes evidencing life and politics beyond capacity of dominant regimes.

The problem that ocularcentrism poses for current understandings of photography cannot be addressed in the scope of this writing. Given Moten's insistence on the sonic, it becomes clear that the first task in working through Moten's theorization is to consider what instruments the model deploy in his performative resistance.

Just as Aunt Hester's scream is corporeal—a product of fleshly material—so is the model's pose. Leland Richard's pose, for example, is where will is transferred into the muscles and sinews that arrange the fingers in a cascading, sequential row and pull the hand tightly inward. The pose moves the body in a direction. Rather than representing one independent, static moment, the pose is linked to the movements that precede and follow it; it reminds that the body moves and maneuvers in the face of the camera and is therefore a process. The pose figures, presents and sculpts the body in a particular way, extracting aesthetic potential from the flesh.<sup>21</sup>

Roland Barthes understood the pose as fundamental to the nature of photography.<sup>22</sup> In his notable reading, the pose is not simply one moment but threads a narrative through the process of taking a photograph, one that can be observed “even in the interval of a millionth of a second.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to being a structuring element of photography's essence (or *noeme*, in his terms), the pose is central the subject's ability to constitute himself. “I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image,” he writes at the opening of *Camera Lucida*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A major element of this project's theoretical background has been derived from Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*, which understands concept of the flesh—originally theorized by Hortense Spillers—as both a space of political and epistemic subjugation and a space for liberatory aesthetics and politics.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 78. “I might put this differently: what founds the nature of Photography is the pose.”

<sup>23</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

In the process of creating this new body, however, the posing subject is introduced to himself as an Other, as the subject is transformed into an object.<sup>25</sup>

Barthes reading stresses the pose as both a site of agency and objectification for the sitting subject. This is useful for thinking the photograph as a moment within time, in which various forces are at play. Looking to Barthes, one can begin to construct a way of approaching the pose as a type of performance. However, in *Camera Lucida*, as in Phelan's *Unmarked*, performance is located on the side of the photographer, in every instance where the word is used. This argumentative move maintains the primacy of the Author in the creation of the photograph, reasserting a structure that needs to be undone in order to access the model's performance.

More importantly, Barthes' understanding of the photograph locates the pose alongside mortification and death. In mortifying the body, he argues, the photograph locks it in stasis. This stasis is the machine that transforms the photograph into the subject's other. Here, Barthes points to the history of early photography, turning our attention to the way that 19<sup>th</sup>-century sitters underwent the "surgical operation" of being observed while holding their pose for extended durations.<sup>26</sup> Barthes here envisions an ontological death that the photograph forces upon the subject in the process of an image's making. Loss, disappearance and death return as the basis for this ontology of photography. In this sense, the performance within the Barthesian pose is always destined to end or fail to escape the context of a photograph's creation. This is perhaps why "photography's inimitable feature (its *noeme*) is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 13.

matter of objects) in flesh and blood or again in person.”<sup>27</sup> Were Barthes writing about *The Black Book*, the only conceivable witness to the model’s performance would be Mapplethorpe, or perhaps the other people in the room, although none of them would be considered a Photographer to begin with.

The limits of Barthes’ definition of the photograph as the realm of the has-been emerge most vividly in his brief reading of an image marked by enslavement’s history. In his commentary on Avedon’s portrait of William Casby—a man from Algiers, Louisiana who was born a slave—Barthes’ claims that the man “*has been* a slave.”<sup>28</sup> His corporeal presence in the photograph “certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us; and he certifies this not by historical testimony but by a new, somehow experiential order of proof, although it is the past that is in question—a proof no longer merely induced...”<sup>29</sup> In Avedon’s photograph, the image renders proof of slavery, the logical condition here being that slavery has passed. Although Barthes qualifies his claim by stating that slavery is not a far off memory, he nevertheless places slavery at a temporal remove that reasserts a divide between past and present. The divide between past and present is not only reasserted on the level of the photograph as a document or text, but also on the body of William Casby, who renders corporeal proof of this version of history. “The essence of slavery is laid bare,” he writes.<sup>30</sup> In the same way the Barthes locates evidentiary proof in the past, so does he locate Casby’s body as a thing of the past. This achieves a mortification of the black body in Avedon’s photograph.

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<sup>27</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 34.

The pose, however, escapes mortification, as the realm of the has-been. It is inherently connected to the other motions—small and large—that the bodaḡy undertakes, down to the millionth-of-a-second, to circle back to Barthes. We are reminded of the pose when the men in *The Black Book* stare back and meet our gaze, as the cover image of the 2010 edition of the text does. The reader catches the glimmer of will or intent most vividly in these moments, such as in the 1980 photograph of Isaiah, who stands cloaked in a leopard skin, or in Pierre Colas’ turned head from 1985. Their stare conjures the performativity of looking back into the camera, recognizing oneself as seen, and orchestrating one’s body in recognition of this fact. Here, it might seem appropriate to argue that this returned gaze signifies an agency possessed by the model’s in the book. I am bracketing the subject of agency, since it implies a sovereign, whole subjectivity that the models do not possess. In this sense, I follow Alexander Weheliye’s question in the introduction to his posthumanist intervention, *Habeas Viscus*: “Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed?”<sup>31</sup> As the models within *The Black Book* demonstrate, the methods of resistance to objectification, commodification or even humanization cannot be so easily collapsed within the rhetoric of agency. Rather than uphold agency as the “*sine qua non* of oppositionality,” this project

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2. Later in the introduction of *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye maintains this skepticism vis-à-vis agency and further clarifies his project. He writes: “That said, I am not making any claims about the desirability of flesh, the unmitigated agency it contains, or how it abolishes the violent political structures at its root, but rather I investigate the breaks, crevices, movements, languages, and such found in the zones between the flesh and the law.”

seeks to account for the elusive maneuver that the pose embodies throughout the pages of *The Black Book*.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the rhetoric of agency faces even higher obstacles when it encounters the photographs in the text in which the black body is cropped, segmented and piecemealed. Where the buttocks, penis and torso make their sculptural turn, the full body and its attendant subjectivity are all but absent. In other words, images like those of Derrick Cross or the unnamed *Man in a Polyester Suit* complicate the desire to locate agency in these photographs. Given this impasse, the pose may show a way to circumnavigate the zero-sum game of sovereign subjectivity that agency demands. A focus on the pose allows for a consideration of gestures as small as the positioning of the hands on a bamboo spear, approximating Barthes' focus on the minute details that prick the viewer under the label of the *punctum*. But the notion of the pose is also useful in its suggestion of the black body's orientation in relation to the powers that imagine it outside of the realm of Man. What does it mean to make microscopic shifts—spatially, aesthetically, politically—in relation to the white gaze?<sup>33</sup>

The pose, furthermore, allows us to re-approach to sticky subject of aestheticization, with which Mapplethorpe is canonically associated. The dust jacket notes for *The Black Book* acclaim the artist's career as one that displays the unrelenting "aestheticization of social taboos."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> For more on the notion of a microscopic shifting of the black body, see Michelle M. Wright's recent text *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, which deploys quantum physics to re-understand the way blackness is understood and discussed. Wright makes a useful intervention into the crevices where the historical ontology of transatlantic slavery fails to produce the most useful methodology for understanding blackness in a particular context or moment.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe. *Black Book*. 2nd ed. (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel, 2010 (1986)).



Furthermore, prior critics have variously Mapplethorpe's production of beauty as a defensive line against critiques of objectification. That debate will not be replayed here for the ways it reinscribes the author as the main subject of conversation. It is useful, however, to note the ways in which *The Black Book* constructs spaces of erotic, artistic imagination that, as Thomas Yingling perceptively argued, leaves "little space for conventional sexual fantasy."<sup>35</sup> The way the models rest atop pedestals, for example, signals this most clearly. Moreover, each of the photographs in the text are framed consistently by white borders, which approximate white gallery walls; through this formal gesture in the book's design, its pages operate, in part, as an exhibition space. The men within *The Black Book* are thus presented as art objects, at the same time that they are engaged textually.

When read as a valorization, the equation of the black body with the beautiful object is the essence of most defenses of Mapplethorpe's artistic practice; however, this argument often fails to distinguish this artistic aestheticization or beautification from analogous forms of objectification stretching across the history of blackness. It is unclear where beauty and "abject thinghood," to quote Kobena Mercer's critique, diverge.<sup>36</sup> Where the camera has met the black body, this divide has often become unclear. One finds an example in the daguerreotypes of North American and Brazilian slaves, executed by anthropologist Louis Agassiz and photographers J.T. Zealy and Walter Hunnewell between 1850 and 1866. While the photographs emerge out of scientific and evidentiary demands, they are also aesthetic objects with libidinal charge. The velvet and metal

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<sup>35</sup> Yingling, Thomas. "How the Eye Is Caste: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Limits of Controversy." *Discourse* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 16. Accessed February 15, 2016. JSTOR.

<sup>36</sup> Kobena Mercer. "Reading Racial Fetishism" In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, 171-188 (London: Routledge, 1994).

casings that surrounded many of the daguerreotypes created an intimate sensuous experience of the slave body, particularly in Brazil. Moreover, the photographs themselves blended codes of erotic photography and scientific examination, as Maria Helena P.T. Machado has argued.<sup>37</sup> Here, the thingness of the photographic object is accented, as is the orientation of this thingness towards beauty.

In the case of *The Black Book*'s dominant rhetoric, the desire to declare the black male body as beautiful cannot be divorced from the multiple levels on which this desire has often been complicit in the history of black objectification. The beautification of the black male body cannot necessarily undo this intermingling of sensuality and violence. Operating in *The Black Book* is not the violence of the whip or chain, but rather the subtler forms of violence in the objectifying gaze and the erasure of black performance. The aim of this argument is not to recast Mapplethorpe in the star role of the captor, although *The Black Book* presents the black male body as a captured object. The binds that produce this captivity exceed and precede Mapplethorpe's body and subjectivity, complicating the frame of personal blame that has been previously used to understand his images of black men. In other words, the objectifying gaze and its complicity in rendering the black body as non-human are bigger than one artist. Thus, a discussion of the body in *The Black Book* is not reducible to whether Mapplethorpe did something *wrong* in his aesthetic project.

Given this, we can begin to ask: what would it mean to set aside Mapplethorpe's hand in this aestheticization, in order to focus on the model's pivot towards beauty? Indeed, like dance,

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<sup>37</sup> Helena P.T. Machado. "Nineteenth-Century Scientific Travel and Racial Photography: The Formation of Louis Agassiz's Brazilian Collection." *Mirror of Race*. May 8, 2012. Accessed March 12, 2016. <http://mirrorofrace.org/>.

the pose orients the body in a particular aesthetic intent. Kobena Mercer's useful analogy between the buttocks and the Brancusi sculpture in the photo of Marty Gibson sticks out as an example. By posing, the model inhabits the realm of the art object. Through the pose, a reorientation of *who* does the work of aesthetic creation becomes possible. The myth of artistic, creative agency is not functional here. Instead, when the models of *The Black Book* are the focus, aesthetic creation is located in the realm objectification and objecthood. As Fred Moten suggests in his reading of the shriek that turns into song, the history of black performance is one in which aesthetic creation persists in the shadow of violence. This violence shows itself in a number of ways, from the physical to the epistemic. However, black life and performance gesture towards alternate forms of life that do not participate in the ideological construct of "western Man as the mirror image of human life as such."<sup>38</sup> In other words, black performance demonstrates forms of humanity disentangled from the fantasy of the sovereign, un-racialized (White), male subject.

Perhaps speaking or performing from this position of objecthood opens up onto other forms of life that are a reserve of critical opposition against the same structures that eject the oppressed from Man's domain. Uri McMillan has delved into this subject, considering the processes that allow "black women to transform themselves into art objects" as a method of accessing political possibility.<sup>39</sup> The examples in which the black performer strategically positions her body within objecthood are numerous. One thinks of Grace Jones' various inhabitations of inhuman beauty, in

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<sup>38</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Uri McMillan. "Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms: Objecthood, Avatars, and the Limits of the Human." Edited by José Esteban Muñoz. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 1 (June 2015): 209-47. Accessed March 7, 2016. JSTOR.

collaboration with photographer Jean-Paul Goude, whose own racist imperatives soak the photo. *The Black Book* is full of its own exemplars: for instance, the images in which the models pose against or in relation to other objects. The memorable photograph that shows the black backdrop peeling away at an angle next to Leigh Lee, or the numerous images in which Phillip Prioleau and Bob Love pose atop pedestals. They also appear where the model poses within a frame articulated within the image, such as the square and circular windows that surround Thomas, approximating a rationalistic imagination of the body in relation to geometric shapes. Here, the model's body is placed in an analogical relationship to the object. Where flowers—the artist's favored leitmotif—come into the mix, this is made even clearer. Mapplethorpe himself once said, "...when I've exhibited pictures...I've tried to juxtapose a flower, then a picture of a cock, then a portrait, so that you could see they were all the same."<sup>40</sup>

Performing objecthood, or perhaps posing within it, allows one to read the performance of the pose as a critical subtext that undoes the image's operating logic, a sleeper cell waiting to unravel the many imperatives that structure the black body as a glimmer in the White gaze. The notion of these photographs as art objects is maintained, preserving the aesthetic engagement with the model's beauty on the table. In my understanding, what posing within objecthood problematizes is accepted understandings of *whom* these images are for; in other words, it may permit a re-understanding of *The Black Book's* audience. Kobena Mercer productively suggested the question of readership in his 1991 re-evaluation of Mapplethorpe's practice, "Looking for Trouble":

When a friend lent me his copy of the book it circulated between us as an illicit and highly

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<sup>40</sup> Yingling, "How the Eye Is Caste," 16.

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 dimensions 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 artist...In other words, we were stuck in an intransitive 'structure of feeling'...<sup>41</sup>

Mercer's anecdote about the libidinally charged circulation of the text among a group of queer, black readers reminds us that the book's material, sensuous physical reality comes into contact with readers, who derive from it varying degrees of pleasure and displeasure. Additionally, Mercer's comment about being trapped within a "structure of feeling" indicates a very specific relationship to a text in which black beauty is articulated through historically-sensitive objectification. I understand the structure that entraps a black queer reader as the dominant erotic, affective and aesthetic logic of *The Black Book* itself. Perhaps being "caught out in a liminal experience of textual ambivalence" is a product of playing by the author's rules, even in his death.<sup>42</sup> The suggestion here is not that the ambivalence that these models' prior interlocutors experienced was their own fault. As the prior historiographical considerations demonstrate, the moment in which the book was published and consumed may have demanded a direct engagement with Mapplethorpe, who was the topic of that day. Twenty years after the publication of *The Black Book*, different possibilities emerge. What would it mean to read outside of this structure of feeling, to construct alternate guidelines for a black and queer engagement?

### III : Towards a Re-Reading of *The Black Book*

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<sup>41</sup> Mercer, "Looking for Trouble," 186.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

If the dominant way of engaging *The Black Book* locks the black queer reader in a narrow affective and political landscape, an alternate disposition in relation to the text may not necessarily provide more freedom. At the same time that they represent a cornerstone of *The Black Book*'s images, the pose and its performance are nevertheless marginalized. The designs of the cover for both editions (1986 and 2010) bear Mapplethorpe's name even before the title of the text. The language used to describe the work cast the text as a work solely by Mapplethorpe. There are broader structures at play, which maintain the size of Mapplethorpe's shadow over alternate attempts at reading. Institutional support and cultural memory continually reassert his artistic persona, such as in the exhibitions in the United States that will be mounted in 2016. When one attempts to write or read Mapplethorpe out of the image, the performance of the pose is the rich leftover.

A praxis for reading based on performative traces is a dramatically narrow one, perhaps even more limited than the structure of feeling one finds in *The Black Book* at first glance. In a certain sense, these are the necessary conditions in which these black queer performances must be read, given the archival silence suppressing the possibility of their entry into complementary rhetorics of authorship and biography. The urgency of the performative remnant comes into view when we are reminded of Mapplethorpe's statement about his models in *Vanity Fair*: "Most of the blacks don't have 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."<sup>43</sup> This makes clear the reality that *The Black Book* is the most widely accessible—and perhaps only—object testifying to the life and

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<sup>43</sup> Dominick Dunne. "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale." *Vanity Fair*, February 1989. Accessed March 10, 2016.

performance that these men present for our view. Relevant here is José Esteban Muñoz's claim in *Cruising Utopia* that "the gesture, and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics."<sup>44</sup>

In leaving its traces, the black body does indeed gesture towards an alternate understanding of remembrance, knowledge and politics. Writing of black nightclub performer Kevin Aviance, José Esteban Muñoz discusses queer dance as an inherently ephemeral practice. Aviance's campy, illusionistic gestures do not simply expire or vanish after they are performed.<sup>45</sup> This is because ephemerality "does not equal unmateriality."<sup>46</sup> The dance and the pose are alike in their aestheticization of the body in motion. There are a number of sequences of photographs in *The Black Book* that seem to conjure the pose's connection to dance, such as two photographs of Philip Prioleau arranged side by side that show him miming the discus thrower's movement. But, as shown in the previously discussed photograph of Leland Richard, the pose does not always enjoy the scope or scale of the full body in motion. It is more elusively located in Ron Sims' flexed feet or in Terrance Mason's turned head. Though the lives of the men within *The Black Book* are not accessible, those same men have left behind remnants of a performance, which, though "hard to catch," may be discernible for contemporary readers.<sup>47</sup>

*The Black Book* archives these radical performances for our view. But, twenty years after its original release, the process of encountering the remnants left behind is not as simple as opening

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<sup>44</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 81.

<sup>45</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

the book. Saidaya Hartman has eloquently summarized the problem: “If it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been? To envision a free state from this order of statements?”<sup>48</sup> Following Hartman, the scandal of racist objectification is itself not a politics or a praxis for reading; in some sense, given the marginality and suppression of the performances within the text, *The Black Book* demands that readers envision new ways of engaging it. This section will consider two of those notable methods for re-approaching the text: Glenn Ligon’s early 1990s installation work *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* and Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston* from 1989.

Reading *The Black Book* might be defined as the process of performing an archaeology or examination of the text’s rhetorical dynamics. This is a technique most clearly articulated in Glenn Ligon’s *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, a photographic installation executed between 1991 and 1993. The work includes all 91 of the photographs included in the text, hung on the wall in two regular rows in a gallery corner. Arranged between these two rows are 78 small rectangles of text, presenting varying commentary on the images by critics, writers and artists. The separation of the book into individual photographs is a deconstruction. Not only does this separation of individual pages reframe the physical experience of the text, but the insertion of quotes from varying sources unsettles Mapplethorpe’s position as the sole author of the text. This points to the paradox of Ligon’s titling. Though they are called marginalia, the comments remind the viewer that *The Black Book* is read as a condition of its existence. There is no *Black Book* without its

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<sup>48</sup> Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 7.



readers. More importantly, Ligon's reframing of the text suggests that the black body is *read* as a text and, moreover, constructed as one within *The Black Book*. In Ligon's intervention, the physical dismantling of *The Black Book* mirrors what reading, with a black queer import, might do: to dissect the rhetorical machine that would otherwise overwrite the performative traces across the pages of the text. As Huey Copeland's work on Ligon suggests, the artist works to visualize—through varying formal techniques—the generative fissures that may open up to black queer self-making. *Notes on the Margin* achieves this by making spatial room for this exploration of the text and its moments of rupture.

This productive dismantling emerges out of the unique characteristics of the photobook. The photobook has historically been an art object conceived around a particular argument, theme or subject matter. Rather than collections of random images, photobooks demonstrate “an intention and coherence of design, whether this refers to the agency of a photographer-auteur, an editor or an editorial team.”<sup>49</sup> The images—and sometimes text—work alongside one another in service of a discursive construction that occupies the physical form of a book. Further illuminating this point, Shamooin Zamir and Patrizia di Bello draw a useful analogy to Sergei Eisenstein's 1939 theorization of montage. Eisenstein wrote that the association of images within a photobook could come together to produce one whole, which he termed “an image of the theme itself.”<sup>50</sup>

The whole into which these photos coalesce, however, is not impenetrable. As *Notes on the Margin* demonstrates, a reading or analysis of the text's operating logic can begin to unearth

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<sup>49</sup> Patrizia di Bello and Shamooin Zamir. *The Photobook: From Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Sergei Eisenstein. "Word and Image." In *The Film Sense*, translated by Jay Leyda. New York: Meridian, 1957.

the discourse that its pages conceal. When the assumption of rhetorical construction is accepted, the photobook presents itself as an art object to be disassembled and reassembled. This may prove particularly useful for readerships outside the dominant imagination. Muñoz suggested a starting place for this type of reading in his text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, in which he reads in Mapplethorpe's photographs the potential for "disidentificatory pleasure."<sup>51</sup> Through this term, he advances an argument about the simultaneity of critique and pleasure: "the experience when consuming Mapplethorpe's images is...one that acknowledges what is disturbing about the familiar practices of black male objectification that Mapplethorpe participated in, while at the same time it acknowledges that this pleasure cannot easily be dismissed, although it is politically dangerous."<sup>52</sup>

In Muñoz's account disidentification arises from textual ambivalence, as well as the ambivalences of queer identity.<sup>53</sup> With Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer productively summed up this ambivalence as the moment when "we want to look, even if we cannot find the images we want to see."<sup>54</sup> As I understand it, disidentification is a practice for reading that sees ambivalence, not as a point of departure towards a politics, but as a conditions for politics in its own right. This

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<sup>51</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>52</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 71.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. "Like melancholia, disidentification is an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences. Mercer, Julien, and Jane Gaines have all explicated the ways in which the ambivalence that a spectator encounters when interfacing with these images is not only a racist exploitation of, but simultaneously a powerful validation of the black male body."

<sup>54</sup> Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien. "Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race: True Confessions (with Isaac Julien)." In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, 132 (London: Routledge, 1994).

engagement with ambivalence may be limited, in its inability to reformulate the structure of feeling that produces the political risk in question. Muñoz argues that, under disidentification, “the object that is desired is reformatted so that dignity and grace are not eclipsed by racist exploitation.”<sup>55</sup> However, implied divide between racist exploitation and the aesthetic presentation of beauty or grace is not a clean cut; at times, it may even be that the two are co-constitutive. This means that Mapplethorpe’s hand in the reproduction of beauty through objectification is silently maintained, as the organizing logic that structures this field of ambivalence. The queer of color reader’s stake in this text is thus positioned on the margins.

In Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, the experience of reading *The Black Book* is visualized in physical terms, when a white gay man walks from a smoky room where images from the text are projected on hanging screens. He is shown walking through diaphanous panels, caressing some of them as he passes by. His movements throughout the space of text are pleasant, easy; not more than a few seconds is spent glancing at each photograph, in much the same way that one might drift through a museum. A jump cut then leads to a series of pans across the images, mimicking the same slow movements that the man undertakes in the first part of the sequence. Here, the man’s body is absented, but his movement through the text, as played out through the cinematography, is preserved. However, as the man’s mastery of the text is literalized in spatial terms, the spoken soundtrack of a black man’s voice is the sole auditory component of the sequence. The content is this soundtrack accents the misrecognitions and dehumanizations of black gay men within white gay sexual fantasy. Interestingly, the speaker is a black man, Carver,

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<sup>55</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 72.

speaking about his brother.

He speaks good damn English to me. I'm his brother, Carver. He doesn't speak that 'dis' and 'dat' bull I've seen quoted. Every word he speaks rings clear in my head. I don't suppose you ever hear him clearly. You're always busy seeking other things of him. His name isn't important; it would be coincidence if he had a name, a face, a mind...<sup>56</sup>

This spoken script highlights a number of conflicts that would be useful in probing *The Black Book's* display of the performance of the pose, such the inability to hear the black man clearly because another imperative declares itself more loudly. The content of the script itself, though rich, will be bracketed. Instead, what is most interesting is the soundtrack's instantiation of an alternate reading of *The Black Book*. At the same time that the soundtrack conjures a set of social interactions external to the text, it nevertheless indicts the white man who walks between its hanging projected pages and therefore is also about the text itself. Moreover, the choice of a soundtrack to introduce this voice may serve as a way to bear testimony to this alternate reading. The body of the speaker is absented and, thus, marginalized visually. Nevertheless, the audio soundtrack activates within the text's images oppositional subtexts about the models' "dignity and grace" (Muñoz's terms), pointing to the vast complexity of the men's lives not legible when *The Black Book* is read solely as a series equations of the black body with beautiful objects. In this sense, it is as if *Looking for Langston's* treatment of these Mapplethorpe photographs points to a reorganization of whom the book is for and who lays claim to its imagery. Beyond a disidentification, *Looking for Langston* suggests a re-identification of the text's constituent audience.

As Muñoz argues, *Looking for Langston* and *The Black Book* are additionally texts of

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<sup>56</sup> *Looking for Langston*. Directed by Isaac Julien (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1989). DVD.

mourning. In the same way that *Looking for Langston* calls viewers to mourn Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and others, *The Black Book* calls us to mourn the various men within its pages. In agreement with Muñoz, one cannot read *The Black Book* without being reminded of AIDS, its traumas, and its particular impact on communities of black men. However, the mourning that suffuses *The Black Book* does not necessarily reassert that these performances are mortified, or even completely located on the side of the past, to revisit an earlier argument. As Muñoz argues, there is no “teleological end” to mourning.<sup>57</sup> Mourning therefore has a definitive impact in the moment called the present. If the possibility of the intimacy of past and present lives is accepted, *The Black Book*’s archive of performances presents itself as a living and emergent document for contemporary readers. Reading *The Black Book* might mirror the way that a narrator from *Looking for Langston* describes the sensuous encounter with idealized beauty, who is personified in corporeal form in the film: “He could feel Beauty’s body against his: hot, tense, and soft.”<sup>58</sup> The actor who personifies beauty in *Looking for Langston* could have easily been one of Mapplethorpe’s models. What arises from the description of his body as hot and soft is the assertion of his body’s living presence for the current moment. Perhaps to read is to account for the ephemeral, “hard to catch” encounter with this presence.

In both texts, beauty is a site of both mourning and celebration. For contemporary readers, both texts may also preview the possibility of mourning and celebrating in a moment where the black body is dramatically vulnerable to state and juridical violence. In *Looking for Langston*’s culminating scene, the somber, smoky parlor of mournful reflection turns into a nightclub, as Todd

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<sup>57</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> *Looking for Langston*.

Terry's house music hit "Can You Party" from 1988 mingles with the sound of two black voices musing poetically through Essex Hemphill's "The Brass Rail." The audio of the poem is derived from a performance of the poem featuring Hemphill and collaborator Wayson Jones. As the two voices mingle, the distinction between them becomes unintelligible, blurring the subjective boundaries of the two men. As Kaja Silverman writes, the poem's performance is "nothing less than the expropriation of the self," a transgression of the divide necessary for the maintenance of the sovereign "I."<sup>59</sup> As these boundaries fall, a black erotics becomes visible and audible. Black bodies relate to one another and to white bodies in this scene, and the beauty of this congregation is celebratory and euphoric, at the same time that it has pivoted from an orientation towards mourning. As this celebration reaches a high, the police and macho goons gather outside the doors of the parlor and force entry, making their way up the stairs to find that the partying men have all disappeared. The scene illuminates a politics of the fugitive that is quite similar to the experience of reading *The Black Book* for its subversive performances. In the shadow of the violence wrought by objectification and marginality, alternate modes of life, remembrance and beauty are able to thrive.

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<sup>59</sup> Kaja Silverman. *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 119.

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