



Sexuality Summer School: A Digital Prequel

PERFORMING MASCULINITIES AND THE BLACK BODY

by Topher Campbell



A wop bop a loo mop a good Goddamn!

Little Richard

Tamir Rice was shot dead in November 2014. He was 12 years old. Timothy Loemann a policeman shot him at near point blank range. Loeman claimed that

Rice, who was 12 years old, looked a lot older and was about to shoot him with his toy gun. The FBI investigation concluded:

“Officer Loehmann’s belief that Rice posed a threat of serious physical harm or death was objectively reasonable, as was his response to that perceived threat”. (1)

Tamir Rice was a 12 years old boy.

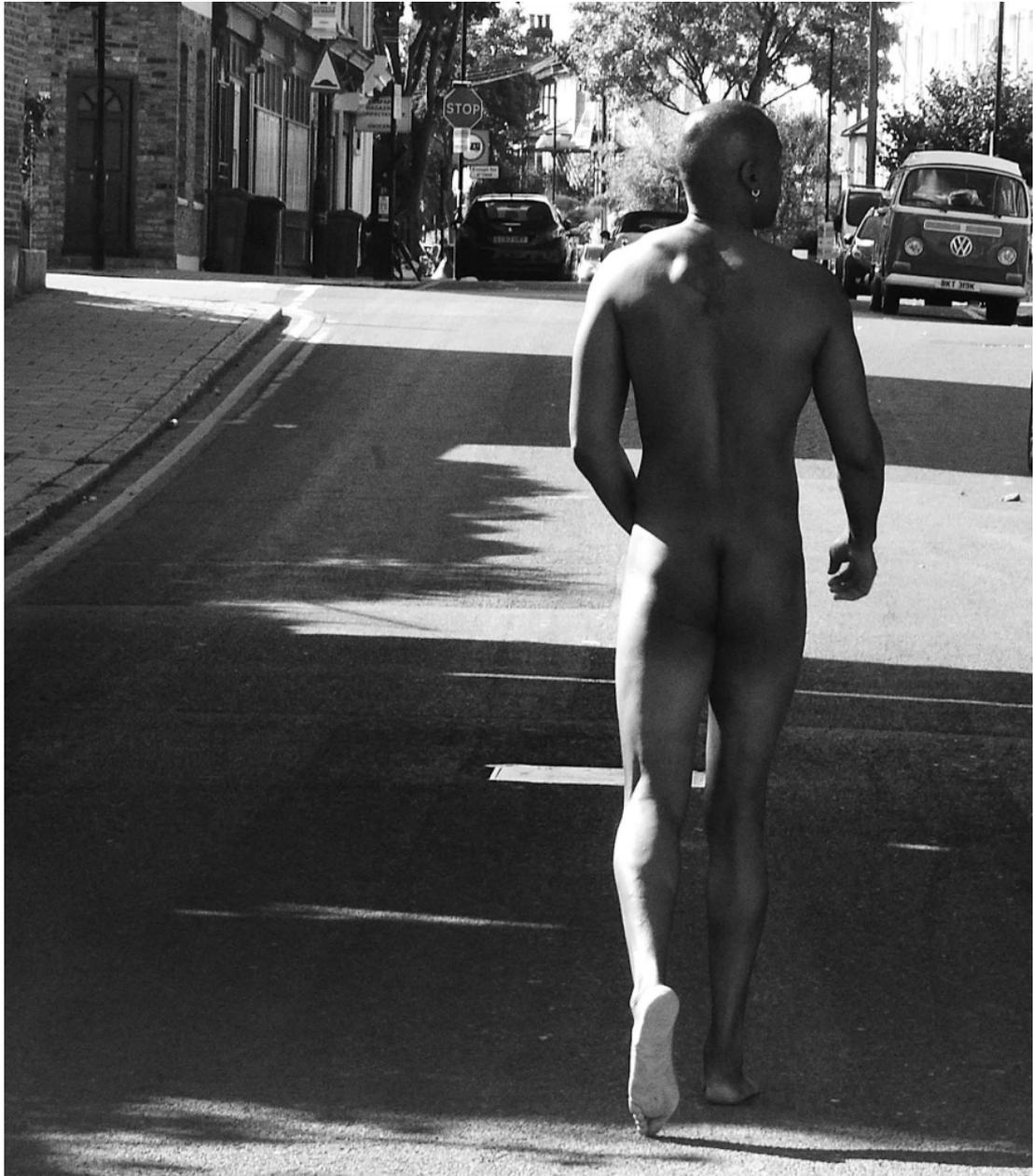
Being Black is a threat. Akai Gurley, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, Botham Jean, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor. Stephon Clark, Danny Ray Thomas, Carnell Snell Jr, Keith Lamont Scott, Terrance Crutcher, Paul O’ Neal, Joseph Mann, Alton Stirling, Christian Taylor, Samuel Debose, Freddie Grey, Laquan Donald, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, Ricardo Diaz-Zeferino, Philando Castile. Shot dead by police in the USA.

I couldn’t take it anymore. In the years preceding and following Tamir’s murder Black men and women in the United States had been murdered by police, recorded on camera phones and then been let off scott-free. Sandra Bland, hanged herself in police station after a brutal arrest, there were no convictions; Treyvon Martin was executed by George Zimmerman, a vigilante who walked free. Treyvon’s murder is echoed horribly by the death of Ahmed Aubrey this year. This May; again killed by vigilantes while jogging in his neighbourhood. Jogging while Black.

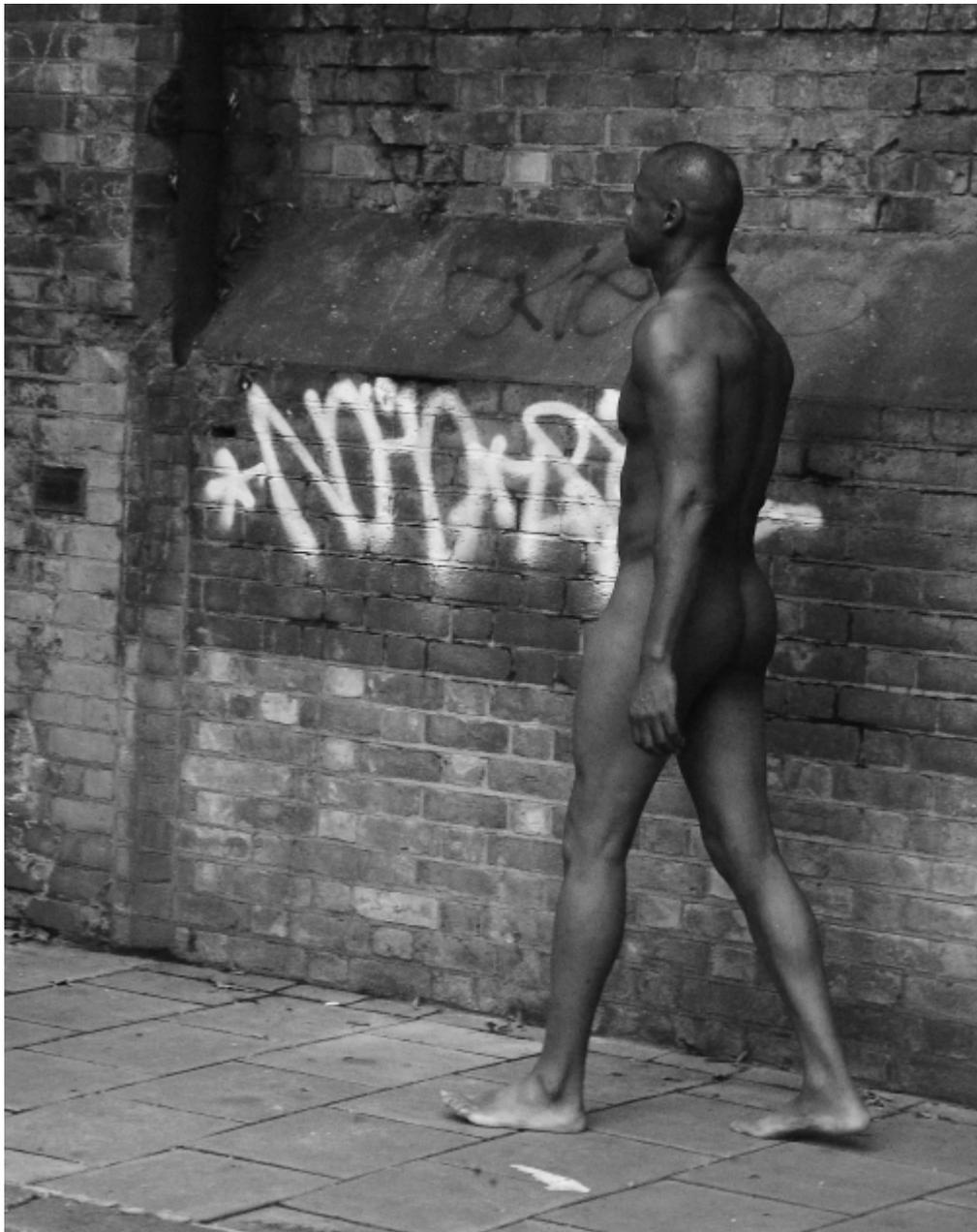
Meanwhile in the UK in 2011 Mark Duggan was shot dead because a policeman believed he had a gun in his hand. The gun was found 20ft away over nearby bushes amongst the grass, out of reach; apparently it was in two places at once. Verdict: Lawful Killing. And the country’s Black and working class youth burnt’ down Tottenham because they were sick and tired of aggressive overbearing policing of their neighbourhoods and the injustice of state oppression. In 2010 Jimmy Mubenga was on a British Airways flight being deported from Heathrow. He cried out “They’re killing me, They’re killing me” and “I can’t breathe”, cries that other passengers heard (2), as he was being held down by G4S security guards Terrence Hughes Colin Kaler and Stuart Tribelning. They applied extra special pressure, for your safety and security. Jimmy Mubenga collapsed and died. G4S the private security firm paid for by our taxes said,

“We believe that at all times we acted appropriately and in full compliance with the terms of our contract with UKBA and it should be noted that the Crown Prosecution Service found there was no evidence to bring criminal charges against G4S in this case” (3).

Just another dead nigger.



(c) Ajamu X



(c) Ajamu X

Trevor Smith was shot dead by a policeman in his bedroom in Birmingham in 2019, Edson De Costa a Black Brazilian died in London in 2017 after a policeman sprayed him with CS gas and applied a pressure point on his neck so that he would release the drugs he had swallowed. Verdict: Misadventure. Jermaine Baker was shot dead by a London policeman in 2015, during an attempt to free a prisoner. Jermaine was unarmed. Criminal charges against the officer were dropped. Rashan Charles was 20yrs old when he was held down by a policeman, in a newsagent, in Dalston, London. Verdict: Accidental Death.

Being Black is a threat. I could relate to each and every one of these deaths. They are the sharp end of every time I am racially profiled in a shop or questioned as to why I am in such and such a space (physical and virtual) or doing innocuous things like trying to get into a gay club. When I was young I was continually asked “Do you

know this is a gay club” and last year a bouncer came up to me and my two friends who are Black and felt the need to explain that the club we were entering was predominantly gay. Our presence was remarkable. Like many Black men I have been stopped and searched and pulled over while driving a nice car. I was pulled over so many times in my Jeep Cherokee, once by police at gunpoint on Victoria Embankment, because I “fit the description”, that I decided to sell it. The vulnerability and real fear of physical violence I experience when I hear police sirens continues to this day.

The cruelty and deliberate execution of these men and women enrage me but I am equally as deeply disturbed by the way they were treated afterwards. Michael Brown’s body was left uncovered in the Missouri heat for hours. Flies and other insects were seen openly crawling over him. The father and son vigilante’s, who murdered Ahmed Aubrey, kicked over his dead body to see if he was armed. Walter Scott was shot in the back. Michael T. Slager, the policeman who shot him, casually walked the 50 feet towards his dead body while officers who arrived later stripped him in broad daylight and moved his body around like it was the carcass of an animal. I couldn’t understand this lack of humanity. There is a direct line between the callous examination of Walter Scott and the prodding and poking of Black body’s sold as merchandise during the Atlantic slave trade. It was as if he was on the slave auction block after being stolen from the West African coast and transported, defined as not human, a thing; commodified and abused.

“The tallest was placed at the head of the row, then the next tallest, and so on in the order of their respective heights. He would make us four hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase”

Soloman Northop. Twelve Years a Slave

The idea that the Black body has less value is ingrained in Western thinking. It’s based on a history of brutal subjugation and long held beliefs that we have no right to power or agency and that when we do assert ourselves we are not believed in the same way. Black African migrants die continuously on their way to Lampedusa the southern most tip of Europe. In February 2020 EU Naval ships were expressly ordered to no longer rescue migrants in distress. (4) Hundreds of Black women, children and men will die at sea as a consequence. So what.

Black bodies are policed in all spaces, physical, economic, political, virtual and cultural. When I started out as theatre director in the 90's I was often disbelieved when I said I was directing a play at a theatre. Taxi drivers in Leicester or Manchester were convinced I was a DJ, while my colleagues thought I must have been an actor or dancer, I would get people asking me if I really was a director. My first agent questioned if I had directed the plays on my CV. A Black man trusted with authority is still a rare thing.

Once on a flight from Cape Town in 2011, as I sat in my first-class seat a white woman passing by exclaimed "You must be famous!" because it was unlikely to her that an ordinary Black man could have paid for their seat. My Black body was not in a space it was supposed to be.

"There are three or four Black people in my neighbourhood in Alpine. It's me Gary Sheffield, Mary J. Blige, Patrick Ewing, (Baseball) Hall of famer, (Basketball) hall of famer, greatest R&B singer of our time, decent comedian, Who lives next to me? Who's the white man next to me? He's a dentist. He didn't invent anything he's just a dentist."

Chris Rock

Chris Rock nailed it when he pointed out that a Black person has to be a magical Negro, an exceptional Black achiever, to be able to be seen on a par with a regular White person.



(c) Ajamu X

The idea of how magical and exceptional our bodies are persists. Saatjie, or Sarah Baartman, made famous by her derogatory name “The Hottentot Venus” was displayed in circuses and cages across England and France in the 1800’s. Her physicality was considered bizarre and fascinated the curiosity of buttoned up Georgians because it suggested a raw sexuality and sensuality out of their reach. Saatjie epitomised early mythologies about African people and culture which are still prevalent in notions of primitivism; that Black people are closer to animals, more resilient to pain, less worthy of agency and more sexually deprived; *because* it is in our genes. (5) Witness how Black women are often typified as aggressive, sexually available and hardwired for pain.

“There is strong evidence that pain is undertreated in black and Hispanic patients. The association between race and ethnicity and the use of epidural analgesia for labor is not well described.”

University of Rochester 2007 (6)

Saatjie's died in 1815 but her remains were displayed until 1974 and were not buried with respect until 2002. (7) I am not going to repeat what her physicality was here because I don't want to add to the idea that she was a freak because I have been made to feel like a freak too. I understand what it is like to perform my freakishness in feeling I have to live up to a masculinity I don't understand. At first I wondered why she let it happen to her but as I grew into manhood I discovered that freakishness can offer a space of strength and refuge even within the pain.

‘....I quickly discovered that my existence was the punchline of a dirty joke’

James Baldwin, Here be Dragons or Freaks and The American Ideal of Manhood

“BBC” hissed a plain white guy as I entered my first gay club at 17. I had no idea what he meant. I later learnt he was saying “Big Black Cock”. As an 80's teenager I saw this all over gay culture. In those days Gay Times Magazine was on the top shelf and included soft porn. I used to steal them from a newsagent near my school. Once I opened it to see a naked muscular Black man in chains described as a “Big Black Buck”. The power of that image has stayed with me. Its full-on association of Black masculinity with slavery and abuse as a sexual fantasy for white men somehow taught me that I have been given a place in the world and that for the rest of my life I would be forever trying to find my way out of and around it.

Some background: I grew from being a gangly, skinny 5 foot something 15 year old to a 6 foot 3 inches/190 centimetre well built man grown man. On the outside I am a conventional man and have been described as alpha male who's height privileges me with the assumption of authority and confidence. Nothing at first glance would suggest anything freakish about me. However my background makes things less straightforward. I was abandoned by my mother at 1 year old and to this day don't know who my father is. I didn't get to know my mother until I was 13. I grew up during a time when Black masculinity was defined by a hard-edged sensibility that meant one had to be either a thug like Tupac or NWA (claimed to be) or a sweet boy like early Will Smith.

There were no British examples of Black masculinity to emulate but those who were lauded included the lovable big buffoon Frank Bruno, the aggressive football star, “Fash the Bash” John Fashanu. At first known for his violence and physical power on the pitch and not his sexuality; or the sexualised athlete Linford Christie. When Linford won an Olympic Gold after dedicated hard work and training, he was reduced to ridicule because of the way his junk moved about in his lycra shorts: “Linford’s Lunchbox” became a national joke. The other major impactful fact about me is that I grew up in a very white middle-class environment and therefore had no fear of interacting with white people and felt most comfortable in “affluent” so-called sophisticated environments. This may not seem remarkable but Black bodies in white spaces are not supposed to assume the same status as white bodies. Legal and cultural frameworks built on moral/religious and social frameworks to enforce this include apartheid and Jim Crow. In the UK policing of Black bodies has been state sanctioned through historical policing powers like SUS, (8) to more subtle mechanisms of exclusion that prevent social mobility and opportunity for Black and Brown people from renting a home (9) to going out at night:

“They know me. They invited me down here. And now they don’t want to let me in because of my colour,” she yells.

“Don’t deny the fact that black people are poppin’. You play our music. Do I need to say any more?”.

Afua Hirsch, The Guardian (10).

My masculinity, my manhood, was never in question instead it was the combination of my race and class that disturbed the water wherever I went coupled with an acute feeling when I was young that a lot of people wanted to fuck me. I was also acutely shy throughout my 20’s and into my 30’s. This meant that I spoke as little as possible in social situations while in professional settings I learnt to be commanding decisive and clear. Speaking well was a skill I had and excelled at, leading people to say, in an often surprised way that I was “very articulate”. The same thing that was said about Obama like it was compliment but actually wasn’t because it left out: “for a Black man”.

However not speaking in some social situations meant people projected their ideas and sometimes fantasies on me and somehow over time I began to embody them. I worked out and became bigger. I invested in some ink including one on my neck to echo the “Thug Life” ideal and either out of boredom or fear I projected an aura of “don’t fuck with me”, particularly in gay clubs and to some extent on the streets. I invented an alter- ego, Tyrone. Tyrone was more sexually confident and capable than me. He was more interesting too because he was born in New York. He became easier to be when I was out partying or travelling because people didn’t

want my ordinary story, they preferred to believe the extraordinary. I decided to embody a fantasy with my bresticles, tall swagger and wide smile.

I enjoyed my male privilege and my Black privilege. I can identify with how Saartje may have internalised what people saw in her freakishness because I used my difference as a shield of power and refuge. I performed my masculinity and enjoyed the benefits it gave me. I was attractive and desired by both men and women.

There is a catch because I became a man like Chiron, trapped in an idea of myself created to give the illusion of control and confidence. In Moonlight, Chiron played by the impressively built Travante Rhodes, sits in the café where he visits his lover Kevin played by Andre Holland. As Chiron is about to eat he takes his stunning Gold grill out like a man relieving himself of his suit of armour. I felt that moment. My suit of armour was the fake heterosexual and white gay masculinity that I had adopted as my own. I wore it everyday and for so long I had no clue what to do without it.

The success of this masculinity in terms of my status, my sex life and my professional life was at the cost of actually knowing myself and of burying some of the hurt of abandonment of my childhood and the way in which I had constructed my Blackness through a mash-up of British and American ideas of race and class. I chose to ignore the constant sexual harassment and objectification I experienced clubbing and the casual racial profiling I experienced on the streets. However the executions of Black men and Women reminded me there is no hiding place for the Black Body and challenged my thinking about myself. I began to evolve.



(c) Ajamu X

I am deliberate and afraid of nothing.

Audre Lorde

Now I want no part of a masculinity that depends on the domination fear and subjugation of my Black body through legal, institutional and violent means and I want nothing to do with the kind of Black masculinity that kills Black and Latino transwomen and is forced to reject notions of sensitivity and vulnerability because ‘it ain’t Black’ and that we must be tough because it’s a racist world. Tough people stab each other in the streets for social dominance. Where is the respect in being dead for a minor infringement or disrespect? Performing the alpha-male is killing us. I also want nothing to do with a masculinity that defines me as a “dick on legs” for white male and female consumption. Instead I choose to explore the possibilities of my difference, which at first was something to be ashamed of, but is now a way of life.

Being a Queer Person of Colour means that what I love to do sexually and who I choose to love regardless of gender, by definition, sits outside ideas of respectability. It is more difficult to move through society freely because society is constructed around an economic and stratified tapestry of social structures held up

by a gender binary, which by definition, is exclusive and persists even within LGBTQ notions of identity. But move freely we must.

“We should endeavour to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerful variety”

Susan Lori Parkes

FETISH came about because I wanted to express more complex, nuanced and creative notions of my space in the world whilst also honouring the fallen. It’s a film that I willed into being as a place for me to reflect on all the different masculinities and femininities inside of me and to offer a vision of humanity and humanness; amongst all the violence and degradation.

Jar Bolsonaro, the President of Brazil, is dedicated to masacring Black men in Brazil based on the idea that we have no right to exist with dignity. (11) His deep association of Black men with criminality – believing that Black men are genetically criminal – gives him the excuse to harass and kill Black men including teenagers without fear. Instead of harnessing the huge intellectual and cultural power of its Black and white populations to confront the legacy of slavery and violence in Brazil, Bolsonaro chooses to embed and encourage violence against Black bodies. I answer this callousness with FETISH, a resurrection of the enslaved body in a dance of defiance and liberation fire inspired by voodoo and the ancient African dead of land and sea.

“Am I the Black Cunt you have been waiting for.”

Jean Michel Basquiat

Walking naked in the streets of New York was not the challenge people imagined because it was not my nakedness that mattered. I agree it is audacious but through my performance as FETISH (FETISH is a multi-dimensional Queer African god) I wanted to stun the viewer, to force a reaction so that the Black Queer Body can be seen as it is, unguarded vulnerable and powerful. FETISH imbues the energies of many lives. Lives he has absorbed along the way including those murdered by police, Marsh P Johnson the transwoman who led the stonewall riots, Tamir Rice, Toussaint L’Overture, the young Brixton insurgents of the 80’s, Beyonce “crazy in love”, The Mau Mau, Zulu Warriors, 18TH Century hustler, Frederick D’Auguste, Jamaican Maroons, My Mother; and multitudes. FETISH walks in my own footsteps and retraces my sense of reclaiming my space in cities and countries across the Globe.

The street is where our Black bodies are most policed in the West. I had discovered my Blackness on the street as I disturbed the air on pavements in Barcelona, Belgrade, Leeds, New York, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, Atlanta, Brighton, Copenhagen, Rome and on and on to many more in an expression of freedom and a lust-for-life that defied the restricted and policed movement of Black bodies in the past and present.



FETISH in his nakedness shows his sex. It is a flagrant and unashamed display of cock, but not like the semi-erect penis of the ‘Big Black Buck’ but instead something

else, a functioning organ, a human organ but one made to fill an entire screen as it defies the projection of fantasy by eyes in white Western minds.

FETISH also carries the elements of Air, Fire, Water, and Earth and is filled with Gold embodying the (plundered) riches of the African continent. His power comes from this source because before the colonial era, which is only the last 500 years, there are thousands of years of pre-Christian histories where sexualities were not defined by a small tribe in the ancient Middle East or the Bronze Age martyr that followed or the notion of a profit in a cave visited by angles that inspires massacres in the open markets and streets of African towns; but by a myriad of bisexual, pansexual and ambi-sexual gods who were not all powerful and were often humourous and playful and stupid.

FETISH is Meta-African being inhabiting the space in-between what you think you know and what you don't know, asking us to look at that Black boy on the street, that 12 year old boy, one more time and to answer the question "What do you see?"

"They used to laugh at me but I saw the future"

Lil Louis

The surface of FETISH'S exposed Brown body and the way he walks through space and time tell us he exists in another dimension like The Man Who Fell To Earth; or The 50ft Woman who "attacked" Los Angeles; most importantly, FETISH was likely transported from Saturn or another dimension with Sun Ra, the Afro-Futurist Prophet. For FETISH to show that he embodies brutalised notions of Black masculinity, and then offer a view of transcendence beyond it, he had to cast a spell with his Body like a voodoo priest, and bare his buttocks whilst also travelling between the past, present and future.

"The social revolution cannot only draw its present from the past but also from the future"

Karl Marx

The Man Who Fell To Earth is not interested in what people think of him or in the physical and metaphysical restrictions of time and place or the fascination of the world at his otherworldliness. He is only interested in gaining enough resources to complete his mission. The 50ft woman with huge breasts and thighs is on a mission to revenge the slight done to her because she has been classed as an unstable drunk and her husband has cheated on her. Her sexualised form is gigantised for all to see inspiring desire, fascination and fear. FETISH is an outcast not because of what he has done but because he has Black skin, nothing more: nothing less and like the

other's has to move differently through the world to obtain his goal: Liberation. Not a liberation from politics and doctrine but one towards the re-composition of his essential being at the molecular and sub atomic level dissolving and re-assembling in infinitesimal space and time.

“There are in every part of the world men who search.

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap in introducing invention into existence.

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it..’

Franz Fanon

There isn't really an end to this meditation. It is a continuum. It is not easy to relive these notions because each thought is a window into unresolved anger and pain side by side with the excitement and joy of being able to say these things out loud. I am remembering that having an ability to see has to be balanced with the ability to just be.

“Black is and Black aint”

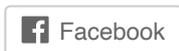
Ralph Ellison

Every exit into the street or venture into the world is a performance and each performance has its anxiety and thrill. At the moment I enjoy painting my nails and playing with subtle subversive ways of altering my conventional masculine appearance. Ultimately though I am still fascinated and inspired by my Black Body as it enters the beginning cycle of ageing and once again shifts the parameters of my masculinity in ways I have yet to experience.



Monochrome photos by AJAMU X

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