# Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic

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A revolution happened in feminist discourse when race was included as a category of analysis informing gender identity. As a consequence, feminist visions of the body politic were expanded. Racist assumptions about African-Americans that had always been accepted were challenged. An overall critique of sexist and racist standpoints in various disciplines created necessary interventions and change. As the feminist movement progressed, discussions of the body were highlighted, and the focus on the "politics of the body were centralized." Yet, as Susan Bordo emphasizes in her introduction to *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* the groundbreaking role feminism played "in developing a 'political' understanding of body practice is rarely acknowledged."[1] Calling attention to ways in which contemporary scholars engage a historical understanding of body politics, Bordo stresses that there is a tendency to move from Marx to Foucault in a manner that erases "the intellectual role played by the social movements of the sixties (both black power and women's liberation) in awakening consciousness of the body as 'an instrument of power.'"[2] Inspired by the critical thinking of black females engaged in the feminist movement, the revolutionary interventions created in feminist theory begin with the call to reassess the body in relation to the question of race.

The black body has always received attention within the framework of white supremacy, as racist/sexist iconography has been deployed to perpetuate notions of innate biological inferiority. Against this cultural backdrop, every movement for black liberation in this society, whether reformist or radical, has had to formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of the body to effectively resist white supremacy. In reformist agendas, that discourse invariably took the form of repression and erasure. If black men were seen as beasts, as rapists, as bodies out of control, reformist movements for racial uplift countered these stereotypes by revering the refined, restrained, desexualized black male body. If black women were depicted as sexual

1. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 16.

2. Ibid.

savages, hot pussies on the lookout for ready prey, then these stereotypes were countered by images of virtuous repressed black ladyhood. Radical militant resistance to white supremacy, typified by the sixties and seventies black power movements, called out of the shadow of repression the black male body, claiming it as a site of hypermasculine power, agency, and sexual potency. That celebration was combined with a critique of white racist stereotypes. Black male writers and/or activists, from Eldridge Cleaver to Amiri Baraka, were talking through the body.

The focus on the black body was extended and rendered more complex as black female engagement in revolutionary feminist thinking led to an interrogation of sexism both in regard to ways white racist aesthetics subjugated and colonized the black body and the ways in which the segregated spheres of black life sanctioned black male domination, subjugation, and exploitation of black females. The critical work of individual black women writing feminist theory broke new ground by constructing an intellectual framework for critical discussions of that body from a standpoint which considered race, gender, and class. Much of this work emerged from critical thinkers who were both black and gay (Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Hilton Als, Marlon Riggs, to name just a few). Feminist and/or queer theory established a broader context for discussions of black body politics.

Ironically, psychoanalysis as the established academic location that most engages a discourse of the body was one of the few disciplines where white critical thinkers were most unwilling to reassess their work in light of contemporary interrogations of racist biases in the development of specific epistemological frameworks. The rigid refusal to consider race as relevant on the part of feminist critics using psychoanalysis to reformulate critical thought in relation to gender served as a barrier. It made it impossible for a substantive body of diverse work to emerge which would expand our understanding of the body politic. Many white women engaged with feminist thinking had found a necessary link between feminist politics of the body and psychoanalytical discussions. Individual black

women doing feminist theory often found it difficult to constructively use psychoanalytical frameworks to discuss blackness because we felt work could not be done effectively without an initial interrogation or deconstruction of the ways in which racial and/or racist biases have informed psychoanalytic thinking, scholarship, and the academic field as well as the realm of clinical practice, in ways that devalue and exclude race. Despite these barriers, courageous individual critical thinkers are increasingly using psychoanalysis in discussions of race. It remains abundantly clear that it is useful for black critical thinkers (and our allies in struggle) to engage feminist theory and psychoanalysis as ways of knowing that broaden and illuminate our understanding of black subjectivity—of the black body.

From my years of undergraduate study to the present day, sustaining an interest in psychoanalysis has required reimagining foundations and inventing strategies of inclusion which make a space for thinking about racial identity. As a young student studying the work of Norman O. Brown, I was profoundly moved by his insistence, in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, that the purpose of psychoanalysis was "to return our souls to our bodies, to return ourselves to ourselves, and thus to overcome the human state of self-alienation."[3] Both then and now, I continue to think about the meaning of healing the split between mind and body in relationship to black identity, living in a culture where racist colonization has deemed black folks more body than mind. Such thinking lies at the core of all the stereotypes of blackness (many of which are embraced by black people) which suggest we are "naturally, inherently" more in touch with our bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society. The absence of critical frameworks that look at the convergence of racism and sexism creates serious theoretical gaps in any understanding of our collective body politic in this society. Without such a framework, we cannot examine systems of domination which privilege the black body rather than deny its carnality, only to exploit that embodiment in ways that

3. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 158.

create a modality of dehumanization and estrangement that differs from the one Brown refers to when he speaks about the flight from our bodies. Brown did not have black bodies in mind when he asserted that "the dehumanization of man is his alienation of his own body."[4] For black bodies, the fear has not been losing touch with our carnality and physicality, but how to be in touch with our bodies in a way that is liberatory, that does not confine us to racist/sexist paradigms of subjugated embodiment.

4. Ibid.

Acknowledging the primacy of race in relation to feminist and psychoanalytical thinking about body politics is a critical standpoint that has consistently led me to focus on the black male body. When I first began to study feminist theory, I was always puzzled by the scholarship around "women and nature," which would talk in universalizing generalizations about patriarchy equating the female being with the body and the male with the mind, because I was so acutely conscious of the way in which black males have always been seen as more body than mind. Full recognition of this difference would disrupt the neat binary gender polarities much feminist and psychoanalytical theory embraced. For the black male body to receive substantive critical attention within psychoanalytic discussions, a distinction must be made between conventional ways of seeing the male body and the way racism disrupts and alters that understanding—the way it informs notions of identification, desire, fantasy.

Calling for such a disruption, Kobena Mercer, in "Fear of a Black Penis," shares this crucial insight: "Psychoanalytic concepts now float freely in debates on cultural politics, but there is still a stubborn resistance to the recognition of unconscious phantasy as a structuring principle of our social, emotional, and political life....It is in the domain of race, whose violent and sexy phantasia haunts America daily, that our need for an understanding of the psychic reality of phantasy, and its effect in the body politic, is greatest."[5] Any liberatory visual aesthetics of the black male body must engage a body politics that critically addresses the way in which racist/sexist iconography, refigured within the framework of contemporary fascination

5. Kobena Mercer, "Fear of a Black Penis," *Artforum*, 32 (April 1994), p. 122.

with the "other," continues to be the dominant backdrop framing the way images are created and talked about.

Within neo-colonial white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the black male body continues to be perceived as the embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion. Psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of the black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization of that threat that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure. It has taken contemporary commodification of blackness to teach the world that this perceived threat, whether real or symbolic, can be diffused by a process of fetishization that renders the black masculine "menace" feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification. Current patriarchal "feminization" of the black male body is a process that takes place primarily in an aesthetic realm where the image produced has altered ways of seeing. In *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography*, Melody Davis explains the term feminization this way: "specularized, men will lose their potency and force....they will be subject as are women to conditions, like pregnancy, beyond their control....they will become the sign for exchange value, and, as is the custom for women, be mere objects, voids for the gaze."[6]

6. Melody D. Davis, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 67.

The equation of black men with body, nature, the feminine appears in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century white male abolitionists. In a celebrated 1863 speech before the American Anti-Slavery Convention, white abolitionist Theodore Tilton urged masculine white males to let go the fear of their black counterparts: "In all those intellectual activities which take a strange quickening from the moral faculties—processes which we call instincts, or intuitions—the negro is superior to the white man—equal to the white woman. The negro race is the feminine race of the world...."[7] After slavery ended, black men were constructed as feminine by white supremacist rhetoric that insisted on depicting the black male as symbolically castrated, a female eunuch.

7. Theodore Tilton, *The Negro: A Speech by Theodore Tilton* (New York Anglo-African Office, 1863), p. 12.

In resistance to this construction, black males cultivated and embraced the hypermasculine image. Richard Mohr's

contemporary analysis of white gay male fascination with projecting this same image can be easily applied to black males (straight or gay) who felt the need to counter theories of emasculation and mutilation by projecting the hypermasculine muscular body intact. In *Gay Ideas*, Mohr reminds us that "under the burden of inherited sexual typographies, liberation is found in a working through of past oppression, a working through in which the constituents of oppression become morally diffused by being incorporated into and transformed in the self-creation of an oppressed minority's development of a positive ideology of and for itself."[8] Historically, visual representations of the hypermasculine black male were seen mostly in photographs of sports figures. Two individuals who personified the use of the hypermasculine image as a means of resisting racism are Jack Johnson and Joe Louis. Fiercely handsome, these two black males, through their rebellious masculinity, symbolized for black people of their generation, and black men in particular, an assertion of militant resistance to racial apartheid.

8. Richard Mohr, *Gay Ideas* (New York: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 172.

**Jack Johnson, 1907**

**Joe Louis, 1935**

Contemporary African-American painter Emma Amos worked with the image of Joe Louis to chart a cultural genealogy of black resistance in a five-part piece, *A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave*. In this huge painted plate, Joe Louis stands between Zora Neale Hurston and Miles Amos, the artist's

father. He is one of the mighty forces uplifting the race. Amos used the full frontal, solitary image of Louis in a silk collograph piece titled *Joe Louis*, painted with one color, a dark shade of brown. Dressed in boxing shorts, wearing his robe, hat on his head, hands in pockets, he is the ultimate image of black male "cool." His cool pose conveys the feeling that resistance comes "natural" to him. For black males of his generation, Joe Louis was the embodiment of colonized black masculinity asserting radical subjectivity. Though sexualized and eroticized by women and men of all races, Johnson, Louis, and the many black sports figures who followed in their wake made their bodies political symbols. That legacy extended into the sixties, when black male athletes in all sports defiantly opposed white supremacy.

Conservative change in this politicized visual representation of the black male body begins to occur in the late seventies with the commodification of blackness, particularly the use of the black male body, mainly that of sports figures, in television commercials to sell products. When that use of the black male body converges with the overall change in cultural ways of seeing maleness that condone the "feminization" of male bodies to sell products, the image no longer directly challenges or subverts. Ironically, this cultural change was generated in part by feminist critique, the men's movement, and gay liberation. Appropriated by market forces, the subversive potential of the displayed male body is countered. This has been especially the case for black male bodies whose radical political agency is often diffused by a process of commodification that strips those bodies of dignity. The bodies of Johnson and Louis were commodified, yet that process was one that exploited and sensationalized political issues like racial separatism and economic inequality. Rather than oppose those forms of commodification that reinvent the black male body in ways that subordinate and subjugate, today's black male athlete "submits" to any objectified use of his person that brings huge monetary reward. Black male capitulation to a neocolonial white supremacist patriarchal commodification signals the loss of political agency, the absence of radical politics.

**Michael Jordan, 1990**

The quintessential symbol of the fetishized eroticized black male body as object of spectacle is the image of Michael Jordan. Repudiating identification with a politicized notion of blackness, Jordan, though quite wealthy from his sports career, lends his image to the money-making schemes of the mainstream culture no matter how silly, ridiculous, or even monstrous that image is made to appear. In the commercials where he speaks to the cartoon figure of Bugs Bunny as though they are equals—peers—his elegance and grace of presence is ridiculed and mocked by a visual aesthetics which suggests that his body makes him larger than life, a fantasy character. This visual image, though presented as playful and comic, in fact dehumanizes. Even though I agree with cultural critic Michael Dyson's insistence that Jordan's image has subversive potential, that "his big black body—graceful and powerful, elegant and dark—symbolizes the possibilities of other black bodies to remain safe long enough to survive within the limited but significant sphere of sport,"[9] outside that realm, Jordan lends his image to the service of a visual aesthetics that reaffirms the repressive racialized body politics of the dominant society.

9. Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike?" in *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 74.

As a ruling-class person in this society, Jordan stands in total contrast to the historical black sports figures, who were fighting for equal pay and equal work. Even though many of those black male bodies were easily seduced by monetary reward, they did not have the luxury of presenting an image of political neutrality, which Jordan tries to do. However, he is not politically neutral. His politics are rooted in both imperialist and capitalist notions of power and conquest. The place where he articulates that location is not in the realm of sports but in the new picture books that lay out his black male body for public display. In *Rare Air: Michael on Michael,* Jordan proudly boasts: "I've never been a vocal kind of guy. My leadership, in practice or games, has always come from the way I approach the game and the way I play once I step onto

the court....If you don't bring your level up to compete with me then I'm going to completely dominate you, and I'm going to talk trash to you and about you while I'm dominating."[10] Couched between sexualized images of his black male body, these statements act to eroticize both the world of homosocial male bonding that sex-segregated sports affirms and the realm of conquest. These "action" statements work to counter the passive objectification of Jordan's black male body seen in the image. In her introduction to *The Male Nude*, Melody Davis talks about the way in which the female body, especially the nude, is usually portrayed as passive, reminding us that Freud talked about the terror of passivity in men, the fear that it signified castration. Davis suggests that "the exposed male body provides a field for sadomasochistic action so that the male body, if not directly active, is the 'embodiment' of the action of other men, or of God, a superhuman male."[11] In *Rare Air* (the very title suggesting that he is like rare meat, raw, a freak of nature), Jordan submits to a process of visual objectification that renders his black male body passive in ways that feminize it. He must counter that violation with the hypermasculine in words that convey and assert action and domination; verbal humiliation as well as physical prowess is used to insist that on the court he dominates. Symbolically then, in the language of black masculinist vernacular, he is the dick fucking the other dude over, turning him into a pussy. Central in this metaphor is both the trope of female domination and homophobia.

10. Michael Jordan, *Rare Air: Michael on Michael* (San Francisco: Collins Publishers San Francisco, 1993), p. 13.

11. Davis, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography*, p. 11.

**Mike Tyson and Tony Tucker, 1987**

To counter the "soft" image created by subjugation via commodification, the black male body must refigure its hardness. For a hypermasculine black athlete like Mike Tyson, that refiguring must be played out both in the boxing arena and via the assertion of sexual dominance over the female, even if that means one must rape. To many sexist black male supporters of Tyson, he was merely being "fucked" by the dominant white male. They defended him against the charge of rape even if it meant they had to disregard the reality of his aggression and

devaluation of a black female body. The insistence on an assertion of "a dick thing" masculinity, both in real life and in the image, creates a structure of denial which allows black male bodies to deny the loss of agency via the process of patriarchal capitalist domination—and to see the arena of sexist domination of females and homophobic subjugation of gay males as the place where those losses can be recouped. Rather than critique and challenge patriarchy and heterosexism, these black male bodies play the game, reproduce the subjugated image.

**Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ken Moody*, 1983**

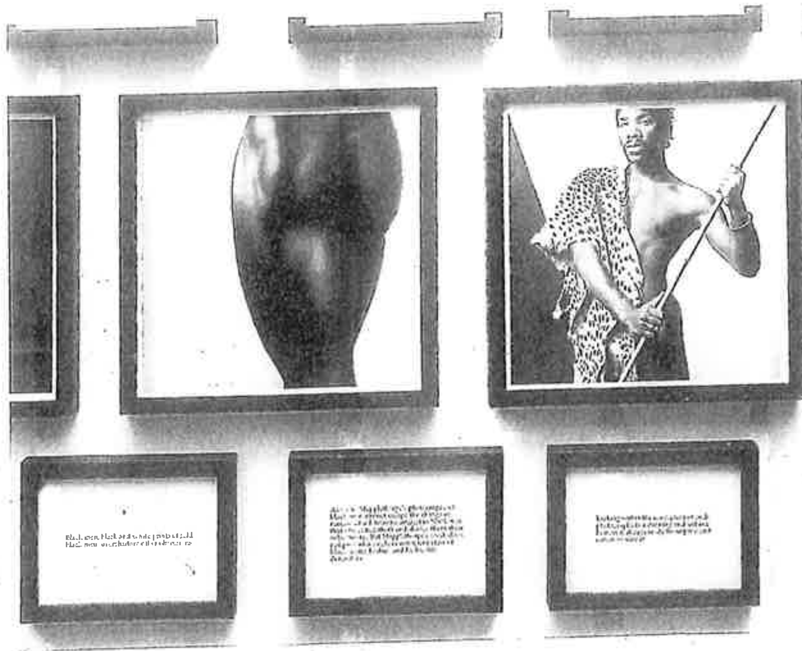
The commodification and fetishization of the black male body in popular culture, particularly in advertising, is mirrored in the art world. That mirroring was made most public by the controversy surrounding the photographs in Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*. Just as it is possible to find sites of opposition in the visual aesthetics of Michael Jordan's image, in some instances Mapplethorpe's images disrupt and challenge conventional ways of seeing. Subversive elements within any image or series of images do not necessarily counter the myriad ways those same images may reinscribe and perpetuate existing structures of racial and/or sexual domination. It is so obvious as to almost be unworthy of note, and certainly not of prolonged debate, that racist/sexist iconography of the black male body is reaffirmed and celebrated by much of Mapplethorpe's work and that of his predecessor and colleague, George Dureau. The danger embedded in the images these two artists have popularized lies not so much in the perpetuation of obvious racist stereotypes which they exploit and reify, but in the manner in which public response privileges this work: it subordinates all other image-making of the black male body by insisting that it reference and/or mirror this work; and, by continually foregrounding these images, it erases and excludes more compelling oppositional representations.

Melody Davis' *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* is a perfect example of this problem. Even though she critically trashes Mapplethorpe, aggressively calling attention to the way in which his images are racist—he "seldom fetishized whites in the purely objectifying manner he had toward blacks"[12]—her own work does not counter this tendency. By only publishing and talking about images of the black male body photographed by white males, she does not subvert the racist agenda of inclusion/exclusion, of domination and control. Framing her critique by juxtaposing Mapplethorpe's images of the black male body with the photographs of George Dureau maintains a colonizing schema wherein racially unaware whites determine who holds the more politically correct "rights" to the black male image. Although Davis chooses to insist in the critical text accompanying these images that there is a major difference in the standpoint reflected in the work of these two artists, that difference is simply not visible in the images. As Mapplethorpe's work, and similar work by other artists, is enshrined, receives ongoing attention and reward, this very success, and concomitant hierarchical privileging (particularly in critical writing) pressures photographers working with images of the black male body to position their images in relation to the work that everyone references. This becomes another colonizing process that recentralizes Mapplethorpe's work and maintains its prominence/dominance.

12. Ibid., p. 81.

Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #10*, 1988

Reaction can also engender oppositional representations. Certainly African-American photographer Lyle Ashton Harris deploys images that critique and counter Mapplethorpe's, as does Glenn Ligon's installation *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, which reappropriates



**Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991–93 (detail). Installation of framed book pages and text panels, dimensions variable. Collection of Emily Fisher Landau**

Mapplethorpe's series in order to critique, expose, and challenge. Ultimately, however, the visual hegemony of these non-progressive white male owned and operated images of the black male body, along with the historical racist/sexist iconography they mirror, can only be countered by the production and curatorial dissemination of a substantive body of oppositional representations from diverse locations. To break with the ruling hegemony that has a hold on images of the black male body, a revolutionary visual aesthetic must emerge that reappropriates, revises, and invents, that gives everyone something new to look at. That aesthetic is already visible in the work of visual artists such as Moneta Sleet, Emma Amos, Carrie Mae Weems, Lyle Ashton Harris, and a host of other image makers, known and unknown.

In order for this oppositional aesthetic to emerge, attention may need to shift away from the black male nude; the assumption that black males are more "authentically" situated to create visual interventions has to be challenged, and more progressive critical studies need to be undertaken, studies that are theoretical and historical and that foreground a variety of work. From the archives of history we will find works like Esther Bubley's photograph of two black men in conversation,

*Greyhound Bus Terminal, New York City, 1947*, and hear anew what that work reveals about black male subjectivity, the black male body. Fully clothed in suits and hats, the body parts that are most distinctive in this image are the face and hands. While one man looks alluringly casual but questioning, his gaze fixed on the other man's face, his companion's body is tense and controlled, the hand on his hip a gesture suggesting annoyance, that he may be "reading" his subject. To know the journey of the black male body this image charts requires a critical engagement beyond that of passive consumption. Similarly, the image of the black male in Carrie Mae Weems' photograph *What Are the Three Things You Can't Give a Black Person* cannot be understood or fully appreciated without some background knowledge of black male subjectivity, the history of working-class men, the "fields" in which they labor. Another Weems photo that challenges conventional ways of seeing black male bodies is titled *Jim, If You Choose....* It is accompanied by a text that reads: "Jim, if you choose to accept, the mission is to land on your own two feet." This image deconstructs homosocial bonding between white and black men, the received messages about white masculinity that come from white-dominated mass media. It calls for accountability and assertion of autonomous agency in the construction of self. Jim is positioned as contemplative—a thinker. Like the two black men in the Greyhound bus depot, photographed more than forty years earlier, he is not positioned to entertain, delight, or titillate us. We must dare to empathize and enter his world if we want to understand the nature of his subjectivity, his struggle.

**Carrie Mae Weems, *Jim, If You Choose to Accept, The Mission Is to Land on Your Own Two Feet*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 14 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches**

**Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied*, 1989**

Another image of the black male body that challenges is the artistic self-portrait of photographer/cinematographer Arthur Jafa: the whites of his eyes are positioned behind the camera, we see him shooting himself working, catching himself charting new visual journeys, speaking to the black male body that is himself. The photograph of Marlon Riggs on the set of *Tongues Untied* reframes and talks back to the Joe Louis collograph. Intellectual, academic, filmmaker, gay diva, yet which of these identities of Riggs does the image express, if any? Like Louis, Riggs wears a hat, a mock tie. Unlike Louis, whose gaze is masked, whose eyes look down, Marlon's eyes are wide open. His is a direct gaze sharing vulnerability, but also challenging, urging, tenderly taunting us to embrace this image, to give it long-denied recognition and love.

Oppositional representations of the black male body that do not perpetuate white supremacist capitalist patriarchy will not be highly visible unless we change the way we see and what we look for. More important than the race, gender, class, or sexual practice of the image maker is the perspective, the location from which we look and the political choices that inform what we hope those images will be and do. Lyle Ashton Harris has set an aesthetic agenda: "I see myself involved in a project of resuscitation—giving life back to the black male body." As that life is made more visible in images, as the diversity of perspectives emerges, the vision of radical black male subjects claiming their bodies will stand forever in resistance, calling us to contestation and interrogation, calling us all to release the black male body and let it live again.