

**“Black Oil on My Skin:” Black Male Nudes in  
the Photographs of Michael Chambers**

**Cassandra Leslie**

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## ABSTRACT

### “Black Oil on My Skin:” Black Male Nudes in the Photographs of Michael Chambers

Cassandra Leslie

The work of Canadian contemporary photographer Michael Chambers is used in this study as a lens through which the experiences and views of a black, male art producer can be examined in the construction of the black male body in art. The text draws on the primary source of Chambers’ black and white photographs, and the imagery constructed around black males from Europe and North America, which isolates the black body within particular stereotypes. A theory concerning the repetition of the “documentary body” is developed throughout the thesis whereby the black body continually functions as a symbol of violence, sexuality and strength in the visual and media arts. This thesis will examine Chambers’ efforts to undermine the current cultural dialogue within Western culture that maintains the documentary body by using the very tools and imagery employed to create and sustain that body. Three aspects of the documentary body—savagery, restraint, and violence—within the artist’s work are argued as intrinsic to the struggle to reassess and reconstruct the black documentary body within western visual culture.

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And lastly, but most certainly not least, I would like to thank the artist, Michael Chambers, for inspiring this effort. His work is at the beginning of its journey; and it is my hope that with the dialogue and efforts of writers, artists, historians and critics, both in and out of the black community, an interest in Canadian black artists and their production will encourage a greater appreciation for that unique aspect of our great mosaic.

For Mothsey

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## Introduction

In the early 1990's Canadian contemporary photographer Michael Chambers began producing a series of photographs on the human body that included male and female nudes of many different races, nationalities and situations. Born in Jamaica and residing in Canada, the development of a particular aesthetic that borrows not only from Western art and photographic styles but also African sculptural techniques that inform his use of light and dark in his photographs. His placement as a black male artist gives him a particular perspective into the systems of reception and distribution of the black body in Canadian art as both producer and subject. The depth and complexity of his concerns in these images stand out in his oeuvre as a significant body of work that is informed by the visual and technical prowess of the artist.

In Chapter 1, the work and influences of Michael Chambers are examined including his creative development as an artist and his continued efforts to communicate with others takes place through various outlets, of which photography is the most recent. His photographs demonstrate a decisive sense of a positive black male body image often considered rare in the Caribbean-Canadian community. In Chapter 2, the theme of the historical black body and its connection to the documentary body is introduced and explored, as it seemed necessary to buttress the assertions concerning Chambers' work with the historical conditions that formed the documentary body and its relationship with photography. The documentary body is a collection of descriptors employed by Europeans since first contact with previously unknown or undiscovered native peoples. These characterizations, still in use today, pre-existed the invention of photography and

reinforced the physical, factual data of the visual image, and cemented notions of the body as document within a photograph. Photography carried the power of irrefutable truth and, married with anthropology, further increased in value and legitimacy. The documentary body has many faces: as much as it is a receptacle of many different and differing aspects of the Other, it is also a point of departure, or a beginning, for comparison and change. Identifying this documentary body and its particular components may be a strategy to begin to dismantle the prevailing visual ideas that have been associated with the black male nude figure since the first photographs of natives in Africa. These visual ideas helped to position black males as objects on an inferior visual scale to whites, creating a challenge for all forms of visual representation. This is no more evident than in the captions and descriptions that often accompany images of black males in the words, “savage,” “brute,” “violent,” and “primitive.”

Chapter 3 looks at the documentary body and its allusions to savagery in many of the nude bodies in Chambers’ photographs. Nakedness often alludes to savagery and if the naked is unattractive, then the nude is the embodiment of beauty. The nude in effect is a “balanced, prosperous” and “confident body” essentially male and eternal; the naked is finite, frail and unavoidably human. For Sir Kenneth Clark, author of The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form the nude and the naked are two opposite poles defined by morality and self-possession.<sup>1</sup> To be naked is to be embarrassed and “deprived” of clothing. To this end, the documentary body can be read as naked, as it is a receptacle for constructions of physical, cultural and moral deprivation. The second half of Chapter 3 deals with the black male as sexual object in Chambers’ photographs. Compared to other photographers

of the black nude subject, Chambers creates more sensual views than the highly typified *Überphallus* that is the black male. Photographic images of the nude male continue to retain the primary function as “real” and “fact” regardless of the emphasis placed on the fictional qualities of these images.<sup>2</sup> Taboos concerning the representations of the nude male body that have been entrenched in societies where full nudity is rare, have led to cautious readings of the unclothed male body in many areas of everyday living, including religion. When explored, the nude male was deemed acceptable for public viewing in limited contexts only.<sup>3</sup> Chambers’ visualisation of the documentary body as restrained is examined in Chapter 4. The forced presence of black bodies in North America, the black body as owned object/possession historically connected to the Middle Passage and the subsequent violent treatment suffered by these bodies are manifest in certain physical objects, primarily devices of restraint. When pictured with, near or on the black body these tools of restraint transform the free individual into a possessed or owned object. This struggle is also examined in the urban landscape in Chambers’ photographs that juxtapose financial, political and social powers in the metropolitan setting. Chapter 4 also focuses on Chambers’ headless figures as part of the continued physical and psychological silencing of black males through violence enacted upon their bodies. As an element in what Moira Gatens has termed the imaginary landscape, black bodies in the highly subjective complex construction that is society in the twentieth century are arbitrary figures that exist in between ambivalences, neither fully excluded nor totally accepted into the landscape of static acceptable signifiers.<sup>4</sup> Chambers’ work and life as a Jamaican-Canadian are reflected in the many locations in which he places his models. His critique of the geographic restraints inscribed within the black body politic and his

resistance to the stereotype of “jungle” or tropical placement of black bodies in the visual arts is signalled by his use of the Canadian landscape in his photographs.

Chapter 5 locates the violence inflicted on black bodies within a fear of the unrestrained black body. As the circumstances of that unrestrained body include sex and desire, the violence inflicted upon each of the bodies pictured in Chambers’ photographs move past his inserted symbols of flowers, bulls-eyes, sack-cloth and noose. These objects are used as part of a guillotine that disconnects the black male’s body from his mind, the psychological and physiological effects of which forever transforms the black individual and alters his interaction with others. Chapter 6 looks at the reconstitution of the documentary body and how Chambers has re-worked some of the more stereotypical images of the black body and created new possibilities for their presentation and placement. Playing on ambivalence, Chambers creates situations in the photographs that the general western public would rather forget, either momentarily or completely. This insistence on imagery that is often forgotten is the photographer’s most consistent tool throughout his body of work from this period. The confrontation with memory and forgetting is directly challenged by our most effective tool in constructing and recollecting an event: the photograph.

The Conclusion will include a brief section on the economic factors that produce and control the images that Chambers creates. The definitive struggle of visible minorities, including blacks, to achieve inclusion in the middle and upper class of Western society is a central factor in the resistance of blacks to some of Chambers more

arresting imagery. It is a disapproval that accompanies many artists and exhibitions where the black body is pictured in any way other than the laundered, unblemished ideal. As artist, Chambers is clear in his intent to relate his own feelings and experiences in his photographs; as informant, Chambers reveals precise moments of collective naming and signification, most frequently for blacks embodied in historical images of enslavement. Each image possesses diverse narratives that depend on the reading of the viewer. The documentary body is similarly a multifaceted construction, many of whose attributes, both negative and positive, cannot be explored in this thesis. However, the three aspects that have informed the work of this photographer, the savagery, restraint and violation of the black body, will be discussed by way of specific examples of Chambers' work. These photographs will be pulled from Chambers' work produced between 1990 and 1997, a prolific period that saw the photographer shooting in at least four different countries, including Great Britain, the Caribbean, Canada and the United States, both in-studio and out of doors. Not all of Chambers works over the past ten years will be included in the discussion, nor will Chambers' works be discussed in terms of the development of the artist's oeuvre. Instead, a thematic approach that criticizes the presence of the documentary body in photography, as well as brief commentaries on television and film, will be punctuated by his striking and thought provoking images, and the disruption these photographs create in the message stream that informs and maintains stereotype.<sup>5</sup> The photographs examined in this thesis are the introduction paragraphs to a larger series of pictures and texts. The discussion in this text is an inevitably abbreviated treatment of the larger subject of race and representation. The works chosen are from the point of view of the author and the selection of the photographs is as much a commentary on the selective

power of institutional display as it is a validation of the problem of the black body politic. This thesis would not exist if these issues were not still relevant and popular within the power structure that recognises marginal texts that serve to continually re-enforce and re-position dominant culture.

#### Notes: Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark, The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 3, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Initially, after its introduction to the public, photographs of nudes were presented as studies for painters and sculptors more often than as the study of the figure through photography itself. This connection to fine art suggested that making photographs was in itself a form of art. Also of note: the photos that were taken for artistic use were predominantly female, while those for scientific use were predominantly male. Edward Lucie-Smith, Adam: The Male Figure in Art (Vancouver: Raincoast, 1994), 5.

<sup>3</sup> “After the Council of Trent decreed in 1563 that ‘all lascivious portrayals of unashamed beauty in sacred figures are hereby forbidden’, representations of the naked male all but disappeared.” Emmanuel Cooper, Fully Exposed: The Male Nude in Photography (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 9. Kenneth B. Clark discusses the “raw exercise of naked power” that is Christianity in The Negro American (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Moira Gatens, Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality (New York: Routledge Inc. 1996), iii.

<sup>5</sup> While recognizing and acknowledging the importance of the discussion of the black female body and the problematic intersection of race and sex in said bodies, the focus of this text will remain on the male black nude and not include the female, save in particular examples. For an insightful discussion concerning the production of the female black nude please see Charmaine Nelson, “The Coloured Nude”: Fetishization, Disguise and Dichotomy. (MA Thesis, Montréal: Concordia University, 1995). In it Nelson describes the intersection of race and gender that creates the fetishized object that is the black female nude. Clearly, there is a dichotomy between the inherent value of a black woman’s body and sexuality versus that of the white woman’s, such that within racialized museum practices the image of a nude white female was considered to be controversial when displayed, whereas its black counterpart was not.

## Chapter 1

### The Photographer, An Artist's Journey

Michael Chambers arrived in Canada at the age of sixteen in the late nineteen seventies. Settling in Toronto, Ontario, his career in art began as a painter whose influences included Sub-Saharan African sculpture of West Africa and its celebration of the body and sexuality. These interests led him to York University, where he studied for four years, attending classes that included Art History and African Art courses taught by Czech scholar Zdenka Vlafka. At this time painting and drawing became less interesting to Chambers, while photography, sometimes described as painting with light, was a more satisfying medium to express both his particular love of the body and experiment with its various shapes, textures and representations.<sup>1</sup> Drawing inspiration from both Canada and Jamaica, Chambers speaks of his work as not being solely about the human form, but about nature and the elements. Influenced by the use of the single light source in the photographs of Victor Skribnesky and the lines and forms of sculptor Henry Moore, Chambers uses position and lighting as his tools in rendering landscape with bodies, both male and female. In his work there is also a critique of, and resistance to the psychological, social and cultural negative constructions of the black male that have existed intact for hundreds of years. His earlier photographic efforts were more politically strident and less eloquent than his work beginning in the 1990s.

The Photographer: An Artist's Journey, a documentary film about Chambers' work during the 1990s, directed and produced by Anton Wagner in 1997, offers a rare

glimpse into the artist's journey and follows the photographer on shoots in Canada and Jamaica, and also features photographs taken in London, Paris and the United States.<sup>2</sup> In his native Jamaica, the photographer encountered difficulty with the conservative attitudes concerning the unclothed body; and the photographs of those bodies were often considered by some to be pornographic. During a shoot for part of An Artist's Journey, Chambers was confronted by the local police in Jamaica, who insisted that what he was doing was "sexual" and "pornographic" and that it "does not look right." This internalized reaction is fractured by the pseudo-pride in which the black community extols its members as the "masters of making love" and "always sweeter than white sugar."<sup>3</sup> In some of his work, Chambers is placed at both ends of a binary spectrum of "good" and "bad" imagery of blacks. Many considered Chambers' work to be problematic in seemingly presenting only examples of the stereotypes constructed around the black body.

One cannot help but feel he is pandering to stereotypes of Black sexuality, despite his comments to the contrary. We have the young strong Black stud and his female counterpart, the overtly sexual jungle bunny in attendance. These images have created controversy in both the Black and white communities, but the documentary does not fully address this opposing view, which makes the film appear fairly one sided. There is always the danger with Black artists that their vision speaks for a monolithic community. The fact that Black people are a Diaspora and are infinite in their variety is never adequately addressed.<sup>4</sup>

During a 2001 interview with the author, Chambers reflected on the reception of his work and the tendency for the public to focus on his photographs of black males, almost to the point of implying that they are his only subject matter. Chambers creates provocative and stirring images of whites, Asians, Latinos, and several other ethnic groups that make up the Metropolitan Toronto mosaic. His images of women (Figs. 1 and 2) are also controversial and problematic, pushing the envelope by revealing, and in some



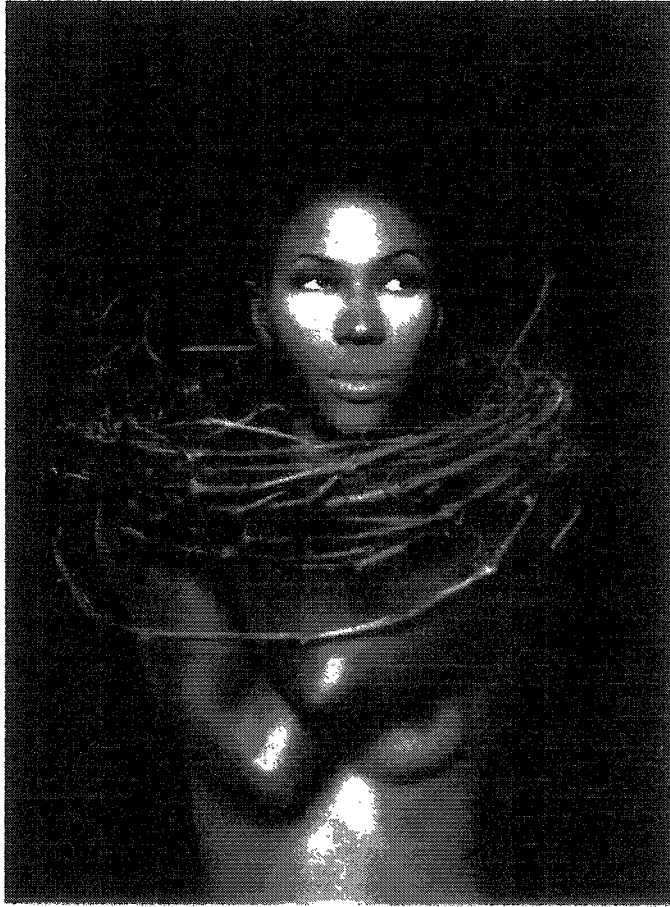


Fig. 1. Michael Chambers, *Nest*, 1995.

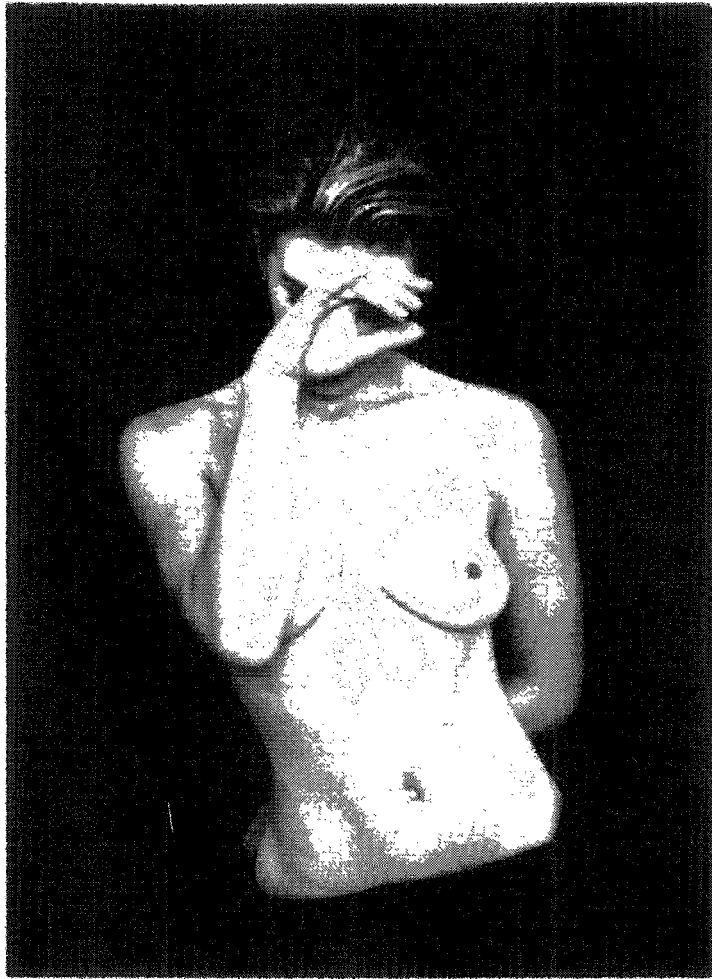


Fig 2. Michael Chambers, *Crane*, cir. 1995.

ways providing a subtle cover for, one black male's attitudes and opinions of women and his ideas concerning female beauty, scale and size. An untitled black and white photograph of c.1990 (Fig 3), now perhaps almost infamously referred to as The Watermelon photograph, created controversy and outrage when Chambers started exhibiting the piece in Toronto around 1991.<sup>5</sup> The photograph of the rear view of a black woman bent at the waist may signal a type of physical subjugation, and the precarious balancing of a large slice of fruit creates an imbalance in the conveyance of the message "sexualized black female object." Instead, to this author, the message becomes more of "kiss my ass" and refers more to the careful balancing black women have had to maintain between being the mammy, the jungle bunny, the voracious sex-goddess and the woman, the mother, the partner, the nurturer, and the person. However defiant the image seems and however it may be read, some feminist critics have complained that the image is an insult to all that black women have endured. Instead of a celebration, the image is seen as just another black woman bent over for the pleasure of a male viewer. The watermelon then acts almost like a type of restraint, since she must remain prone in order to balance the fruit commonly associated stereotypically with African-Americans in the southern United States.<sup>6</sup>

The selection of his models, his partners in creating the scenes, is a spontaneous process based on Chambers' impression of the people he meets, friends and acquaintances most of whom had never posed for a photograph or picture without clothing. Yet his selections often confuse and surprise the potential models themselves; a common concern is not weight or fitness of the body, but colour.

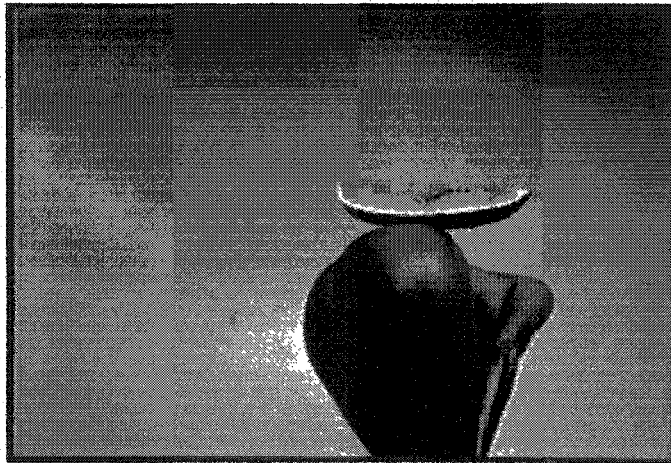


Fig. 3 Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1990.

Often, it is a situation where I can see what it is that they would look like; and how beautiful they would be. They don't believe they're beautiful. Dark, dark skin, big lips, extraordinary features...*black* features, and they do not believe they're *beautiful*? This particular situation...is disturbing. It angers and frustrates me, but most of all I find it terribly disturbing.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the adage, "Black is Beautiful," few blacks seem to truly believe it.<sup>8</sup> It is still difficult to convince most people of African descent that their bodies are viewable in terms of Western standards of beauty. But by what other standard do they measure themselves? What other standard is there? According to Chambers the gaze of the photographer should be a liberating one that reveals and exalts as much as it communicates. It is here that the question of aesthetics begins. Chambers disrupts the stereotype of subordination, instead revealing character, grace and style that allow the image to display beauty regardless of race. The subject/model can exist essentially without the photographer: the viewer has caught a moment, a brief look into the essence the subject's beauty. It is neither embellished nor avoidant of the imperfect or ill proportioned; scars are just as beautiful as smooth skin. With the exception of a few photographs taken in the early stages of his career, he has some personal connection with all of the people seen in his works. This levels the field of positioning to that of equals, with both photographer and subject participating in an exploration of images and light that have little or nothing to do with celebrity and status. The purpose of the photograph for Yousuf Karsh was to capture in his famous and powerful subjects "what made these faces, these people, prime examples of greatness."<sup>9</sup> It would seem that Chambers' purpose is the same: his work comments on black identity, sexual orientation, racism, self-expression, the human condition, and AIDS prevention.

Chambers' work in black in white has been a very specific choice: "There is a simplicity to the message, a clean, sharpness" that he prefers in the silver gelatin prints which are produced at a scale of 31 by 40 centimetres apiece (his gum bi-chromate prints are all approximately 75 by 50 centimetres). In a rare move for the artist, he recently began producing postcard sized greeting cards in the hopes of reaching the black urban audience of Toronto; "getting them to interact and react to my work in a direct way" since he understood that, in general, few blacks frequented the many small galleries of the Toronto metropolitan area.<sup>10</sup>

Chambers has exhibited in several different countries, including at the Las Chicas in Japan (1992), The International Center of Photography in Los Angeles (1991) and The Art Box Gallery in London (1997), as well as several galleries in and around Toronto, and New York. His photographs have recently been exhibited for the first time in Quebec and Nova Scotia as part of the Black Body exhibition curated by Pamela Edmonds. His more recent work of large-scale bi-chromate gum prints as well as the silver gelatin prints of his past works, have continued to garner high praise and enthusiastic reviews. Active in many areas of Toronto cultural life, Chambers has worked as creative director of the Asian magazine Dragun, and in 1990 produced the first black AIDS poster for the AIDS Committee of Toronto. His work is featured in Black Beauty, an international survey of photography published by Janssen Verlag and is the subject of the jazz recording "Michael, The Photographer" by David Williams and Neil Braithwaite.<sup>11</sup>

This thesis seeks to examine the photographs of this Canadian artist and the reversal of stereotype and symbol in his photographs of the black male nude body. Begun at around the same time as the release of Robert Mapplethorpe's Black Book in the United States, Chambers' images offer less sexual and more sensual views of the construction that is the "Black Male." Through his photographs, Chambers strives to communicate feelings, thoughts and experiences of the human form and spirit. The photographer actively contests the formulaic creation of stereotype and is "continually drawn to the concept of transformation, the flux between the interior and exterior: and most of all examining reality inherent not in the person or situation itself but in the tension between that person or situation..."<sup>12</sup> Images of the black male nude body in his photographs will be examined as part of the cultural landscape of North America, and also examined are the ways in which Chambers employs devices including parody and metaphor in order to displace the documentary body.

#### Notes: Chapter 1

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers recalls an event early in his artistic career (no date specified), upon his return from a trip, only to find that all of his canvases and painting equipment were gone from his apartment. Abruptly, as his very fluid personality was wont to do, he turned his full attention to photography. Michael Chambers, interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 13 December 2000.

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<sup>2</sup> Wagner also produced and directed Our Hiroshima featuring activist Setsuko Nakamura Thrlow concerning the role of the Canadian government in and the Canadian components of the atomic bombs that struck Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Anton Wagner, Our Hiroshima, Film (Anton Wagner Productions, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Van Peebles, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song. Film (1971). Anton Wagner, The Photographer: An Artist's Journey. Film: 43 min. (Anton Wagner Productions, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Palmer, "The Photographer: The Challenge Awaits You," Soul Magazine (March 15, 2000): 22.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, The Photographer, (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> In photographic terms, dark skin is appealing, as the darkness of the skin achieves at times more texture and contrast in particular lighting than lighter skin. The addition of pigment onto the skin, such as black oil or make up, reveals an interesting split in the conception of race and beauty. Chambers had at times used dark oils on his models early on in his career but ceased to continue the practice, mostly preferring the "natural beauty and texture" of the skin. Michael Chambers, interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 13 December 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Chambers credits his parents strong and loving relationship with each other that largely responsible for their success in raising their son. To return briefly to the issue of self-image and black identity in the media: Chambers recounts an occasion as a young man when he was feeling down and self-critical. "My father said, 'Your mother has the most beautiful, big, black lips. They are wonderful... magnificent... I adore them.' Then my father told me, 'You have your mother's lips.' I never doubted my looks again." Michael Chambers, interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 13 December 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Yousuf Karsh, Karsh Canadians (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Lack of patronage from the black community of the Toronto urban community has long been a decisive factor in Chambers' move to shift his work to the United States. In Europe, his work is well received and the publication of books in Germany and Japan are pending.

<sup>11</sup> See "Artist's Statement:" Pamela Edmonds, Curator, Black Body: Race, Resistance, Response (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2001), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Chambers, "Transforming Reality," Camera Canada (Winter 1991, Vol. 904): 14.



## Chapter 2

### The Documentary Body: The Photographing and Processing of the Other, Its History and Construction.

“Thank God for the camera, for the testimony of the light itself, which no mere man can contradict.... That is to say, the incorruptible *kodak* -- and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe.”

Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*

The documentary body is a combination of descriptions and attributes assigned to a racial or social group from a particular moment in time. These descriptions refer to physical, social, psychological and ethnographic information as they are interpreted by those who control and distribute the images or likenesses—including drawings, paintings, sculpture and photographs—throughout that group. The documentary body perpetuates the familiar ethnographic convention of distant voyeurism through the development of the photographic image. The study of the indigenous peoples in Asia, Africa and the Americas was transformed by photography from illustrated flights of fancy to apparently objective, scientific, first hand ethnological and anthropometrical research. For example, photographs of the Zulu tribes in South Africa in the late 1870's accompanied a series of articles in the influential British journal, The Photographic News, evidence of the British public's great fascination with the “raw primalness of Africa,” and the ongoing Zulu wars. “These articles,” William Ewing writes,

are remarkably revealing, not only of British perception of non-western peoples, but of 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes generally to the human body. Directly or indirectly, they illuminate a whole range of issues highly significant for Victorian England: notions of race, concepts of beauty, sexuality and man's animal nature, beliefs about decency and morality and the distinction between ‘savagery’ and ‘civilization’, assumptions about social class, and even the rightful place of the body in art and science.<sup>1</sup>

Concurrent with the invention of photography, anthropology emerged as a fact gathering, scientific discipline—a classifying natural science.<sup>2</sup> Photography ensured the discipline’s supposed objectivity, supplying what was considered to be visual truth in the examination of a people and their culture. According to John Tagg in his article “Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State,” the constructing gaze was now articulated in a two-dimensional field, a referent of the expanding and diversifying functions of the state into forms that were both more vigorous and more rigorous.<sup>3</sup> Hegemonic power was then preserved in a proliferating system of documentation of which ethnological photographic research was only a part. Historical photographs of aboriginal peoples, from North or South America, Asia or Africa, set the standard for how the subjects of these images would have been seen by Victorian Europe well into the period of the Industrial Revolution and until present day North America. Along with anthropology, other sciences were reinforced by the perceived irrefutable truth of the photographic image; this includes the study of medicine—particularly comparative anatomy—among other disciplines.

Clear, comprehensive procedures for taking anthropological photographs gave the work official status and imbued the researcher with authority and power. If established methods were followed the resulting images “could be studied, with some apparent scientific justification, for physiological differences which become ‘the indices of moral, intellectual and cultural attributes, the visibility of this truth captured with the photographic image.’” Such photographs, safely viewed in the private spaces of offices and laboratories, reinforced the power that separated the observer from the observed—or

the spectator from the spectacle---and did not necessarily reveal previously undiscovered truths but instead served to validate prejudice and opinion.<sup>4</sup> According to Sanders L. Gilman,

Every social group has a set vocabulary of images for this externalized Other, These images are the product of history and of a culture that perpetuates them. None is random; none is isolated from the historical context.... While all of these images exist simultaneously, the ones that are invested with relatively greater force vary over time. An image can gain potency partly as a result of actions by the corresponding real entities.... But stereotypes can also be perpetuated, resurrected, and shaped through texts containing the fantasy life of the culture, quite independent of the existence or absence of the group in a given society.<sup>5</sup>

In the particular case of the black male, the documentary body can be said to have developed as a result of colonial exploration into the African continent by a host of other countries including England, France, Spain, Portugal and Holland.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning, most often drawn as a caricature upon maps and within travel journals, the inhabitants of particular communities or groups in the image of the otherworldly, dark-skinned native was depicted as something clearly non-human in form; often possessing oddly shaped heads and grotesquely deformed bodies. As ethnological and anthropological interest in the African continent increased, the image of the native body, both male and female, was depicted as humanoid, but with marked differences from the white European, such as more pronounced facial features, a definitive lack of clothing, and a concurrent lack of modesty considered "inappropriate" for their state of undress. According to Brian Wallis, these "scientific" representations preceded most of the more familiar stereotypes and derogatory images of blacks in contemporary popular culture. "From these pseudoscientific studies a Negro type emerged that was highly distorted and almost unique to ethnographic illustration... The popular images built on the scientific ones and

enhanced or exaggerated distortions of the black body. The subject's clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether..."<sup>7</sup> Colonizers, informed by contemporary beliefs concerning material wealth, technology, religion, sexuality and the human body, interpreted these differences as part of the moral and social behaviour of the native peoples.

A particular push in the field of evolutionary theory brought into focus the place of the black body in reference to the white; it was determined that the black body was closer on the evolutionary scale to the apes than it was to that of the Caucasian, and was in fact the missing link between the two. This information was based upon physical "evidence" such as facial features including a broad nose, wide and thick lips, coarse hair, dark skin and tales concerning large genitalia, with particular attention paid to the penis.<sup>8</sup> "Other characteristics (of the Negro) appear to be a hypertrophy of the organs of excretion, a more developed venous system and a less voluminous brain, as compared with the white races."<sup>9</sup> Descriptions of enormous phalli, or "organs of excretion," among blacks, although false, continued to circulate, encouraged by tales of explorers who had supposedly seen these "enormous members" for themselves. A larger penis connoted heightened sexual prowess and frequency, and was associated with animal behaviour, including lawlessness and aggression. Scottish archaeologist John Pinkerton (1758-1826) described the Negro race as being "akin to ferocious animals."<sup>10</sup> A portion of the entry for "Negro" in the 1910 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica quotes F. Manetta (dates unknown), who, after conducting "a long study of the negro in America," states that his comments "may be taken as generally true for the whole race:

The negro children were sharp, intelligent and full of vivacity, but on approaching the adult period a gradual change set in. The intellect seemed to become clouded, animation giving place to a sort of lethargy, briskness yielding to indolence... the arrest or even the deterioration in mental development is no doubt very largely due to the fact that after puberty sexual matters take first place in the negro's life and thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

In reality, the sexual proclivities or genitalia of males and females of African descent are not supernaturally large, nor are large genitalia a feature in apes. Therefore, the common myths concerning the extraordinary size of the black male penis and his insatiable sexual appetite were wholly exaggerated. This type of stereotype, among others, was maintained in descriptions and texts found in travel and scientific books, periodicals and journals such as The Photographic News, The Royal Geographic Society, The National Geographic Magazine and the Journal of the London Missionary Society, dating from as far back as 1795, as well as on drawings or cartouches found on maps and atlases from the same period.<sup>12</sup>

The descriptions found in texts concerning primary colonial contact included frequently used phrases that remained in continual use before and after the invention of the photographic process. Words such as savage, violent, unruly, primitive, sexual, immoral, unhealthy, uncivilized and unintelligent were cited in reputable journals and publications in England and North America up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the anti-slavery movement firmly took hold. The lack of clothing or nudity of the native peoples of the African continent was considered to be an intrinsic part of their savagery. Nudity signalled debauchery and sex, and the lack of modesty signalled a lack of the Christian faith, which labelled them further as heathens.

The photograph, a product considered to be a factual, accurate record of the visual experience at the time, codified this labelling process. This ensured that the image of the naked black male, with penis and weapons on display, and the naked or semi-dressed black female, with her breasts on display, would be depicted and distributed into homes and libraries as static, irrevocable *fact*; the documentary body. Classificatory projects that involved the production of slave photographs in the United States include the slave daguerreotypes produced in 1850 for Swiss scientist Louis Agassiz to support his theories concerning polygenesis, the concept of multiple, separate creations for each race as distinct species.<sup>13</sup>

In the drawings and photographs of the past, three main historical events are singled out in reference to the black body: early contact with native groups of Africa; the use of the black body as a countermeasure for anti-evolutionist rhetoric, positing the black body as closer to nature (apes) and therefore representing an earlier stage of human evolution; and the forced removal and enslavement of black bodies both within and beyond the African continent. All three of these events helped to create the documentary body and to reinforce its position as an increment against which all black bodies are measured, legitimized by the use of anthropological exploration, scientific proof and physical restraint and violence. Three distinct aspects of the documentary body, savagery, restraint and violence, each reflects these movements involving the black body.

In the beginning...there is the coincidence of widely diffused desires and the personal tastes of a few individuals endowed with the gift of simplifying their visual experiences into easily comprehensible shapes. Once this fusion has taken place, the resulting image, while still in a plastic state, may be enriched or refined

upon by succeeding generations. Or, to change the metaphor, it is like a *receptacle* into which more and more experience can be pored. Then, at a certain point, it is full. It sets. And partly because it seems to be completely satisfying, partly because the mythopoetic faculty has declined, it is accepted as true.<sup>14</sup>

Sir Kenneth Clark's definition of ideal beauty has a direct link to the documentary body. Clark's "completely satisfying" elements of the receptacle that is the documentary body, facilitated by these forums, include its ability to present the African as savage and a lesser being than the white European. Herein lies an important stage of evolution for the non-white documentary body: the mythopoetic element of the chronicles in travel journals and novels of voyages of discovery are reduced by the invention of the photograph. That is to say, the fictional component of the accounts became less important once an image that could provide physical proof of even a small part of the myth, accompanied the text.

Among such easily comprehensible shapes of widely diffused desires and personal tastes are such diverse publications as the National Geographic, and the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society, as well as other exploration periodicals in both Europe and North America. These were in fact sites for a form of disguised pornography, one that was acceptably couched behind the respectability of scientific and anthropological study. Roughly concurrent with the invention of photography was the abolishment of slavery in the British and French colonies. In the United States a limited form of legislated freedom was signalled by the Emancipation proclamation of 1863. Yet even as the definition of citizen had been extended to include black males, the black body maintained those aspects of savagery despite the recent end of, or some may argue

because of, the legislated end of slavery and efforts at blacks inclusion into everyday life as equal citizens.<sup>15</sup>

Currently, the documentary body survives in many forms. As photography, television and film have become part of daily life in the West, it becomes more and more difficult to filter out the repetitive messages, both negative and positive, produced by the media. From the stereotypes seen in many films and television programs, to the limited and “race specific” roles available for non-white actors and producers, the documentary body is a consistent presence in the depiction of black bodies, particularly in North America.<sup>16</sup>

The documentary body as literary representation has been invoked and used as both the negative antagonistic aggressor and descriptive device with which to demonstrate both internal and external inadequacies in Canadian society. The background where such literary characters exist becomes the rhythmic, unchanging reality that the primary characters must negotiate. Therefore these “background” characters are a necessary part of the construction of the scene and by extension, the entire story being told.<sup>17</sup> The documentary body functions in much the same way in photography. It describes, simultaneously, the past and present state of the black body as well as the internal and external manifestations of race and race relations within society. Whether as a central focus for the lens or as a smaller contributing element to a background or composition, the documentary body illuminates particular aspects of both the body being



described and the environment that shapes that body and the one who describes it, thus critiquing the political and social systems that bring it to bear.

The documentary body is a concept that exists between the named and the unnamed. By attributing the slave body to this concept, it then becomes a valid representation because it has been named. The labelling process that took place at the beginning of anthropological studies of Africa and its inhabitants is part of the process of naming, and therefore recognition, of the particular aspects of what was previously unnamed, such as a type of polemical hysteria, including fear of the unknown strangers that lived and looked so different than the explorers who ventured there. Naming is also a part of the myth making that creates stereotype. According to Gilman: “Stereotypes can assume a life of their own, rooted not only in reality but in the myth-making made necessary by our need to control the world.”<sup>18</sup> Many critics and theorists, including Cornel West, Stuart Hall, bell hooks and Rinaldo Walcott, all conceive of stereotype as a means of coping with anxieties engendered when faced with control and power issues.<sup>19</sup>

It would be false conjecture to equate the documentary body with racism or slavery. Instead the presence of the documentary body, in this case the black documentary body, frames and shapes experiences—both positive and negative—for blacks and non-blacks alike. Therefore, although it may refer to particular morally questionable and repugnant actions or events, the documentary body is not a negative construction *per se*. Its function, as with the function of many symbols and signs, has changed even as what it represents has not. It can now be used as a marker or signpost in

the complex background narrative of western society even as other, more primary characters rely on its existence to define and shape who they are and what they do.

Michael Chambers works against this construction by using it as a weapon against itself; that is to say, instead of rejecting the image of a black man as uncivilized and savage, Chambers manipulates that image in order to ask the viewer to think differently about what they see. In his black and white photographs the savage is no longer truly savage, but becomes something more complex than the simplistic construction of a stereotype often described with similar imagery. Chambers turns the documentary body on its head, so to speak, by using it in a way that refutes the image of the black male as uncivilised, hyper-sexual and violent, using these images in order to communicate feelings and experiences from his own life and personal encounters with issues of race and masculinity. The image of violence against a black body is placed into Chambers' context of a young black male living in Canada, and violence suffered in his everyday experiences, both mental and physical. His Blackness and his Maleness are considered to be problems both separately and together, impediments in being fully accepted into the Canadian cultural mosaic. Race as a political issue is the result of various power struggles, and functions as a validation of particular constructions of knowledge. The placement of these power struggles, both historical and contemporary, are located in particular arenas, namely the institutions of society.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Ewing, The Body: Photographs of the Human Form (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 12.

<sup>2</sup> In an 1896 issue of the Journal of the Anthropological Institute, an article extolled the benefits of photography used in anthropological research for the amateur or the professional in the field. "In fact, photography had by this date taken over as the ultimate method of ensuring a verifiable 'objectivity' ...." Annie E. Coombes, "Containing the Continent: Ethnographies on Display," Reinventing Africa: Museum, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 136.

<sup>3</sup> John Tagg, "Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State" in The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1988), 61. Tagg asserts that the need for social order and militancy against the lower classes' revolts necessitated the bolstering of social power and a condensation of social forces, employing a need for regulatory and disciplinary apparatuses, of which photographic classification was one.

<sup>4</sup> David Green, "Classified Subjects: Photography and Anthropology: The Technology of Power," in Ten-8 no. 14 (1984): 31. See also Cooper 62, note 16.

<sup>5</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Introduction: What are Stereotypes and Why Use Texts to Study Them?" in Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 20.

<sup>6</sup> The slave trade began with the arrival of the Portuguese in Africa in the middle of the 15th Century, followed closely by the Spanish, and at a longer interval (1562) by the British. The Dutch (c.1620), the French (c.1640), the Swedes, Danes and the Prussians attained the full extent of slave trade activities into the 18th century.

<sup>7</sup> This observation refers specifically to the research of scientists in the eighteenth century. Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz" in American Art. Summer 1995 (Volume 9, No. 2) 105.

<sup>8</sup> "Representations of the facial angle of the Negro skull almost always showed an abnormally pronounced brow, protruding lips and teeth, and a back-sloping forehead." The comparative study of facial angles was a technique developed by Dr. Peter Camper in the eighteenth century. The technique involved the systematic evaluation of the profile measurement from the tip of the forehead to the greatest protrusion of the lips. Wallis, *ibid.*

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<sup>9</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information. Eleventh Edition, Vol. XIX, s.v. "Negro" (New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co., 1911) 344.

<sup>10</sup> Pinkerton, John, 1758-1826. A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World. Volume 9, 1811 (London, 1808-14) 31.

<sup>11</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica 1911, 344. These assertions are not limited to historical texts. According to Dr. J. Philippe Rushton's analysis, Blacks are more excitable, more violent, less sexually restrained, more impulsive, more prone to crime, less altruistic, less inclined to follow rules, and less cooperative. J. P. Rushton, Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life-History Perspective. Third Edition (Port Huron, MI: Charles Darwin Research Institute, 2000) "More controversial is my work on race differences. In new studies and reviews of the world literature, I consistently find that East Asians and their descendants average a larger brain size, greater intelligence, more sexual restraint, slower rates of maturation, and greater law abidingness and social organization than do Europeans and their descendants who average higher scores on these dimensions than do Africans and their descendants. To explain this pattern I proposed a gene-based evolutionary theory. My book, Race, Evolution, and Behavior reviews the theory and many of the data sets." J. Philippe Rushton is currently a professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>12</sup> The Photographic News was founded in 1858 and, merged with Amateur Photographer in 1884 to become the Amateur Photographer and Photographic News. It was often mistaken for the British Journal of Photography, which was first published as The Liverpool Photographic Journal in 1854. The National Geographic magazine began in Washington D.C. in 1888, as the active arm of the National Geographic Society in the United States. Although the activity records date back to 1764, The London Missionary Society, then The Missionary Society, was formally established with a mandate and constitution in 1795. In France, one of the first such periodicals, Les Annales des voyages, de la géographie et de l'histoire, published from 1807 by Conrad Malte-Brun, in 1819 renamed les Nouvelles annales des voyages (1819-1865), was primarily concerned with the translation of unedited travel notes and journals; la Revue coloniale (1843-1858) which became la Revue algérienne et coloniale (1859-1860) and the Revue maritime et coloniale (1861-1898) recounted news concerning the maritime expeditions along the African coasts and waterways; L'Explorateur. Journal géographique et commerciale (1875-1876) became L'Exploration. Journal des conquêtes sur tous les points du globe (1876-1884) and la Gazette géographique (1885-1887) and la Revue française de l'étranger et des colonies (1890-1914) described the progress of colonial conquests and expeditions.

<sup>13</sup> Wallis, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark, The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art. (London: John Murray, 1956), 11. Italics mine.

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<sup>15</sup> President Abraham Lincoln helped draft The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 granting technical freedom to more than four million slaves in the Confederate states of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. However, it did not apply to the large number of slaves still residing in states that had not seceded from the Union (Including Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri). Nor did the proclamation apply in areas under the control of federal military rule: Tennessee and parts of Virginia and Louisiana. In 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment formally abolished slavery “within (these) United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” In 1803, although slavery was not legally abolished, Chief Justice of Lower Canada, William Osgoode, ruled that slavery was inconsistent with British Law. J. B. Robinson, Attorney General of Upper Canada ruled in 1819 that people of African origins who lived in Canada were free with their rights protected by law. No laws existed in Lower Canada and the Maritimes concerning slavery. Although slavery was still legal, slaves who left their owners had no fear of being forcibly returned.

<sup>16</sup> Other ways to describe types of documentary bodies include stereotype, typecasting, profiling, (ironically enough, a stereotype is also a form of offset printing) or generality.

<sup>17</sup> See Rinaldo Walcott, “By Way of a Brief Introduction Insubordination: A Demand for a Different Canada” in R. Walcott, ed. Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), 7-10.

<sup>18</sup> Gilman, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Gilman writes about the pathological personality as consistently aggressive towards the people and objects represented by stereotypes and this personality’s need for the line of difference, whereas the non-pathological individual considers stereotype a momentary coping mechanism that can be used and then discarded once anxiety is overcome. Gilman, “Introduction,” 18.

<sup>20</sup> Wallis, 102-106.

## Chapter 3

### Savagery Within The Documentary Body: In Search of the Uncivilised Man

Three distinct aspects of the documentary body, savagery, restraint and violence, each reflect particular historical events involving colonial contact with, and the forced removal of, the black body from the African continent. The presumed savagery considered an intrinsic part of the black native African's physiological and psychological make-up was promoted by way of images, both hand-produced and photographic, and the written word. The invention of the photograph created records of colonial contact with native groups more visually accurate than the paintings, drawings and etchings that preceded them. The word "savage" was connected with the image of a "primitive" or native, in this instance an African native.

The 1999 Gage Canadian Dictionary definition of the word 'savage' refers to "animals not tamed or under human control; wild and fierce; savage beasts of the jungle" and of "geographical features, wild and rugged; savage mountain scenery."<sup>1</sup> Other dictionaries, from the past as well as the present, have defined savage as "wild, uncultivated, fierce and ferocious; untamed and without civilization; primitive, barbarous, brutal, boorish and crude; a member of a non-literate culture, often having a tribal way of life." Savagery is defined as the condition of being savage, or wild, primitive and uncultivated.<sup>2</sup> The primitive and the savage are tied together. The primitive is defined by a lack of technology, or of an original, primary way of functioning; the savage is defined as a violent, uncontrollable brute.<sup>3</sup> The lack of development echoed in the definition of

the savage as well as the primitive, expand to include other types of behaviour including gestures, language and speech.

The documentary body as savage is also the primitive body; represented in the image of the unclothed African with tools and a way of life considered to be materially and technologically inferior to that of the Western world. Images that contain nudity, less complex tools, weapons and displays of hostility or violence were considered typical of Native groups such as the black African. Another component of the nudity that acts as an aspect of the savage involves Judeo-Christian religious ethic and the staunch belief that nudity was part of an uncivilized, voracious sexuality. Clerics sought to enter Africa to enlighten and educate “heathens” in the proper ways of Christian living.<sup>4</sup>

Heathen Negroes and Caffre tribes extend southward over the continent from the line [passing through the Soudan] to the colonies in the southern extremity of the continent; and over this vast area the native mind is surrendered to superstitions of infinite number and character. In the Cape Colony Protestantism again prevails, but with a strong intermixture of heathenism. The labours of the Christian missionaries have, however, done much, especially in South Africa, towards turning the benighted Africans from idols to the living God.<sup>5</sup>

This conversion process to Christianity began as a civilising mission that for many, including early African explorers Richard Jobson (dates unknown, c1590-1650), James Bruce (1730-1794), John Pinkerton (1758-1826) and David Livingstone (1813-1873), served to pacify the black population and, through particular interpretation of biblical scripture, justify the colonial involvement and presence of European interests on the African continent.<sup>6</sup>

Groups that customarily wore less clothing were viewed in terms of heightened eroticism, moral depravity and native savagery: Ewing ventures, “the nudity of the Zulus was postulated as proof of primitive morality”—or the lack thereof embodied in visible genitalia.<sup>7</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark states that the importance of male nudity in classical Greece “implies the conquest of an inhibition which oppresses all but the most backward people; it is like a denial of original sin.” Therefore nudity was linked not only to “backwardness”, but also to a lack or rejection of the Christian faith, a view consistent with the religion’s treatment and rejection of the nude body.<sup>8</sup>

Nudity—or according to several definitions which define the nude as art and the naked as vulgar—*nakedness*, is often considered to be the element that ties the savage and the primitive together; the savage harkens to the most primary of impulses, including violence and sex. As E.D. Morel has stated: “The African was a heathen, and as such fair game for the prowess of the noble Christian Knights who opposed their steel breast-plates, tempered swords and cross-bows, to his bare chest and primitive spear.”<sup>9</sup> Linked with a primitive way of life—the absence of sophisticated or technological devices and tools—this nudity completes the image of the savage aspect of the documentary body.

The mere presence of a pre-modern tool or mode of transportation in an image or photograph of native African or person of African descent can signal a reference to the supposed degraded state of the savage being. Michael Chambers’ black and white silver gelatin photographs taken in 1991 entitled The Pot I and II (Fig. 4) feature a black male with shaved head, balancing a metal pot upon his head. The background is empty; the



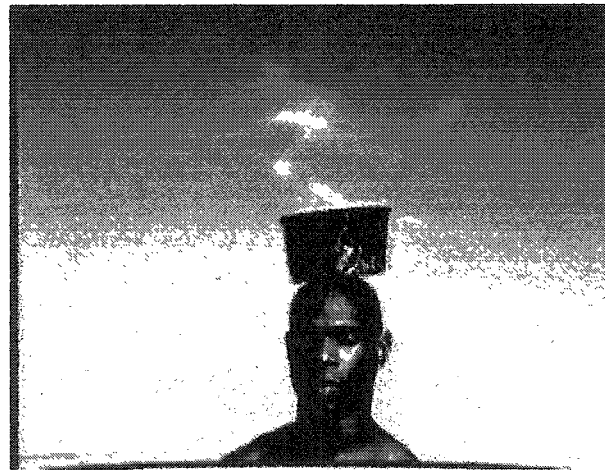
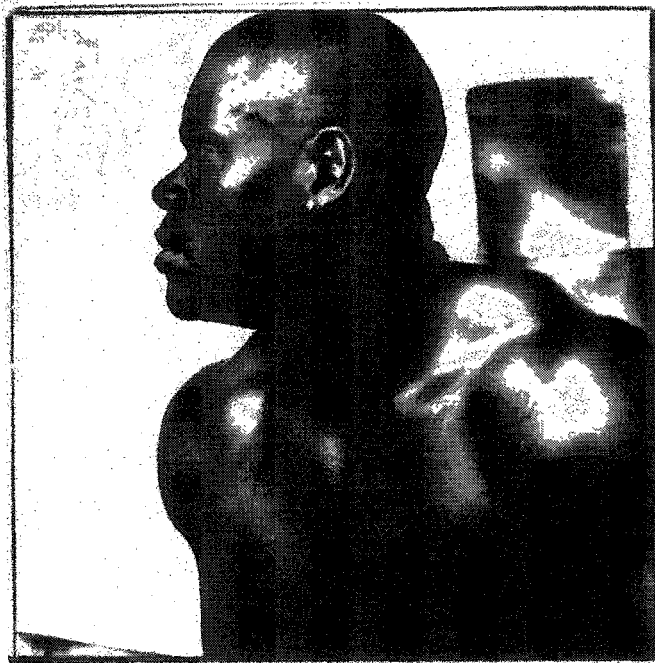


Fig. 4. Michael Chambers, *The Pot, I and II*, cir. 1990.

angle from which the photograph was taken removes any aspects of the landscape. The sky is clear save for some thinning clouds directly above the pot upon the man's head. Both images are taken with this cloud formation above the subject, creating the illusion of steam rising from the pot. Visually, there is no tension in the facial expression, however, the act of carrying a vessel in this manner results in bodily tensions to maintain balance that are at times invisible. The carrying of water, or any liquid as suggested by the pot in this manner is a balancing feat, and can also be perceived as a type of primitive technology in the place of pipes and aqueducts. This manner of conveyance may be regarded as "primitive" but what makes this an image of the "savage" is the presence of the black male (it is assumed) without clothing.<sup>10</sup> But it is the physical aspects of the figure, namely his strong profile, which draws attention in descriptions of the photograph. The geographical aspects of the land mentioned in the Gage dictionary's definition of savage, are equated with the man as the same descriptive words, wild, rugged and fierce, are often used in describing the features of a person of African descent.

The profiles of both the man in Chambers' The Pot and that of Otis Bathiste photographed by New Orleans photographer Jonathan Webb in 1997 (Fig. 5) are distinctive; both position the body as the only figure within the frame and set against the sky; both bodies are muscular and are pictured without visible clothing. The caption beneath the photograph of Bathiste published in Adam: The Male Figure in Art by Edward Lucie-Smith in 2001 refers to Webb's choice to "concentrate on the primitive strength of Otis' profile."<sup>11</sup> The description of Bathiste's profile as being "primitive" is evidence that the documentary body is still representing the black body, as the



“JONATHAN WEBB (A. 1997). *Otis Bathiste* (1997). Jonathan Webb has here chosen to concentrate on the primitive strength of Otis' profile. Another New Orleans photographer, George Dureau, has made numerous images of the same model.”

Fig. 5. Jonathan Webb, *Otis Bathiste*, 1997.

The caption reads “Jonathan Webb has here chosen to concentrate on the primitive strength of Otis' profile. Another New Orleans photographer, George Dureau, has made numerous images of the same model.”

“primitive” strength of the profile infers a reference to an “original” or “relating to an earlier age or time” effectively placing Bathiste, and those with his features, into the genetic evolutionary past, or at the very least, the material, technological past.

The description of the photograph (by Webb) was concerned with Bathiste’s features as primitive. The profile of the man in The Pot is no more or less “primitive” than that of Bathiste’s; Negroid features, such as full lips, broad nose and dark skin are communicated as signs of the primitive.<sup>12</sup> Therefore not only the presence of the pot upon his head but also the model’s physical features place him in the category of primitive savage. Such adjectives were used when describing black bodies and profiles in colonial texts, therefore the solvency of the visual currency, the documentary body, remains intact as the representation of a black man is described in a publication from 2001 in the same manner as in 1875.<sup>13</sup>

Chambers’ usual use of the landscape involves utilizing the scene not just as a background but as an active part of the image, implicating the environment as more than a tool that situates the subject within both the frame and Chambers’ text. The lack of additional visual information could suggest the void in which the body exists metaphorically. Moira Gatens describes such voids as the space where ambivalences reign, therefore Chambers’ open space neither signals savagery nor sophistication but a lack; an emptiness that isolates the figure visually in order to demonstrate social or emotional isolation, making the conceptual void “visible.”<sup>14</sup>

The Pot I and II, are photographs that place the subject, a muscular black male, in a position often reserved for females, as a bearer, of what we are not certain. The man could be a water bearer, comparable in subject matter to an early work of the Baroque painter Diego Velázquez' The Water Carrier of Seville. Yet unlike the Seville *bodegones* painting from 1619, the black and white photograph does not portray several figures, nor does it allow the viewer to see any action but transport. There is no interaction with, or presence of, other bodies within the scene. The two images possess only the one common aspect of the male as carrier or bearer, yet the two images can be compared as illustrations of action, scene and positioning.

The action is that of the bearer, the focus of both images, as indicated by the respective titles as well as the visual focus within the compositions. The beaten metal pot has been placed solidly in the centre of the photograph; the man carrying it is almost an afterthought. The water bearer in the painting however, carries the jug of water that appears in the lower half of the scene, as a secondary focus to the relationships between the water seller and those purchasing his supply. In one image, the man and his behaviour are the presumed focus of action. In the other, action central to the photograph takes place in the form of steam seemingly rising from within the vessel atop the man's head.

The scene within the Velázquez painting is composed of several characters, both in the foreground and the background. The photograph features an empty background where the viewer is unsure of the location; the title of the painting informs the location, accompanied by the appropriate visual signs such as the style of hair and dress of those

pictured in the scene. Yet the empty space of the photograph speaks to a sensibility that creates a visual balance in the composition accompanied by a concern for internal dialogue echoed in the environment of the subject. While this may be consistent with some forms of painting, the photographic process uniquely creates a vastness of the exterior in panoramas or vistas that are directly intended to resonate the remoteness and alienation of internal physical or psychological dialogues.

Although this particular comparison involves very different media, painting and photography, the techniques utilised to create each image have to do with how each of the main subjects within the frame functions as bearer.<sup>15</sup> Both profiles are striking and lend dignity to the works. Both men have strong features in distinct profiles and short shorn hair. The lighting of the water seller implies a type of solemnity that is also communicated by the closed eyes of the man in The Pot. Just as the Water Carrier seems involved in some type of ritual or event, one of an almost religious significance, so does the man in the photograph; his bearing and facial expression convey the aura of a solemn parade or ritual procession. As a result, the journey of the pot seems much more interesting than the destination of the man who carries it.<sup>16</sup>

The feminization of the figure in The Pot is part of a process that renders the black male helpless and more consumable and controllable. This feminization, Melody Davis contends, is part of a strategy that includes the ideal of action that protects the man from slipping into the socially sub-ordinate role reserved for women.<sup>17</sup> The patriarchal privilege that is maintained through the possession and regarding of the female nude has

a distinct disadvantage when a male nude is placed in the female's stead; the insult of passivity or of submission is equal to the perceived insult of femininity. When a man becomes the spectacle and not the spectator, it creates a schism for the viewer, presumably male, whose gaze now renders the man in the photograph less male and then perhaps *less threatening*.<sup>18</sup>

Another such image is the photograph of a woman bearing a vessel upon her head appears in the photograph entitled, A Traffic Cop in "Darkest Africa," Main Street, Elizabethville, Belgian Congo by an unknown photographer (Fig. 6).<sup>19</sup> The image is of a woman standing with a small white bowl upon her head on the side of what appears to be a street in an African town or city. She is clad in loose traditional clothing and is barefoot. The bowl perched atop her head is small and not deep, and seems almost precariously balanced, even as the child she carries on her back suggests that the woman is subject to frequent physical movement. The traffic cop, dressed in a uniform, is placed far in the background of the photograph, standing upon a white circular platform. The exact date of the image is unknown. However, the more modern buildings in the background indicate that the photograph may have been taken c. 1910.

This image is typical in that it is usually females that carry loads upon their heads in various depictions of African natives. The use of the male in the photograph by Chambers disrupts particular power relations that maintain the male as agitator and female as support or the subject that is acted upon. In the case of The Pot, both the man and his female counterpart in Traffic Cop are acted upon, with the burden of the pot or



Fig. 6. (33758) A Traffic Cop in "Darkest Africa," Main Street, Elizabethville, Belgian Congo. Stereoview, Keystone View Company. 152mm x 79mm. Date unknown.



(Detail)



bowl, however light upon their heads, acting as a type of pacifier or restrictor of physical movement. The male is therefore not free to act physically since jarring movements might cause the pot to fall from his head. The feminization mentioned above also implies a restriction of movement, both physical and social. This then extends to a political strategy and the negotiation of power between those with material wealth and technology that no longer require the balancing of burdens upon their heads and those who do.

Chambers' "Fern" (Untitled, fig. 7) connects foliage and fauna to the savage body, locating the black body as subject geographically.<sup>20</sup> The gaze of the man in the photograph is direct and non-threatening, even alluring. This contrasts with London photographer Clare Ajenusi's photograph Ebenezer (Fig. 8) where the black male pictured gazes at the large shell in his hands within an interior space. The shell acts as a point of reference to situate the subject of the photograph in a tropical environment where that shell is found. The nude body of the model is positioned with legs apart, head bowed, with his gaze averted. The direct gaze of the model in Fern makes him an active participant in the exchange between the viewer and the subject; the gaze of the model in Ajenusi's photograph does not engage the viewer, allowing the subject to be consumed without the interruption afforded by the direct gaze of the subject. Fern's direct and piercing gaze creates an entanglement that is both seductive and terribly uncomfortable. Slavoj Žižek writes: "As a rule, one focuses on the horror of being the object of some invisible, unfathomable, panoptical gaze (the "someone is watching me" motif)—yet it is a far more unbearable experience to find oneself at (the) very point of a pure gaze."<sup>21</sup>

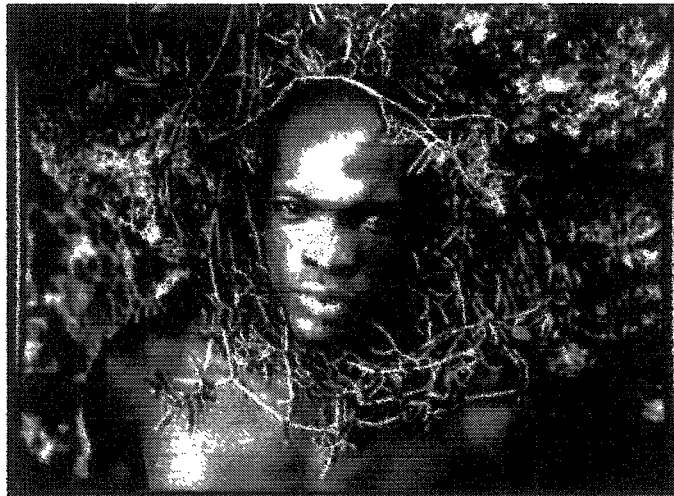


Fig. 7. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1990.



Fig. 8. Clare Ajenusi, *Ebenezer*, 1980.

The power located in the gaze of this particular subject—the presumably naked black male—indicates a disruption in the typical power relations in photos featuring the documentary body. Ebenezer displays his body but not his gaze, a dangerous and powerful tool. Yet Fern's self-possessed gaze plays with an underlying element attributed to black sexuality that Ebenezer does not: the control of the gaze in Fern indicates a control of sexuality, contrary to the rampant, uncontrollable drive of the “savage.”<sup>22</sup>

Both images include natural elements from tropical settings, the vine-like greenery in one and the shell in the other. The environment associated the black body has consistently been described as tropical, whether referring to various parts of the African or Caribbean landscape. The foliage in Fern creates a type of isolated environment within the photograph since no other indicator of the model's location can be seen. The viewer can only guess that he is surrounded by more of the lush verdure that encircles his face, and in fact, may even be conceived as a part of the greenery and the vines, as if he were inseparable from them. The tropical environment has contributed to the reduction of the black body as savage in the way that a symbiotic relationship has been assumed between the heat and foliage of the tropics and the black body. Writers have linked what they believe to be the mental, physical and social inferiority of blacks to their “original environment.”

At the same time his environment has not been such as would tend to produce in him the restless energy which has led to the progress of the white race; and the easy conditions of tropical life and the fertility of the soil have reduced the struggle for existence to a minimum. But though the mental inferiority of the negro to the white or yellow races is a fact, it has often been exaggerated; the negro is largely the creature of his environment, and it is not fair to judge his mental capacity by tests taken directly from the environment of the white man, as

for instance tests in mental arithmetic; skill in reckoning is necessary to the white race, and it has cultivated this faculty; but it is not necessary to the negro.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, Chambers' dark-skinned man in Fern is an illustration of the points made in the entry from the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910) quoted above, re-inscribed by the photographer's use of the documentary body in this photograph. Particular types of prowess have also been attributed to the black body that refer directly to the mastery of more "primal" abilities: "On the other hand," the author of the entry continues, "negroes far surpass white men in acuteness of vision, hearing, sense of direction and topography."<sup>24</sup> Entries concerning the inferior intelligence and mental capacity of the African races reveal the encyclopaedia, according to Sander Gilman, as a textual ethnological museum that exhibits blacks within the context of scientific discourse. According to Gilman, seeing black become an evocation of genitalia, as if the black body could stand for it. That the black body—male and female—came to represent the genitalia is obvious, both in turn of the century art and literature; however, this representation only came about through a series of analogies, good versus bad, black versus white, that implied the innate primitivity of the African races.<sup>25</sup>

Ajenusi's positioning of the conch shell is telling; it reflects the consumptive preoccupation of the West with the physical prowess of the black male, a prowess that has primarily been located in the sexual and by extension, the tropical. By blocking the man's view of his penis, and positioning the conch right above it as the centre of the composition, Ajenusi effectively replaces the shell for the model's member, continuing a form of replacement that equates sexual ability with a tropical environment. Fern can also be read in this way as an image that isolates the black body within the tropical or the

natural, i.e. the primitive or the savage. However, his use of the model's direct gaze disrupts an undisturbed consumption of the body in the photograph.

Chambers' images of the savage are countered with small markers of resistance that attempt to draw attention to the type of stereotypical imagery of black male bodies that depict the black male as unthinking, violent, and primitive. By suggesting thought with tendrils of "smoke" rising from the pot upon a man's head and inferring sensuality, tranquility and intelligence with the unflinching gaze of a beautiful black male, Chambers uses the documentary body as a template for images that reform the savage body. Other photographs that more actively reject the savage documentary body without the use of typical visual aids such as foliage or tropical shells are effective since they present direct, clear representations of the black body in atypical positions for the "savage" body. These images are featured in the final chapter where, the black body is placed in specific environments and situations that effectively seek to counter and re-place the documentary body in the depiction of the black nude male.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1999 Gage Canadian Dictionary (1998), s.v. “savage.”

<sup>2</sup> Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition (1999), s.v. “savagery.”

<sup>3</sup> The definition of the word ‘primitive’ includes terms such as “original, or primary, not derived; of or relating to the earliest age or period, primeval: closely approximating an early ancestral type.” (Gage, 1999) “Characteristic of an early stage of development: crude, rudimentary. Elemental, natural of, relating to or produced by a relatively simple people or culture [art]: untutored.” [the noble savage endowed with virtue - Oscar Handlin] Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, Ninth Edition (1993). The idea of primitive as “pure” and untainted is also consistent in many spheres of modern life, including but not exclusive to architecture, art and business semantics.

<sup>4</sup> Nudity was actively discouraged and was still frowned upon during missions in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Kenya, for example, Missionaries provided natives with clothing thought suitable for God-fearing individuals. See The Laura Collins collection of photographs taken in Kenya during the 1890s. The Laura Neva Collins Photographic Collection: The Billy Graham Center Archives (Wheaton, Illinois: BGC Archives, Collection number 422).

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and General Literature, Ninth Edition (1875), s.v. “Africa,” 265. Missions included the Church Missionary Society established near Mombas on the East Coast during the mid 1800’s and the London Missionary Society of which the famed African explorer Dr. Livingstone was an agent. See James Stewart, Dawn in the Dark Continent or Africa and its Missions (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1903); David Livingstone, Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa (London: John Murray, 1857); Horace Waller editor, The Last Journals of David Livingstone in Central Africa from 1865 to his Death (London: John Murray, 1874).

<sup>6</sup> “Bruce and others have represented the (Somalis) as a savage race with whom it would be dangerous to have any connection; but Lord Valentia and later travellers found them a somewhat industrious and commercial race.” The Gazetteer of the World: A Dictionary of Geographical Knowledge (Edinburgh: A. Fullerton, 1856), s.v. “Somali Territory,” 663. “In political institutions they have made no advance, their governments being simple despotisms, without any regular organization. Their religion is merely the instinctive expression of the religious feeling, in its lowest form of fetishism.” *Ibid.*, s.v. “Negro,” 480. Often believed to be without progress, the notion of the dying race was also used as a justification for the conversion and enslavement of the native inhabitants of this country and others. Missions were established in many areas of the country, primarily along the coasts.

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<sup>7</sup> Ewing, 14. It was not considered that the Zulus themselves did not connect nudity with sexuality—the prevailing attitudes in 19th century Britain at the height of its colonizing power had constructed parameters by which to measure all “primitive peoples” in the same instant, creating and reinforcing their own identities. At this time in Britain, as well as North America, no respectable woman would dare to pose in even partial nudity, and ideas of the naked and the nude were cemented with the advent of photography. It is interesting to note that actresses and prostitutes were grouped together as non-respectable, in the same class as, yet still far above, the morally ignorant and degenerate native savage. Cannibalism that was practiced in the few cases/groups recorded was also a decisive characteristic that was applied to all native groups. See Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Clark, The Nude...of Ideal Art , 20. See also Chapter I “The Demon Rod,” concerning the visibility and rejection of the penis by the Christian Church in David Friedman, A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis (New York: Penguin, 2001), 1-54.

<sup>9</sup> E. D. Morel, The Black Man's Burden: The White Man in Africa from the Fifteenth Century to World War I [Book on-line] (Manchester: National Labour Press, 1920; BoondocksNet Edition, 2001) 1-2. Accessed May 2002; available from <http://www.boondocksnet.com/editions/morel/>; internet.

<sup>10</sup> Part of the text found on the back of a stereoscopic photograph card. “*Transportation.* –Notice the native carriers toiling up the trail, bearing on willing head and shoulders the baggage of white travelers.” No.9972 -- Forest trail in the heart of Africa, between Stanley and Tchopo Falls, Congo Free State. Underwood & Underwood. Date unknown.

<sup>11</sup> Also of note is the author’s failure to refer to Bathiste by his last name, inferring a familiarity that is inappropriate for the subject of discussion whose surname is known. See Lucie-Smith, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Linnaeus classified mankind into four varieties: European (albus), American (rubescus), Asiatic (fuscus), and African (Niger). Linnaeus described whites and blacks thus: Europeans as: Fair, sanguine, brawny. Hair, yellow brown, owing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws. Africans are described as Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky; nose at; lips timid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Anoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice. Carl von Linne (Linnaeus), General System of Nature Through the Three Grand Kingdoms of Animals, Vegetable, and Minerals (London: Lackington, Allen and Company, 1806), 1:2.

<sup>13</sup> Using a phrenological approach, the facial features of the black African have been linked to mental inferiority in that the shape of the head and the slope of the cranial seat were assumed to produce a smaller brain that inhibits intellectual development. See Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910), 344 and Wallis, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Gatens, vii-xiii.



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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that Viennese multi-media artist Erwin Wurm presented a short film about a man who carried a bowl above his head for two years as a form of political protest, as part of his exhibition at the Centre Nationale de la Photographie in Paris in 2002.

<sup>16</sup> As commented about the Water Carrier, the “grasp of individual character and dignity invests this everyday scene with the solemn spirit of ritual.” H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, History of Art, Fifth edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 571.

<sup>17</sup> Melody Davis, The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Unlike the legend of the fictional children’s character, Johnny Appleseed, who wore a metal pot upon his head as a type of hat, not as a container. This character was the non-threatening, non-violent form of Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett.

<sup>19</sup> The photograph of a woman standing with a small white bowl upon her head is entitled: (33758) A Traffic Cop in "Darkest Africa," Main Street, Elizabethville, Belgian Congo. Stereoview, Keystone View Company. Date unknown.

<sup>20</sup> The photographic collection of Prince Roland Bonaparte featured black and white photographs taken by Maurice Bucquet in the Jardin zoologique d'acclimatation in Paris 1892. The Jardin d'acclimatation often held ethnographic “exhibitions,” where Parisians could come and observe native Africans in their “natural habitat,” a series of gardens and botanical displays. In a section of these gardens, native Africans were placed in poses and stances that reflected what was considered to be their everyday activities. The images illustrate a particular concern Bucquet had with placing the figures within a “tropical” context.

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Zizek, “Why Does the *Phallus* Appear?” in Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 126-127.

<sup>22</sup> “Ebenezer” (*stone of help*) is described as a stone set up by Samuel after a signal defeat of the Philistines, as a memorial of the “help” received from Jehovah. (1 Samuel 7:12) The position of the stone is carefully defined as “between Miz’pah and Shen.” The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1990), 250.

<sup>23</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910), 344-345.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sander L. Gilman, “Black Sexuality and Modern Consciousness” in Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 111.

## Chapter 4

### **Restraints and the Documentary Body: Shackles, Ropes and Cages**

What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?

Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Orphée Noir*<sup>1</sup>

The restrained documentary body as a subject can be essentially divided into two parts: the non-urban restrained body that refers to the enslavement and transport of blacks to other countries; and the urban restrained body that refers to the economic and social destitution of blacks in ghettos and urban slums.

The non-urban restrained body pictured in the images of the colonial slave trade of black Africans chronicles their consequent transport from the African continent to different parts of the world including Great Britain, France and North and South America. These images, connected with the restraint, sale and distribution of black bodies provided ideological confirmation of colonial power and control. This control, based upon territory and the exploitation of resources both human and non-human,<sup>2</sup> was often facilitated by religious orders that considered the black savage redeemable by way of conversion to Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

Within the triangular trade system, ships embarked from European ports, stopped in Africa to gather captives, and delivered them to the New World, returning after they completed their contract to their ports of origin. The Middle Passage was that leg of the slave triangle that brought Africans from West Africa to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. The Middle Passage refers specifically to the arduous, difficult

journey of up to three months in cramped, unsanitary conditions that regularly resulted in the death of over two-thirds of the ship's human cargo to violence, disease, suffocation, and suicide. Transported in the holds of ships between the 15th and 19th centuries en route to enslavement, captives were shackled and chained together in cramped spaces where they could not move, and were permitted little or no physical care.<sup>4</sup>

The Diaspora, and the triangle trade system that facilitated it, were the result of the capture and confinement of black bodies on land in holding camps on the African coast and at sea on slave galleys, and manifest themselves in devices and objects of restraint.<sup>5</sup> One of these devices is present in Chambers' photograph The Box (1991) (Fig. 9) in the form of a thick, corded rope that hangs loosely around the model's neck, as well as encircling his feet. The figure perched within the wooden crate seems small and vulnerable; the direction of his gaze implies a plea for either protection or safe passage. Chambers' use of dramatic lighting from a single source creates sharp contrasts on each of surfaces; the wood of the box, the straw or hay and skin. These textures are subtle despite the key lighting of the model, whose eyes become a starting point that encourages the viewer's gaze to wander outside of the tight composition of vertical lines and the lead-in of the rope at his feet. Unlike traditional documentary or still life photography, Chambers uses very little fill light when photographing his subjects in the studio. The blackness of the background lends to the feeling of isolation of the solitary figure in a box. The background also serves to heighten the illusion of smallness of the figure and of the box; the lighting emphasizes only his protruding limbs, his knees and his face, the

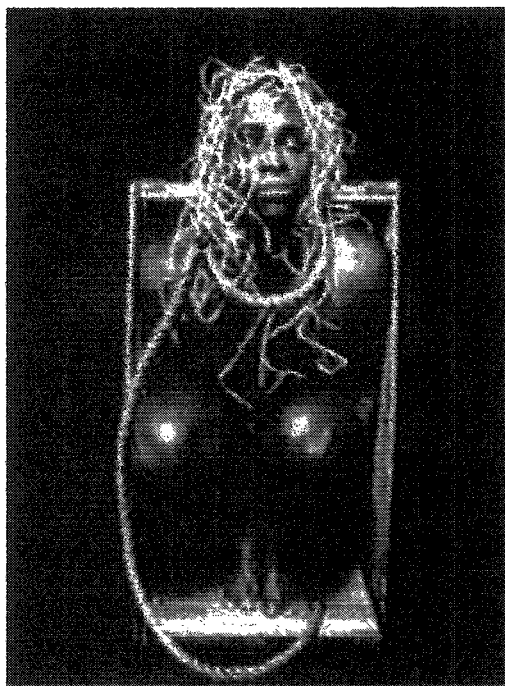


Fig. 9. Michael Chambers, *The Box*, 1996.

deepening shadows around his body and within the limited space of the box conveying the impression of diminutive size or stature. One can consider that the image depicts the Middle Passage in a new light as the transportation of precious cargo, and not objects to be bought, sold, beaten and used. The Box represents the slave galley in its cramped, small space where the figure has barely any room to turn or move. The halo of hay or straw could suggest religious connotations such as a reference to the crown of thorns, but the immediate connection to packaging material seems more likely. The black body within the box, even as it is restrained, has been treated with care and packaged with a protective material, the hay, in order to insure that this body not be damaged. This image speaks in one sense of the Diaspora but also of a small creature, packaged and prepared for delivery. The photographer attentively juxtaposes one reality for another by implying specialness and care for the man that would, in a historical context, have been handled quite differently. The uniqueness and care implied by the moss and hay in his photographs complicates a more simple reading of the body and presents it as more than mere spectacle. In this way Chambers re-works history and manipulates the image in a way that does not make it less aesthetically pleasing, but that also does not remove the disturbing message of this body being packaged expressly by the viewer, for the viewer and historically for sale as property. Another reading of the box and its confining size could be psychological: the difficulties of functioning within a society that does not recognize certain inherent rights of particular bodies is, in effect, a box, a stratigraphying position/tool/mechanism of walls and limitations. This box that the man has been placed in may well be very much like the one that delivered his ancestors to the North American continent several hundred years ago.

Yet Chambers, recognizes the black male body's emergence from the box of limitations imposed upon him. This suggests that the enslavement then is not only to the "idea" that others have of a black man, but also about black males feeling less fixed within their skin.<sup>6</sup> The photographer often plays with sexual and gender issues often associated with the black male body. For instance, another aspect of the figure in The Box is its ambiguity in reference to gender: the bent knees can be read as breasts and the rope on the head as hair that seductively frames the face. Read as female, The Box can represent both the jungle nymph or the serpent-haired Medusa restrained.<sup>7</sup> Read as male, it confronts the unease within traditional black communities, including the Caribbean, concerning homosexuality and black gay culture. Homosexuality within black culture is still, according to Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, not unlike a "closely guarded secret." It is because of the acceptance of the hyper-male, hyper-virile persona that has become part of the Black Male that the fierce rejection of homosexuality within the black community becomes more apparent. As sexual orientation it becomes tied into the evolution of the uncontrollable black stud whom feminisation cannot control, transformed into the stereotype of the black homosexual bull, or the sensitive and effete "black dandy" in order to maintain prescribed power relations both within and outside of the black community.<sup>8</sup>

The most famous and memorable depictions of the Middle Passage in art are often romantic. J.M.W. Turner's Slave Ship and Jean Léon Gérôme's Slave Market both feature slave scenes first of the Middle passage and the second of the lucrative trading of

female flesh in parts of the Asiatic world.<sup>9</sup> The brilliant colours and sophisticated rendering of light in the scene subordinates the subject of the slaves being thrown overboard so that the captain, insured for loss of slaves by drowning but not disease, could collect for the loss after an outbreak of cholera, while leaving the captives to drown or be eaten by the awaiting sharks. Both the above examples do not illustrate obvious signs of restraint unless the boat and the slave master's scimitar are considered. However, the rope around the woman's neck in Gérôme's painting signalled her ownership to someone else as much as the rope around the man's neck in Box. In the photograph, the image of the rope also connects to a subject discussed further on in this thesis, as an instrument of violence inflicted upon the black body.

In an untitled black and white photograph labelled for this discussion as "Thread," of 1995 (Untitled, fig. 10), Chambers wraps a figure in string, tracing the thin cord about the model's body from head to toe. The model is light haired, perhaps grey haired, even as his excellent muscularity and tone suggest youth. The figure awaits a happening, an occurrence; the thinness of the thread belies the size and potential of his body, creating a visual tension that prompts the spectator to wonder at why he does not break free. The potential energy here is not unlike potential sexual energy; however, in this instant, before the subject acts---if he can act---it is determined that he has been somehow subdued and tamed by these comparatively tiny threads, that he is packaged, ready and portable.

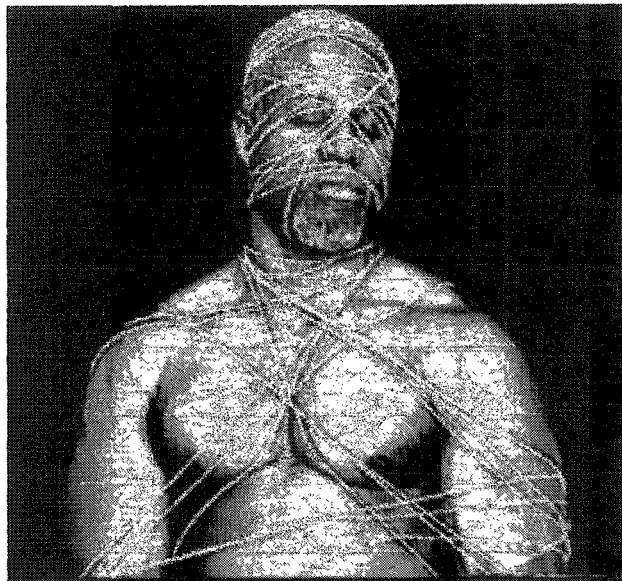


Fig. 10. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, (detail)  
cir. 1995.



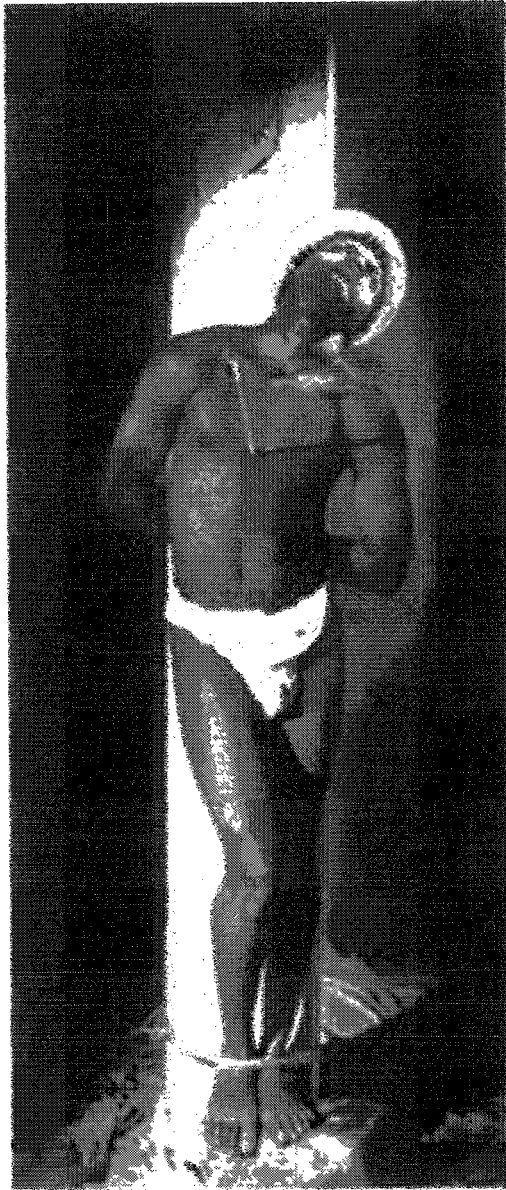


Fig. 11. Carvin Rinehart,  
*St. Sebastian, Martyr*, n.d.,  
colour photograph, oil paint.

In Thread, Chambers has moved from more overt restraints of cages, wood and rope to the thin cord wrapped around a muscular black male's body. His face is the real focal point of the image, more specifically his closed eyes. Again, the light emphasizes the eyes, this time in our view of his slightly turned head. Just as the figure in The Box in the first section of this chapter and Caged in the second, Thread displays the restrained body, but one that presents the possibility of care or protection. The upward tilt of the head and the facial expression, considered to be serene by some, refer to commonly used poses for the painting of martyrs like St. Sebastian, in particular the Black St Sebastian by Carvin Rinehart.<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 11) Chambers' combination of lighting and pose of the model create a delicate almost surreal beauty. The web of string around his body works with the softer lighting technique employed perhaps to bring more attention to the string, a large amount of which surrounds the model's head. Although not visible, the man's hands are open and lay flat against his legs, suggesting little resistance to this cocooning. Yet the lines on his body may not be as benign as string, but may represent scars. The more famous versions of St. Sebastian depict the body of the martyr as being pricked by—at least—one arrow. The omission of the arrows is telling, as Chambers seems to resist piercing the skin of the models at this point, but it is also worth noting that Chambers does “pierce” the skin of a model in order to use string in a much more confining and violent manner as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5. If in fact, the thread is a form of protection, a type of cocoon, or barrier that attends the body until it emerges, Chambers does not indicate what the subject protects himself from, nor it is evident when, or if, he will emerge.

### **Monkey See, Monkey Do: Behind the Bars of Ethnographic Display**

Otabenga (called Ota Benga) was a Bushman from the Bachichiri people along the Kasai River in what is now Zaire. In a raid by the Baschilele, Otabenga's family were killed, his home destroyed, and the Zappo-Zap of Congo, a tribe of African natives loyal to King Leopold II of Belgium, held him captive. Acquired by missionary-explorer Samuel Phillips Verner, who was looking for "Pygmies" to be exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, Otabenga aided in convincing other Africans to return with them to St. Louis to build an "authentic" native African village for the World's Fair, positioned alongside thousands of other native tribesmen from all over the world. After returning to Central Africa to collect artefacts, Otabenga asked to join Verner on his trip back to New York in the summer of 1906. Once in New York City, a bankrupt Verner had his collections seized by the Guardian Trust Company and left Otabenga in the care of the American Museum of Natural History as part of the sale of his collections. Motivated by "good intentions," caretakers transferred Otabenga to the Bronx Zoo where he became a sensation as an exhibit of evolution, residing in the primate house with an Orangutan as a roommate.<sup>11</sup>

The non-urban restrained body is also manifest in the images of black bodies on display for ethnographic or scientific fairs. The restraint, caging and display of the black body, particularly in England, France and North America, was a highly popular

endeavour that served to visually colonize the body of an Other well into the early part of the twentieth century. The two types of restraint and display are evident in the example of Otabenga; the black body as materially and socially deficient, and the black African's close "genetic" relationship with primates. The fact that men such as Otabenga were equated with, and housed like, apes, speaks for the attitudes of the time. This case demonstrates the ease with which the black body was connected to the animal or ape by the American public and the how the display of that body, whether for science or entertainment, reinforces that connection.<sup>12</sup> In the past, the matter of intelligence of the Africans was related directly to their level of humanity, marked by artistic, particularly literary, expression. Henry Louis Gates Jr. summarized the broader discourse of race and reason in the eighteenth century in a lecture concerning the attitudes of the time during which the young black poet Phillis Wheatley produced her most successful works (1765-1784):

The question of the humanity of the Africans was (at this time) essentially related to the possession of reason, in a tradition inaugurated by Descartes... the question turned on whether or not Africans could write, that is could create imaginative literature. If they could, this line of reasoning went, then they stood as members of the human family on the Great Chain of Being. If they could not, then the Africans were a species subhuman, more related to the apes than to Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

Michael Chambers' photograph Caged (Fig. 12) works to not only restrain the body, but also to place it on display. As with circus animals and native Africans behind steel bars for ethnographic display, the man is within a restraint that further distances him from the status of human. The bars about the man's head symbolize not only the inclusion of the man's body into a dialogue of evolutionary measure as primitive or evolved primate, but also refer to the metaphorical restraint implied in his perceived

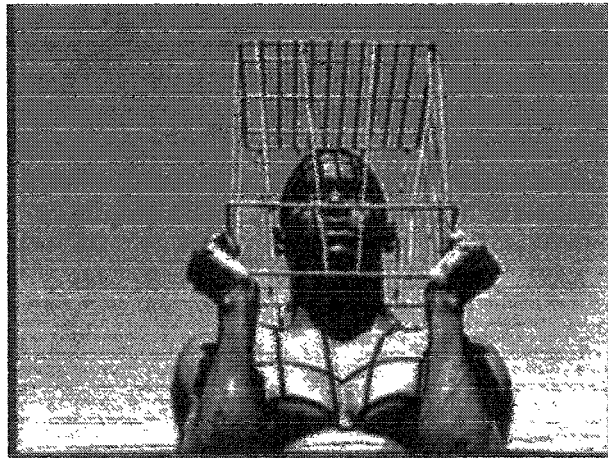


Fig. 12. Michael Chambers, *Caged*, cir. 1990.

inability to think or function fully as a human being. The mind of the man is caged by the physical and metaphorical restraints of the past. The photograph was shot from an angle slightly below the waist of model. The lighting is natural and bright, creating shadows beneath the chin and nose that emphasize his strong features. The gaze of the man is focussed upwards, perhaps invoking a reference to salvation but that works to convey dignity instead of helplessness or supplication. Again, the placement of the model with the backdrop of the clear sky divulges nothing of the environment in which the photograph was taken, similar to The Pot. The man's grip on the cage raises several questions: is the man complicit in his own bondage or his status as a spectacle? Is this a reference to the past or today? This complicity of the man holding the cage is echoed in Otabenga's aid to secure further "artefacts" for the Worlds Fair, but not ironically so, as there was an established history of black being Africans delivered into the hands of slave traders by other Africans. Different forms of slavery in several African cultures pre-existed the Diaspora and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the case of the man in Caged, his fate seems to be within his hands as he is the one holding the cage.

Chambers' caged man would not have been so unusual at the turn of the century, even as slavery as such had become illegal in both Europe and North America. The restraint in Chambers' photograph is in the form of a small cage rather than Otabenga's large barred pen of a zoo or the glass and mesh enclosures of an ethnographic display. The cage is small enough to cover the man's head alone, making his head, and by extension, his mind the focus of the spectacle. This distinction serves Chambers well, as

it puts the focus onto the mind of the subject and not solely his body; that is to say that the locus of action for this black body is mental, rather than physical.

### **The Urban Jungle**

The urban restrained body is pictured in the images that, in most instances, relate to crime, whether in particular neighbourhoods or cities. Statistics show that well over forty percent of Americans incarcerated in a State and or Federal penitentiary are of African American descent.

When we consider the plight of black males today in American society, we encounter the most horrible statistics, reflecting a nightmare reality for a large percentage of that half of the African-American community. In 1990 alone, for instance, 2,280,000 black boys and men were jailed or imprisoned, while 23,000 earned a college degree, a ratio of 99 to 1 (compared with a ration of 6 to 1 for whites).<sup>14</sup>

In Canada, however, the numbers differ, with the ratio reflecting the ethnic distribution of the population.<sup>15</sup> Part of urban fear in many areas in both Canada and the U.S. is based in the belief that ethnic groups are more likely to commit crime. Urban violence and crime inscribed onto the black body, mirror the particular levels of economic degradation that have become part of daily existence for the majority of black communities and individuals in North America.

Handcuffs are frequent restraints in Chambers' work from this period. Concerned with the effects of urbanization on the black mind and body, the effect of racism had already been identified historically; but the city's systems, both political and social, were at work to undermine what Chambers describes as "a basic acknowledgement of our

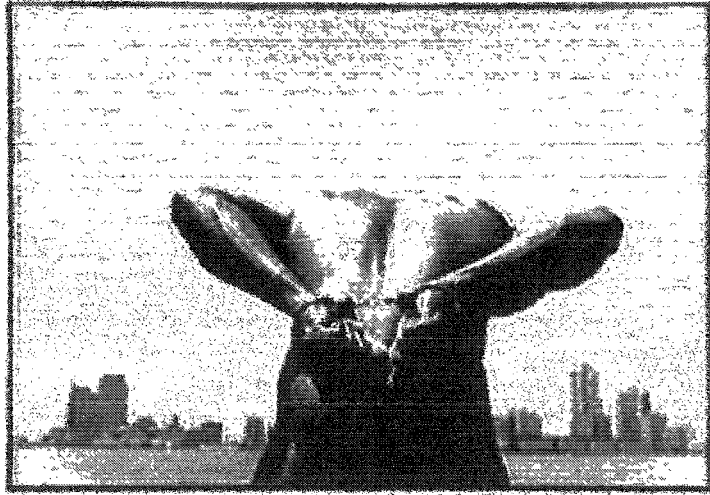


Fig. 13. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1991.



existence as human beings.”<sup>16</sup> The handcuffs appear only in his urban scenes. In Untitled (1991), a photograph hereafter referred to as “Bent,” (Fig. 13) the handcuffed headless body stands before the backdrop of a city. The city is anonymous, its features too small for clear identification by the skyline. The “headless” figure clenches his fists and the impression of this gesture is that the pose or the situation is painful. The pose is a familiar one: it is the position a person who has been arrested and cuffed, head down with arms behind their back.

The headless body that Chambers explores in Bent, can refer to several possible theoretical interpretations: as lack of personal identity; as a lack of intelligence (a perceived inability to think or function mentally); or lastly, as an illustration of how black existence is perceived as mainly physical and not mental. Chambers deals with this schism between mind and body for black individuals by focusing on the heads of his black models. Often, his photographs are characterized by emphasis on the problematic area with dramatic presences and absences, some of which will be revisited in this thesis in the chapter on violence and the black body. However, in this series of images concerning the black urban body, decapitation creates a void both visually and metaphorically; in Bent, the headlessness works with the pose and the handcuffs to subordinate the figure and connect the black body pictured to stereotypes about urban crime and the belief that particular ethnic groups, especially young black urban males, are more likely to commit violent crimes.<sup>17</sup> As Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien maintain in an essay entitled “True Confessions,” the prevailing stereotypes project the image of a black male youth as a “mugger” or “rioter,” and the black urban male represents a violent



Fig. 14. Leonard Freed,  
*Suspect in Police Car, New York,*  
1978.

threat to white society, becoming the objectified form of inarticulate fears at the back of the minds of “ordinary people” made visible in a multitude of texts included within the photograph.<sup>18</sup>

Leonard Freed’s Suspect in Police Car, New York (1978) (Fig. 14) is a black and white photograph taken from the interior of the car, using the dark leather of the seats with a slight view of the car window for its background. This photograph seems to depict the aftermath of an event—a crime—the anti-climax, but the car locates the event as Bent does not. Chambers also creates a more visually constructed composition, suggesting the placement of the body as outside of the city, whereas Suspect by its placement as well as its title, places the scene well within the city limits. But similar to the Chambers image, the body in Suspect has a sense of anonymity as there are no discernible facial features, physical attributes, tattoos or scars, to indicate who these men might be.

In Chambers’ Untitled (1991) hereafter named “Bowed” (Fig. 15), a black man stands with head bowed, naked before yet another unidentified city. In this photograph, the model stands off centre in the composition, creating a visually striking contrast between the soft rounded shape of the model, as compared to the jagged and uneven constructions of the city. The curious division in the sky by the man’s slumped body is emphasized by a scattered pattern of clouds that seem to limit themselves to one particular side of the city. The large expanse of the sky dominates the composition, and the model’s bowed head suggests a resignation as not having been, perhaps in male or phallic terms, as hard as the city. Urban black males experience the highest amount of

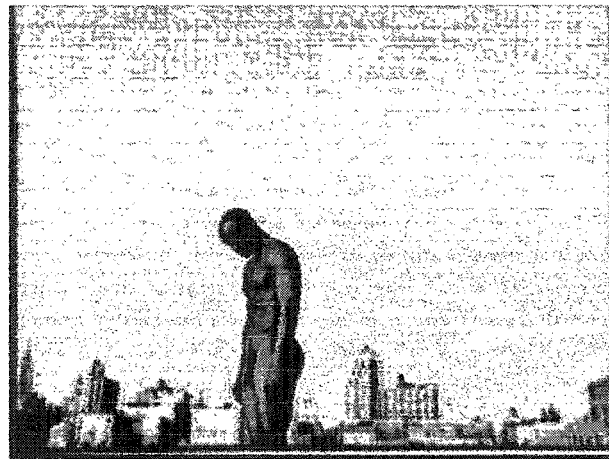


Fig. 15. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1991.

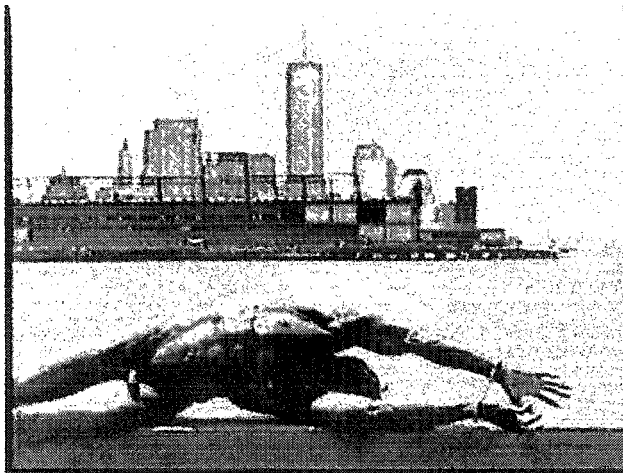


Fig. 16. Michael Chambers, *Hostage*, cir. 1990.

violence of any demographic in North America. The affluence and control of the city---and by extension modernity, mobility and the middle class---has been suggested by writer and critic Shelby Steele as being a contrived system of power positions that serve to equate blackness with victimization. In essence, that being black is to be outside of the middle class, living within a system of suppressed class identity.<sup>19</sup> Talcott Parsons writes: "Only in a highly urbanized, hence individualized and pluralized, society does the opportunity emerge for a saliently different minority group to diffuse itself through the society. Only then does its position become so anomalous as to activate strong pressures to break up its monolithic separateness, even if, as in some historic cases (for example certain Jewish communities), it is a privileged separateness."<sup>20</sup>

It has often been believed that economic mobility would ensure equality. The recent emphasis on the "normalization" of black studies pose a problem for black educators and critics who focus on the ways in which the black North American tradition "subverts" or rebels against white cultural norms. Phillip Richard writes,

The particular dilemma may be thought of as a subset of a larger psychological confusion that characterizes a fair portion of the growing African-American bourgeoisie. Thus, as we learn from studies of black college students by Jacqueline Fleming, and from a spate of books by Brent Staples, Lorene Cary, Ellis Cose, and others, upwardly mobile as well as already successful blacks---that is, those who have achieved or are on the way to achieving the very integration into American society long sought by their elders---are often beset by feelings of ambivalence, displacement, resentment, and even rage.<sup>21</sup>

Hostage (Fig. 16) is a juxtaposition of financial, political and social powers at work. Hostage creates a dialogue between the body and the city, both of which are stretched out and laid bare (ironic in that New York has often been referred to as "The Naked City") and in this instance, both are equals, as the body and city both occupy equal

space within the frame. Chambers' layering in this photograph questions the power of the metropolis, hovering dangerously above the man, and his ability to either resist or merge with, or even mimic, the city. Although handcuffed, this figure, with his arched back and spread fingers, is more active and less passive than the figures in Bowed or Bent. From the angle that Chambers had chosen, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre have become one, reaching above the surrounding buildings as the pan-ultimate phallic symbol. It becomes evident that the photographer was less concerned with race in the construction of this image than he was with masculinity, strength, power and perhaps playing with the idea of masculine insecurities, however, the handcuffs are still the primary form of restraint pictured. The shackled body also relates to the restrained body as part of the Middle Passage, in this image, as a precursor to being thrown into the water.<sup>22</sup>

The lighting of the figure indicates the natural early morning light of the east coast, and the exposure of the film was set to emphasize and create sharp outlines and powerful shapes in the panorama of the city and the interplay of taught musculature on the model. Following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Chambers had a chilling reaction to the image. "It surprised me. As if I never realized they were there. I did of course; in that way that one must when viewing the space, taking the photograph, creating the image. The Twin Towers have forever changed this image and inscribed different meanings. It's incredible."<sup>23</sup>

Notes: Chapter 4

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée Noir" in Léopold Sédar-Senghor, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache (Paris, Collections Quadrige: Presses Universitaires de France), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 915. Marx gives this description of this period of history: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production."

<sup>3</sup> Many missionaries, including Livingstone and Malté-Brun were not only intent on delivering the Christian faith, but believed wholeheartedly in the humanity of Native Africans. Encyclopaedia Britannica (1875), s.v. "Africa," 245-272.

<sup>4</sup> See Hugh Thomas, The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and Milton Meltzer, Slavery: A World History (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> The Diaspora can refer specifically to the resettlement of the Jewish people outside of Palestine after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC and again following the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Diaspora (Also called Dispersion) is also defined as a scattering or dispersion of culture, people or language that was formerly concentrated in one place. Ethnologists and archaeologists use the phrase to refer to any large-scale migration, such as the African Diaspora into the Americas or the South Asian emigration to the Pacific coast. Ideologically the African Diaspora has been said to develop as a result of the desire for capitalist gain through the procurement of free labour that was provided in large number to the New World, America.

<sup>6</sup> Fanon, 116.

<sup>7</sup> "Modernity's Sphinx: Woman as Nature and Culture" in John Jervis, Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999): 114, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Cooper, Fully Exposed: The Male Nude in Photography (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990):121, 127, 133. See also "Masculinity, Sexism, and Censorship Law: Censorship and Homophobia" in Maurice Berger et al. eds. Constructing Masculinity (New York: Routledge, 1995): 258-260.

<sup>9</sup> (Jean) Léon Gérôme's (1824-1904) paintings of Orientalist subjects are notable for their rich colour and smooth, meticulous finish, and were almost ideally suited for



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photographic reproductions. Gérôme remained a prominent exhibitor at the Salon, and despite the nearly photographic realism he employed, the paintings were, for the most part, pastiches of Indian, Egyptian, and Turkish elements that had no basis in reality. See Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> “The concept of a black Saint Sebastian represents an intriguing subversion of the traditional portrayal of a favorite subject in Western art. Through one unexpected substitution, the photograph embraces the imposition of the culture and religion of the oppressor upon the oppressed – the physical bondage and wounds being visual tropes for the spiritual and psychological injuries and imprisonment of the African who is caught in cultural and religious traditions not his own--what many sociologists have seen as the essence of the African American experience.” Taken from a website dedicated to the art of Carvin Rinehart, photographer, where Joseph Martin comments on Rinehart’s Saint Sebastian, Martyr, a colour photograph with oils. Accessed January 2003; available from <http://www.earlham.edu/~rinehca/legends/sebastian.htm>; internet.

<sup>11</sup> Extricated by well-intended ministers of religion, Ota Benga was transferred through several eleemosynary institutions of learning, while Verner was kept busy with new plans for African empire building with backing from New York millionaires. Ota Benga died in Lynchburg, Virginia, of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1916, apparently despondent that he could not return to Africa. Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). See also The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) See also Roger Shattuck “Man in a Cage” in Los Angeles Times Book Review (Sept. 20, 1992) p. BR12 and Roger Shattuck, “The Man in the Monkey Cage” in “Comment on the World,” Los Angeles Times (Oct. 2, 1992) p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> English scientist, Charles White, author of An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables; and from the Former to the Latter, used a drawing of a monkey on two legs in an upright position with a walking stick in hand, originally published a century before in E. Tyson’s Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris. White, a member of the Royal Society, maintained that this image, published in his 1799 edition, was part of the proof that Negroes were closer in evolutionary terms to apes than humans, thus proving their innate primitiveness.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Mister Jefferson and The Trials of Phillis Wheatley.” Lecture delivered March 22, 2002, as the 31st Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center. [The full print version of the lecture on-line] Accessed December 2002; available from <http://www.neh.gov/whoware/gates/lecture.html>; internet.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Preface” from Thelma Golden, ed. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 13.

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<sup>15</sup> “On 31 January 1992, the overwhelming majority of long-term offenders (almost 85%) were Caucasian. The remaining group consisted of inmates from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including native people, Asiatics, blacks and others. The distribution of long-term offenders across ethnic backgrounds is similar to the ethnic distribution for the total offender population, although there was a somewhat higher proportion of Caucasians and a somewhat lower proportion of native people in the long-term offender group.” Sue Séguin, Bart Millson and David Robinson “Long-Term Offenders: Who Are They and Where Are They?” Correctional Service Canada Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada. Between 1930 and 1972, 455 people were executed for rape in the US, 405 of them black. From Wendy Kaminer, It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995) In Canada indigenous people make up some 5% of the total population but 32% of the federal inmate population. There has been a 204% increase (whites 23%) in the number of blacks incarcerated in the Canadian province of Ontario between 1986 and 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Chambers, telephone interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 23 February 2001.

<sup>17</sup> “Foreign-born people make up 20.2 per cent of the Canadian population but represented only 11.9 per cent of those incarcerated or on conditional release in 1991. Government figures indicate that 18 of every 10,000 Caribbean-born immigrants in Canada wind up in penitentiary. Yet, in an Angus Reid Southam news poll of 1,508 Canadians taken in 1994, 51 per cent supported the view that certain racial or ethnocultural groups are more likely to be involved in crime than others.” Fear of Crime in Canada: Taking the Pulse of a Nation, by The Church Council on Justice and Corrections, for the Department of Justice Canada. April 1995. [Archive or as full-text on-line] Accessed February 2003; available from [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching\\_backgrounders/crime/fear\\_of\\_the\\_offender.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching_backgrounders/crime/fear_of_the_offender.cfm); internet.

<sup>18</sup> Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, “True Confessions,” in Thelma Golden, ed., Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 196-197.

<sup>19</sup> By suppressed I refer to Steele’s definition of “middle-class blacks” and their change in behaviour when they are convinced that to be “black” is to be poor. Shelby Steele, “On Being Black and Middle Class.” Commentary, vol. 85, no. 1 (January 1988): 42-47. A major difficulty for the black males in North America concerns being confronted with the same “real” inequality that faced their parents and grandparents, and there still exists the persistent myth of the notion that things have become, and are becoming, better for blacks. “As a result of the real material conditions and the unreal illusions of progress, African Americans males are becoming confused as to what values to transmit to the younger generations. Already there is a subtle shift in value orientations among African Americans.” This can also be said to hold true, to a lesser degree, for black Canadians as well. According to L. Goddard and W. Cavil III, Afrocentrism and the reparations movement—both of which represent the black community’s response to centuries of

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political, economic and social oppression, “as discussed in interviews with parents, teachers and students, aims to redefine the black identity and reconstruct the historical memory of African-Americans. The reparations movement, in contrast, believes in “righting the wrong,” by claiming a fair share of the wealth that black labour helped create in previous centuries.” Reginald L. Jones, ed., Black Adolescents (Berkeley: Cobb and Henry Publishers, 1989), 387.

<sup>20</sup> Talcott Parsons, “Introduction: Why ‘Freedom Now,’ Not Yesterday?” in The Negro American (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), xxiv.

<sup>21</sup> Phillip M. Richards “Signifying” in Commentary, vol. 105, no 6 (June 1998): 68-71.

<sup>22</sup> The figure can also be read as sacrificial, restrained with body bent back, in a sense also headless, as his head is in shadow. The black body pictured here as a sacrifice presented on an altar before the financial and social temple that is the city.

<sup>23</sup> Conversation with Michael Chambers 18 January 2003, during the exhibition Black Bodies: Race, Resistance, Response. Curated by Pamela Edmonds. Presented at M.A.I. (Montréal, arts interculturels) 16 January-15 February 2003, Montreal, Québec.

## Chapter 5

### Violence and The Documentary Body: Dislocations and Amputations

“In the whole world no poor devil is lynched, no wretch is tortured, in whom I too am not degraded and murdered.”

Aimé Césaire, *Et les chiens se taisent*.

The two previously discussed aspects of the documentary body dealt with savagery and restraint. In this chapter, the black body as a site of violence is examined as a result of historical events that include the commercialization of the black body, the guillotine, the bullet and the rope. The photograph of the suffering black body remedies an amnesia that allows disavowal of the presence of difficulties concerning race today. The absence of the slave body works for and against the rise of critical theories concerning race and racism—that is, its rejection creates a public culture that is able to deny stereotypical processing of the black body; whereas its presence re-enacts a series of events, whether micro or macrocosmic, that reveal the restrictions based on race still active in traditional and contemporary socio-political discourses.

Despite Kenneth B. Clark’s assertion that the use of force for the maintenance of class, racial, economic and national distinctions as no longer being possible due to the revulsion against international warfare infecting domestic society, violence is still being used against black bodies to this day.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to The Negro American of 1965, Clark states that people are no longer willing to allow violence as the determinant of status in American society. However, almost forty years later, violence against black bodies has continued in a direct effort to assert class, racial, economic and even national control. This effort is manifest in the continued actions of individuals or groups both

physically, in the form of shootings, beatings or lynchings, and psychologically in the depiction and representations of blacks continually produced and reproduced by the society at large. Moreover, these physical acts have been downplayed as random or incidental even as they have been documented, and times circulated, for the continued entertainment of those who inflict it, and occur with a frightening, almost repetitious, serial quality.<sup>2</sup>

In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon's desire to be recognized and treated as "a man, nothing but a man" is punctuated by his choice to accept being identified with his ancestors who had been enslaved or lynched in order to more easily be identified by the majority of whites he meets. His choice, according to his text, is to either be identified in the "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else... "Sho good eatin'" or as a descendant, an inheritor of all of these. This can be interpreted as a dislocation, the amputation of his body from his self. It is within this moment of awareness that it is deemed essential that the black man separate himself from his skin and all of its connotations if he is to function successfully in Western society or to be taken seriously. It is the amputative moment of colonial awareness, and even though acts of violence were visited on his grand-father, Fanon must contend with being identified not only with his kin but also with the actions that were visited upon that man and those like him. Each of those actions are frozen and imbibed by his ethnic characteristics. The fact that it is as impossible today as it was then to slough off these racial schema is partially due to the representations that later generations received in the "flawless," "unquestionable" text that is the photograph.<sup>3</sup> Fanon writes,

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I didn't want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men.

Even as Fanon refuses to accept this amputation, as does Chambers, the difficulty is in finding a path through the complex network of personae imbued by western culture into and onto black skin. Chambers' headless, faceless black bodies have been used to express not only loss of identity but also psychological and physical manifestations of pain. The amputation of which Fanon speaks takes place for Chambers in the removal or replacement of the head that signals the split of mind and body, and is so crucial to the location of colonial power texts which situate black power in the body and white in the mind. Chambers demonstrates that this is not a painless process. As an extension of the urban documentary body theme, Bullseye (1995) (Fig. 17) focuses on the black male as urban target. In this photograph, the shiny muscular body of the black model is marked by the bulls-eye on the back of his head. Playing with aspects of time in his photographs, the photographer represents a prescient view of the violent murder of this body without blood being shed. It becomes quite clear then that Chambers engages his view of these stereo-cultures in his interpretation of the political. Bullseye was created after the shooting death of an unarmed black teen in the Toronto metro area in 1987.<sup>4</sup> The image brings to mind at once the tribal resonance of body marking and tattooing as well as the contemporary photographic reality of the lack of face and particular identity of the subject, the strong black male, where his gaze is more dangerous even than the muscular strength of his body. "I didn't think to do it right away," comments Chambers, "It just sort

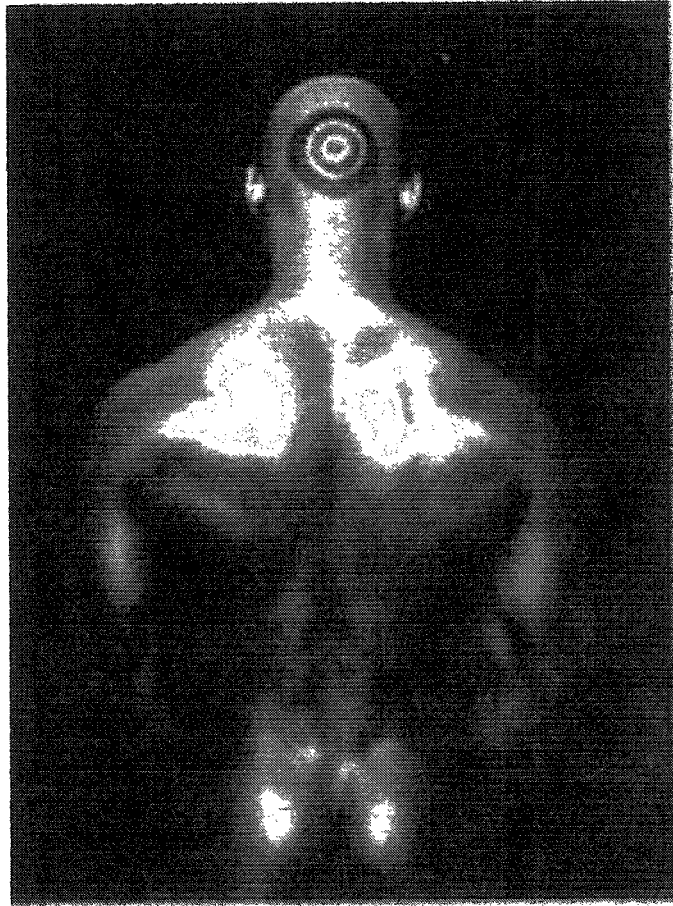


Fig. 17. Michael Chambers, *Bulls-eye*, 1995.

of came up in an angry ball years later after seeing yet another news clip of the shooting. It was a crime and no one was jailed. So I felt like that was all we were. Targets. So I figured, all right then, let's help them out..."<sup>5</sup>

In Sunflower (1995) (Fig. 18), the flower comes to represent the head and face of the model. The beheading of the black body within this frame was performed by using the most painless of scalpels: an enormous sunflower. It also suggests, however, that Chambers is very much aware of the happy, sunny Negro and this depiction, however "innocent", carries the same weight as any of his more overt images in demonstrating the harmlessness of the sunflower as a way of re-inscribing the ever smiling, happy sambo of the Antebellum South. The decapitation of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima on commercial products is also conveniently forgotten in the happy grin of its representatives and namesakes. Sunflower is an almost immaculate photograph; the beautifully simple composition with high key lighting brings almost every detail into focus for the observer, except the man's face, hidden by the enormous head of the flower and whose body is simultaneously hidden and exposed by the single vertical of the flower's stem. It is the flower, not unlike Imogen Cunningham's use of the buds, leaves, stamens and pistils of succulents and plants, which is the prime sexual organ in the photo. The solid black background and centrality of the figure repeat themselves in Chambers' work, and the dusting of chalk on the legs and torso recalls the George Rodger photograph of two Korongo Nuba Wrestlers, 1949 (Fig. 19): in it the victor rides high on the shoulders of a friend, his body dusted with ceremonial wood ash. The dusting of the pigment on both men's bodies and the central vertical line created by the well muscled line of one man's





Fig. 18. Michael Chambers, *Sunflower*, 1995.

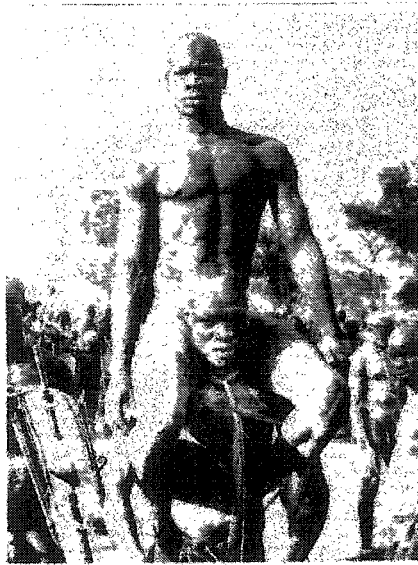


Fig. 19. George Rodger,  
*Korongo Nuba Wrestlers*, 1949

chest that flows downward into the line of the necklace are read in much the same way as the large face of the sunflower. The plant's thick stem and the large, dark hands that hold it are framed by horizontal upward sweeps created in Sunflower by the enormous leaves of the plant, and by the limber arms and legs of the figures in Korongo.<sup>6</sup>

Melody Davis believes that the male nude must be feminized in order to satisfy the action ideal inherent in all "acceptable," heroic depictions of a male body without clothing.<sup>7</sup> Sunflower is not frail; the construction of the image is intended to tie aspects of the flower to the body of the man, including allusions to size and strength. Virility is also implied by the choice of the plant, as the sunflower can produce hundreds of seeds per flower head. Although the face of the man is hidden and the darkness of the background is close to the skin of the model, there is a lightness that comes from the photographer's use of classical verticality, perhaps helpfully illuminated by the large, brilliant face of the flower: Its face becomes his face and the contrast, balance and the beauty of the flower that possibly mirrors the beauty of the model, inside and out.

Moot Point (1995) (Fig. 20) speaks to this end: Chambers' photograph features a black man with his mouth sewn painfully shut. This violent silencing of the black male, all the more striking for the lighting and positioning of the figure, sends as clear a message as the headless figures in several of Chambers' photographs: the black male as associated with body as opposed to the mind; as silenced rather than heard through a painful process that occurs at many different levels in North American, and in the case of this artist, Canadian society.

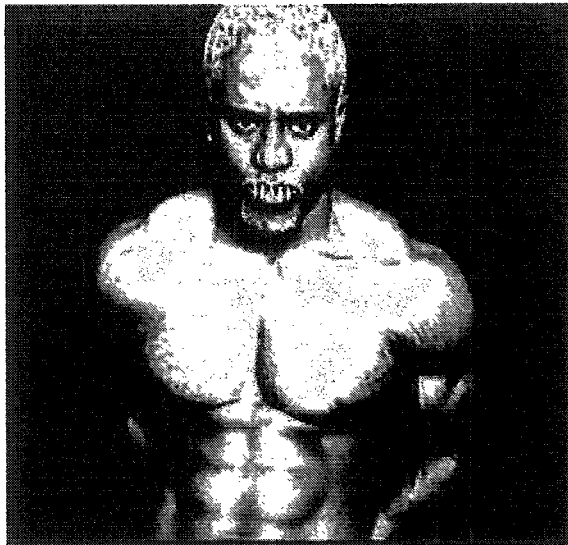


Fig. 20. Michael Chambers, *Moot Point*, 1995.

The classic stance of the model works in tandem with his muscular form against the background. While Chambers delivers the poignant image of the black nude body, he just as easily transmits his messages concerning the lived actuality of the Western black male. Moot Point features a beautifully built muscular man, whose piercing gaze does not release the viewer, instead, even as a photograph, challenges the viewer's right to "consume" him or his image without protest or resistance. His mouth is sewn shut, his arms are behind his back and his gaze speaks volumes. Striking and disturbing at the same time, the gaze of this nude resonates with the anger of the silenced, the muted, the unheard in an embodiment of Chambers' personal experiences and in North American society. The energy of this image emerges from a man whose voice has been silenced by the many mechanisms imbedded in the culture and society in which he lives. The viewer is suddenly faced with a subject that resists the lack of intelligence and lack of assumed wealth of words physically manifested in the form of a painful stitching of the mouth; an indication of the pain often inscribed on black bodies in order to silence them.<sup>8</sup> The shot, taken from slightly above, is voyeuristic, implying that the power of the gaze affects the model. His sewn lips will never reveal the desires of the viewer, nor his own. He is a muscular sexual animal that, for the sake of order, requires silencing and restraint.<sup>9</sup> The model's eyes however, have not been restrained and continue to speak. The powerful gaze and strong, defined, muscular body deliver a number of messages, not all of which have been silenced by the stitching of the man's mouth. Elisabeth Alexander agrees that black bodies in pain for public consumption have been a Western spectacle for centuries. According to Alexander, "This history moves from public rapes, beatings and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing." Referring to the video-taping and

arrest of former Washington D.C. mayor Marion Barry on drug charges; the Clarence Thomas senate hearings; Mike Tyson's rape trial; and, of course the Rodney King beating,<sup>10</sup> it becomes clear that traumatic instances for the black male body, both physical and non-physical, are openly "consumed" by the larger populace. One example within this system of violent display exists in the photographs of lynchings that became a popular subject of postcards. These postcards displayed horrific events of human suffering and violence and were freely circulated up until and including the time at which Clark wrote his introduction.<sup>11</sup> This form of redirected or subverted violence has replaced the larger scale violence of race restriction or segregation to which Clark referred. Instead, smaller acts have become a salient method of maintaining boundaries over which those of colour are not openly encouraged to cross. As these images and events are placed in the background in recent years, they have nevertheless continued to occur. Attacks such as the Texas incident continue and the images still circulate, albeit perhaps now more covertly on select websites and in desktop published magazines, among other sources.<sup>12</sup> The use of an image of that suggests this type of "forgotten" violence evokes strong reactions that deny its contemporary existence by affirming it as "history", thus placing it, and its implications of continued violence and injustice, at a distance. The documentary body relies on what Roland Barthes terms the invisibility of a photograph; its transparency ensures that the referent will not be seen but constantly referred to, and for the historical or sociological, referred to at a great distance.<sup>13</sup>

The black man is both hidden and revealed, both individual Subject and historical subject.<sup>14</sup> Hood (1995) (Fig. 21) is a silver gelatin print taken of a man whose head is



Fig. 21. Michael Chambers, *Hood*, 1995.

covered by a cowl and a thick cord or rope. Specific references to slavery and lynching may be obvious connections for most, yet Chambers maintains that his original idea had nothing to do with that part of his collective past, but part of his present experiences. This illustrates that the visual signifiers we associate with particular occurrences are not consistently employed by or applied to the black body politic. The man's body in Hood is without clothing and the position of his arms behind his back (tied or not—Chambers does not indicate) lead the viewer from the cowl and rope down his arms to his semi-erect member.

A more thorough examination of the male body in the visual arts, both black and white, would be facilitated by the awareness of basic presuppositions that create difficulties in the reading of images that contain the male nude body and more specifically, the penis. The demonization of the penis evolved along the same historical path as the demonization of the black body. The fate of the organ and the race have been seemingly inextricably joined such that one now represents or may stand for the other. The Black male body has become the black penis and the black penis has become the Black man.<sup>15</sup> Thus the resistance to the black male is exacerbated by the conflagration of the penis with the black male himself. As the unpredictable nature of penile control and compulsion continues to be a struggle for the white male, a human manifestation, albeit socially and culturally constructed one, is a threat almost beyond comprehension. To put it simply, if a man cannot control his own penis, how can he control a larger penis in the form of a man? According to Mercer and Julien: “The black subject is objectified into



Otherness as the size of the penis signifies a threat to the secure identity of the white male ego and the position of power which whiteness entails in colonial discourse.”<sup>16</sup>

In Hood this distance is bridged not only by the hood and rope about the model’s head but also the bold nudity of the subject. This nude can be read in the habitual manner as sexual and physically, visually beautiful. However, Chambers has manipulated the nude aspect of the body with the full frontal positioning and the seemingly restrained hands behind his back in order to connect the ostensibly benign nude with the violence of lynching and the black male’s threatening sexuality. Even more fascinating is the extent to which Chambers deals with the denial and ambivalence of the viewer: He openly maintains the disturbing elements of the image, while presenting the viewer with an alternative text that not only serves to bring the lynching into the present moment, yet also presents a different context through which the standardized image of black pain can be read: Not all of the struggles a black person suffers have to do with slavery or its history. This image Chambers maintains, speaks of a very current and contemporary suffering, that of a man who is unable to see his own future. Much like Barthes’ example of Kertész’s works, Hood is a photograph that almost “speaks too much,” that makes us reflect on a suggested meaning that extends beyond, but at the same time is different from, the literal one.<sup>17</sup>

In much the same way that Linda Nochlin describes the fragment as a positive founding trope for the transformative ideals of the French Revolution, fragmentation for the black male in art is an acknowledgement of not only physical but psycho-social

dismemberment manifest in acts of violence perpetuated upon blacks.<sup>18</sup> When deliberately undertaken, the severing of the head from the body marks a significant shift in visual representation for non-white people; when unintentionally produced, this effect underlines the need to question the frequency and importance of depicting a black figure without a head, the symbolic and physical home of reason and “civilization.” Another fragment to be considered is a black man’s skin; he is separate from it in many ways as it is a deformed part of him, an aberration, a sign of bedevilment. He becomes his skin, the dark, violent aspects of the epidermis become parts of his nature. Artist Elizabeth Ingraham suggests that, “...skins are garments, not clothing for the body, but clothing as body. They costume and camouflage the self, conceal and reveal identity, contain and control sexuality, embody states of longing and desire.”<sup>19</sup> Fear of passivity in white males and prevention of the symbolic activation of what is believed to be an insatiable, grotesquely libidinous, unstoppable sex drive of the black male creates an almost hysterical desire to enter into a process of demystification of the sexuality the black male through the violence of castration.<sup>20</sup>

This acknowledgement of the denial of continued violence against non-whites in North American society is a predominant function in Chambers work. His message is simple: this is how we suffer, today and everyday, and it has not yet ended. Without the drama of blood or the theatre of sound, photographs such as Hood and Bullseye work in the past, present and hopeful future, by reminding viewers of the prevailing and evolving conditions of Black males in contemporary society. The *sine qua non* of the photographer’s efforts is to present the image of the Black male as multi-layered and

complex, countering the simplistic and often reductive imagery that still persists in our visual culture.

There is a strong sense of abjection at work within the images of his black males. They are muscular yet always pictured with a sense of the too beautiful, at the same time as the horrible, in such a way as to at times repulse as much as attract. Chambers beholds his men, fragments them, robs them of sight, transforms their bodies into sights of disfigurement; they are beautiful even as they are ugly, *animus feritas* (*bellus amoenus*), the beautiful demon. Freud wrote that the individual character of psychic traumas was linked to the traumatic scenes that had provoked them. According to the classic terminology, the mnemonic residues of particular “scenes” determined symptoms and it is not a single event, but multiple traumas, frequently analogous and repeated, that was the cause of the symptom(s). “As a result, it became necessary to reproduce chronologically this whole series of pathogenic memories, but in reverse order: the latest at the beginning and the earliest at the end...”<sup>21</sup> As Bullseye prefigures the act of violence it stands to reason that the trauma would be suspended, but it is not. The horror of the moment is as terrible as it is fascinating; you cannot take your eyes from it. And it is this effect, this *Ersatz*, this surrogate for the actual event, that causes the psychic recoil of the observer, and even more so, those who identify with the subject.

Notes: Chapter 5

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, "Introduction: The Dilemma of Power," The Negro American (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in the past were often targeted: African-Americans especially, yet sometimes Native Americans, Latinos, Muslims, Jews, Asian immigrants, and European newcomers as well.

<sup>3</sup> Fanon, 112.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Wade Lawson, aged 17, was shot in back of the head by Peel Region police officers on December 8, 1988. An illegal bullet was used. Constables Anthony Melaragni and Darren Longpre were charged with second degree murder and aggravated assault. Both were found not guilty by an all white jury. Despite several reports going back to the 1970's, the Morand Report [1976] the Pitman Report [1977] the Carter Report [1979], the Toronto Metropolitan Police force continues to be plagued by a pattern of shootings of unarmed men of colour.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Chambers, telephone interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 23 February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The sunflower has appeared in many compositions that feature the black body. Faith Ringgold's Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles (1991, acrylic on canvas) features women of colour within a colourful, positive context that touches on intersecting discourses concerning the working of textiles, art, communal work, history and the sphere of the woman as outside of the home. Winslow Homer's 1875 painting, Taking Sunflower to Teacher also features the sunflower as a striking presence alongside a young seated black boy. The boy is idealized as a positive image, even as the title figures into the flower as gift and the state of the child's clothes indicate poverty working well into the relationship between virtuosity, poverty and otherness.

<sup>7</sup> "The ideal of action protects the man from slipping into the socially subordinate role reserved for women." Melody Davis, The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>8</sup> There are also allusions to things of which the black community does not speak: AIDS and HIV and the silences that surround the virus and disease is endemic. Michael Chambers has played a major part in supporting and promoting AIDS awareness for several years.

<sup>9</sup> Black slaves in several countries were frequently fitted with tight restrictive devices that prevented them from speaking, moving or escaping. These devices were usually constructed in metal and similar to the harnesses, bridles and muzzles used on animals. Please see: Peter Kolchin, American Slavery: 1619-1877 (Hill & Wang, 2003).

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “Can you be BLACK and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." in Thelma Golden, ed., Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 91-110.

<sup>11</sup> For an insightful look at the violence of lynching and the distribution of photographic postcards of these events, please see James Allen, ed Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Twelvetees Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> John William “Bill” King, Lawrence Russell Brewer and Shawn Allen Berry were charged with murder in the killing of James Byrd, 49, who was savagely beaten, then shackled by his ankles to the back of a pickup and dragged to death on June 7. Byrd’s torn right arm, head and torso were recovered along a twisting, 2-mile stretch on a narrow country road. “The number of organized hate groups in the United States increased 20 percent last year, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala. Nearly 9,000 hate crimes, more than half of them motivated by race, were reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1996—compared to 7,947 incidents in 1995, and 5,932 incidents in 1994. Last week, James Byrd Jr., a 49-year-old black man, was dragged to death in Texas by a chain from the back of a pickup truck. Recently, two black men also became the targets of possible copycat crimes in Illinois and Louisiana.” Please see Rebecca Leung, “Hate Crimes in America: Texas Killing Spotlights Nation’s Racial Divide.” [Transcript on-line] ABCNews.com (December 17, 2000), Accessed November 2002; available from <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/jasper990121.html> and <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/hatecrimes980611.html>; internet.

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Trans. by R. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 4-7.

<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Strozier, Preface, Foucault, Subjectivity and Identity: Historical Constructions of Subject and Self (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> See Gilman, 109-116.

<sup>16</sup> Mercer and Julien, 194.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Nochlin, The Body in Pieces: Fragment as a Metaphor for Modernity. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 7-15.

<sup>19</sup> Reflections in Black Smithsonian African American Photography: A History Deconstructed. Curated by Deborah Willis. Organized by the Anacostia Museum Center for African American Art and Culture, the Smithsonian Institution, 1990.

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<sup>20</sup> Castration was a common act during the lynching process where the penis of the victim was cut off (in most cases the victim was still alive) and inserted into his mouth prior to hanging or burning.

<sup>21</sup> The passage continues, "... it was impossible to make one's way back to the first trauma, which is often the most forceful, if one skipped any of its successors." Freud as quoted in Fanon, 143-144. Fanon does not specify whether this particular passage is from Anna Freud's The Ego and the Mechanism of Defence (New York: International Universities Press, 1946). No specific source for the quote, nor page number, was given.

## Chapter 6

### Reconstitution of The Documentary Body

The figures in Chambers' photographs are a part of the tradition of the nude body as flesh, fragment, and mirror. Some of the photographs may not probe the realm of scientific exploration, yet the vulnerable body, the flesh, is an intrinsic part of his art. An emphasis on corporeality, evident in the firm muscularity of his models, is an important part of his photographic methods. The idealized body, the idol, both male and female, figures prominently in Chambers' work. The bodies are at the peak of physical condition and their vulnerabilities are revealed by way of particular devices including lighting, pose, body markings and various objects present in the frame.<sup>1</sup> Michael Chambers continually works toward the reconstitution of the black documentary body. The body transformed is an important aspect of his work, whether it be as beauty or ugliness; object of desire or exploited fetishized object.

Discus (c. 1991) (Fig. 22) is the consummate classical figure of athletic beauty, a simple, lyrical signature on the parchment of hazy sky that Chambers utilises as his backdrop for this image. The strength of the man's form is undeniable as he holds an enormous discus aloft, his body a figure of strength and athleticism, and perhaps supreme struggle as alluded by the overwhelming size of the disc. Yet the weight remains above his head, and his pose suggests a classical reference to the god Atlas. In this photograph the black male has assumed the position of universal strength that connotes endurance and reliability that is made more iconic as both his head and face are hidden from view. The angle of the shot places the model's muscular back and rear towards the camera and

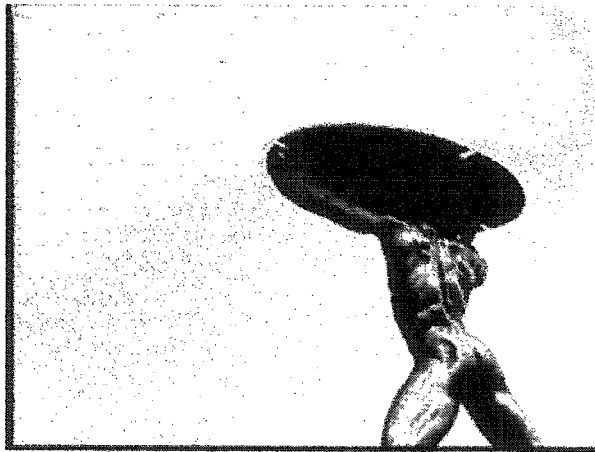


Fig. 22. Michael Chambers, *Discus*, cir. 1991.



the off centre composition creates a space where the model's movement can possibly follow through, as if the disk were about to be launched. However fluid and potent, the endurance implied in the photograph may be read in terms of the eroticised black male. The eroticised black athlete is a form of the documentary body that persists in the images of Jack Johnson to today's Evander Holyfield. Chambers' studies compare to the "classic" athletic nudes of the 1930's and 40's and reveals many similarities in the stance and angle of the shot and lighting.

Chambers' figures, part classical figure study, part bodybuilder ideal, offer the gallery viewer a part of the male image, often presented in many ways like the pin-ups of "physique photography" in American magazines of the 1940s and 1950s, including Adonis and Tomorrow's Man.<sup>2</sup> The selection of boxers was not incidental; the focus remains on the black male body with little or no clothing, as opposed to, but not exclusive of, football, baseball and hockey players. Sports figures that are both sexual and strong in the presence of the camera are also playing their role in the pageant of sports, and specifically in the case of the unclothed body, the spectacle that is boxing.

The colour photograph, The Eubank Roadshow (1994), by Gichigi, demonstrates that point. The carefully staged event has been created by a meticulously organized promotional machine that propels world champion super middleweight boxer Chris Eubank into the arenas of both sport and nude icon. His well oiled body and fierce gaze are essential in the ring, but helpful in the promotional tour as well, making and keeping with the target audience, mostly male, who wish to see and wager on not only a pugilist,

but also an ideal; an unstoppable physical machine who will stop at nothing short of victory, that is to say, the complete physical dominance of his opponent.

In a sense, Chambers' photographing of the black male nude body is a type of mirroring, of turning the camera onto his own body, by illustrating some of his own experiences, both physical and psychological, in his photos. By displaying the body as a site of contested meaning and value Chambers takes these occurrences, the good and bad in his life, and plays them out for the viewer, sometimes expressing an opinion or creating an often uncomfortable dialogue made up of frequently discarded images of the black experience, both negative and positive. Yet Chambers also uses non-black bodies to express different aspects of his life and experiences, moving outside of the trope of the black man as being limited to only "black" experiences.

In Flag (c. 1991) (Fig. 23) Chambers initiates a type of montage of important political, social and fantastical figures by introducing the black body with the American flag and the fuzzy white hat typically associated with of Saint Nicholas and his elves. This combination may seem out of place with the context of black bodies in sport, yet the presence of the flag is an important element that involves nationalism and nationhood. Flag is reflective of the nationalistic forces aligned in sport: the athlete becomes a representative of the nation and as such creates some obvious questions as to the validity of the prize; recognition as a native son, since true inclusion is never assured. The Jesse Owens', Jackie Robinsons and many others never truly attained the full rights of citizen. Only by dominating others in sport can they approach the tempting promise of full

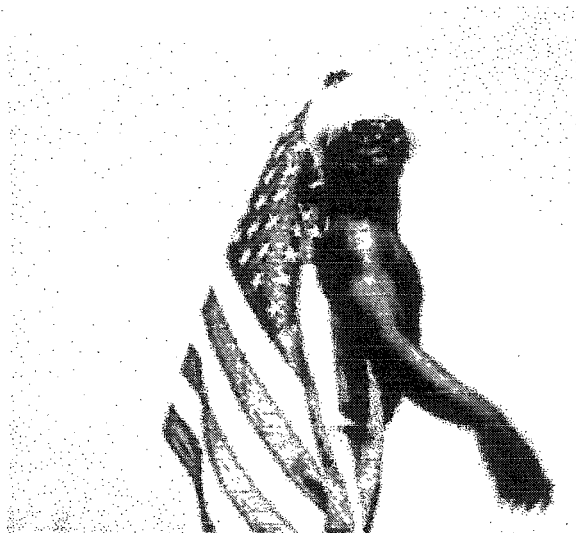


Fig. 23. Michael Chambers, *Flag*, cir. 1990.

acceptance, full nationhood, and by extension full personhood, often dangled in sport. This play on irony is underlined by the use of the flag of the very nation where a system of slavery lasted longer than in any other country in the Western world. The success of the photo can be found in the gaze and the stride of the model; he is going where he will without concern for the viewer or anyone else who may watch him. The man carries the flag as proof, however ironic as a former slave, of his belonging to that country.

In Boulder (1990) (Fig. 24) the rough landscape welcomes the sculpted form of the black male body, bringing the figure out of the imaginary landscape of jungle and heat, onto a stark, hard background which forces the viewer to attend and participate in the disruption of the proposed visual and imaginary landscape. The coiled body, seen from the back and with head hidden, becomes a geographical site, much like the terrain behind him. As a photographer, Chambers' artistic inspiration is drawn from both Canada and Jamaica. Using position and lighting as his tools in rendering landscape with black bodies both male and female, he deliberately places these bodies in, among others, Canadian landscapes and spaces. Anthony Joyette writes,

The term "Canadian art" should no longer be interpreted as exclusively art by aboriginal and mainly white artists in Canada, but also applied to the works of black Canadian and other artists of colour. Until this happens, contemporary Canadian art history will not reflect the complete range of its multiethnic or pluralist culture.<sup>3</sup>

Although American culture represents a significant influence and source of visual representations with respect to race, Canadian culture is by no means without its own "racialized representational practices...(that) must not be viewed as a mere importation from external models."<sup>4</sup> The racial nature of Canadian culture presents its own unique

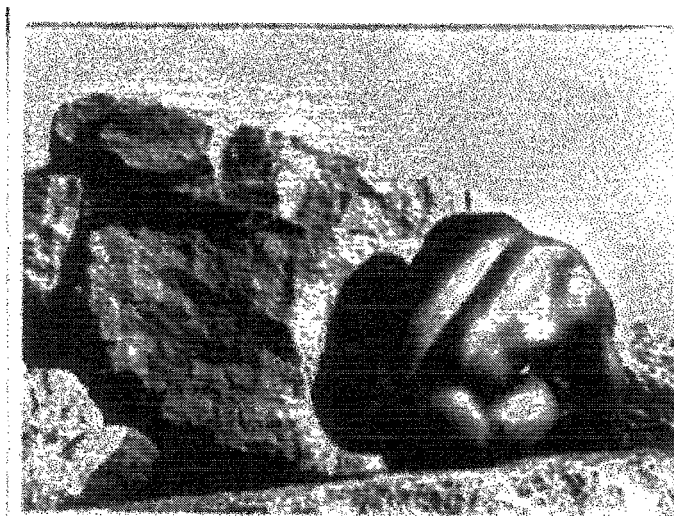


Fig. 24. Michael Chambers, *Boulder*, 1990.

obstacles to the black artist. Black Canadian artists work from a comparative source of traditions that form the foundation of all Canadian art, yet the work that they produce is seen as being outside of mainstream Canadian culture. Canadians of African descent are under-represented in the sanctum of Canadian art historical practice. However the presence of the black body as subject in the country's visual arts is not a recent development.<sup>5</sup> This illustrates the duality of the existence of black creative production in Canadian art: As with the United States, the presence of black bodies as subjects in the visual arts does not ensure recognition or acceptance of black artists, similarly, the presence of active black artists does not guarantee the presence of non-stereotypical depictions of the other.

When photographed within the northern terrain, black bodies are not only physically insinuated into the North American landscape but also symbolically, generating situations through which the viewer can be stimulated to participate. The geographical borders that the black body signifies situates these bodies as tropical and restricts their movement to and from different, or non-tropical, locations and spaces. The concept of geographical restriction works as an easy way to situate the person of colour as Other and maintains the idea of black as related to the tropical as native or inhabitant and never as visitor or vacationer. The black body is read as visitor within the West's continually culturally mapped terrain; even in Canada, where the black body is not recognized as a present and potent contributor to the Canadian cultural landscape, a relevant and active element both in the past and today. As black bodies are often geographically situated within the visual arts, the representation of a black nude without

the characteristically recognizable tropical environment, fruits or fauna suggests an uncomfortable displacement that disrupts the continual dialogue which feeds stereotype. This displacement creates tensions between the figures and the landscape that evoke diverse responses from viewers, white and non-white. The photograph of the black “beautiful” body within the white “beautiful” northern landscape visually encourages the viewer to engage in and question what racialized beliefs have fixed onto the map of colonial control both economic and social. As such, the Black nude male is an element within an imaginary physical and cultural landscape. According to Moira Gatens: “The imaginary body is not simply a product of subjective imagination, fantasy or folklore. The term ‘imaginary’ (can) be used in a loose but nevertheless technical sense to refer to those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the often unconscious imaginings of a specific culture, the ready-made images and symbols, through which we make sense of social bodies determine, for the most part, their status, their value and what will be deemed as their appropriate treatment.<sup>7</sup> There is an imaginary landscape that contains a stock of languages, images and social practices that constitute an unconscious dimension of our cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup> The imaginary landscape involved in much of the social-sexual education of West-Indian or Caribbean blacks involves the rigid belief that black and sex go together; and that instances of sensuality (as opposed to sexuality) do not truly exist without sex, a *habitus* that informs the images. As a result, nudity is considered almost obscene in most rigid West Indian societies and in some instances much less accepted than in many Western countries. bell hooks writes: “For some time now the critical challenge for black folks has been to expand the discussion of race and representation

beyond debates about good and bad imagery. Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical.”<sup>9</sup> As an element in the imaginary landscape, the black male body is rejected, unless it is mediated by specific markers of the dominant system or ideology. This disarms it and renders it harmless, reduced to symbol. Ralph Ellison writes about the black male as invisible, save when rendered as “a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe... (or)... one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms.”<sup>10</sup>

As it stands, the bodies within Chambers’ images become referents, symbols of divergent afro-American cultural constructions; the African, with its created naturalist primitivity; the West Indian, with its semi-cultured transformation from the animal to the trained anglicized islander (a deposed primitive); the immigrant who comes to the more materially advanced country (North America) only to be forced and gently caressed into the margins (black is beautiful). Positive images in the media and in the arts have also been in production since the invention of the photographic process. The photo-studies of James Van Der Zee and Roy DeCarava of the American black urban and sub-urban experience have carried on in the works of many photographers and film-makers who have contributed to the elevation and emancipation of the black image from its negative stereotypes. Chambers also endeavours to produce positive images in his insistence on the aesthetic goal of each photograph. That is to say, the photographer, as artist, strives to create a beautiful, engaging image.





Fig. 25. Michael Chambers, *Oscars*, cir. 1990.

Oscars (c.1990) (Fig. 25) transforms black bodies into icons of cinematic fame and places them in the ethereal landscape of an anonymous rocky beach. The backlight that emerges from behind the rocks creates an otherworldly scene where all except the icons, these Oscars, could easily disappear.<sup>11</sup> Chambers' figures stand solitary, backlit with natural light, their placement implies that they are made of the same material as the hillside, perhaps having even emerged from it as does the figure in Boulder. The angle of the shot was taken at the point when the sun illuminated the surface of the rocks but not the subjects themselves. This seemingly harsh environment could be one of Canada's coasts; the rocks and the coolness of the black and white gelatin silver print communicate an unyielding resistance of the landscape. The vastness of the photograph is accentuated by Chambers' positioning of the subjects, and the distance between them is mirrored on the left side of the composition by the rocky hills in the foreground and background. When Oscars is compared to other figures in Chambers works presented in this thesis, the static rigidity of the forms in Oscars becomes more pronounced in the face of less rigid, more naturalistic poses, and a notable difference in the play of distance and space. Again, Chambers' use of empty spaces speaks loudly: The Oscars stand poised on a bleak shoreline, as if placed there long ago like motionless *kouroi*; lonely figures on the rocky beach in the empty pantheon of great, unrecognized black actors.<sup>12</sup> While a deserted, rocky landscape can look the same almost anywhere, the roughness of the Canadian terrain, or any rocky terrain, contrasts with the lush tropical landscape.

Another unrecognized aspect of the black body in a positive image is that of black family unit. Photography is, like television, a technology of moments and instants. Yet unlike the flickering scenes of television or film, photographs isolate a moment and present it for scrutiny, closing the comfortable distance between the viewer and the viewed in that it challenges the willed amnesia, guilty conscience and moralizing self-regard involved in the “first” world’s fascination with watching the “third” world. Therefore the nude child in these advertisements becomes a signal to others that the parents are unable to care for and properly provide for his or her material needs. Promoted by photography, television and film, the nude black child has become a significant embodiment of the political, social and material insufficiencies of black communities and countries. This is also a prime component of the so-called myth of the black family unit.<sup>13</sup>

Although Chambers has photographed children, including the curvaceous planes of their mother’s bodies while they still remain cocooned inside, he counters this denial of family ties in his photographs of couples of every race, photographed in poses that emphasize the spiritual rather than the physical. The bodies of the black couples he presents are posed and nude, with placement and lighting that suggest strong supportive relationships in the place of sexual, fleeting ones that evoke the image of the Savage. The bodies are often placed in nature, with angles that suggest the viewer has discovered them quite by accident, embracing in a forest of green lichen or in a vast field bracketed by an evening sky. The message of the black bodies present is clear: harmony, togetherness and tenderness, elements missing from the construction of the black male’s familial



Fig. 26. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1990.



Fig. 27. Michael Chambers, *Untitled*, cir. 1990.



Fig. 28. Michael Chambers, *Niksi* (detail), 1996.

relationships implied in absent fathers, single-parent families, poverty and crime. Even as the sensual is promoted and encouraged by the black bodies in Chambers' work, the sexual aspects and connotations will not be denied: It is an energy that to some extent infuses all bodies, regardless of race. Positive representations of black bodies, male and female together, are becoming less rare. Photographs of these bodies together, regardless of the coupling, in sensual rather than sexual poses and display, offer a different reading of the black body as belonging to a lexicon of sensuality rather than sexuality, of the human element rather than that of the beast.<sup>14</sup> (Figs. 26, 27) The realism that Chambers strives for is in the depiction of the everyday and the banal: all of his photographs of blacks relate daily ongoing experiences, symbolically and spiritually. Tenderness as part of the black physical experience counters the stereotype of hyper-sexuality and bestial, savage qualities.<sup>15</sup>

In a more symbolic than natural pose, Niksi (c.1996) (Fig. 28) works by utilising the facial expressions of the models to evoke a sense of bliss and calm emphasized by the supporting position of the woman's hands upon the man's head. There are props in this photo as well that transport the subject to a more natural, outside environment than the obvious indoor placement indicated by the sharp studio lighting. Although taken indoors, the use of the single element, the branches wreathed around the woman's neck, connects to Chambers' earlier works, The Pot, with his careful placement of the pot against the backdrop of the sky and Fern, with the almost delicate arrangement of vines around the model's head and shoulders.

These sexual myths concerning the natural savagery and lack of social control are both fear-inspiring and captivating; the image of a black nude body still represented sex, tied inextricably through Western attitudes to savagery and mental degeneracy, and photographs of this rampant sexual element are a large part of the construction of the Documentary Body. According to Cornel West, Americans are obsessed with sex and fearful of black sexuality. The obsession has to do with fear rooted in visceral feelings about black bodies and are fuelled by sexual myths about black women and men:

The myths offer distorted, dehumanized creatures whose bodies--colour of skin, shape of nose and lips, type of hair, size of hips--are already distinguished from the white norm of beauty and whose fearful sexual activities are deemed disgusting, dirty, or funky and considered less acceptable...Black sexuality is a taboo subject in America principally because it is a form of black power over which whites have little control--yet its visible manifestations evoke the most visceral of white responses, be it one of seductive obsession or downright disgust...Black sexuality puts black agency centre stage with no white presence at all.<sup>16</sup>

The cultural consciousness adumbrated in Michael Chambers' concern with realism is precisely what is absent from Robert Mapplethorpe's more cathartic self-satisfying preoccupation with sex. By making images that further fetishize black male bodies, Mapplethorpe avoids the question of how photographers, both black and white, might free themselves to transcend their material, social, and political surroundings. No less importantly, he forfeits the role of the artist as critic and judge of his own social order--an order in which, gays and lesbians of all races play a profoundly problematic role.<sup>17</sup> However, Mapplethorpe's governmental situation on the allocation of funds dependent on "acceptable" subject matter is significant and groundbreaking for the depiction of the human body.<sup>18</sup> The popularity in the past and present, and recent



accessibility of his photographs have contributed in many forms to AIDS awareness and prevention programs. Yet Chambers does not accentuate or focus on the penis with such attenuated specular energy. Instead the pose, shape and texture of the body create their own eroticism.

The erotic photograph, according to Barthes, by its very condition does not make the sexual organs a central object and may never even show them at all, taking the spectator outside of the frame; for it is there that the viewer can animate the photograph and have it animate them. “The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward the fantasy of a praxis, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.”<sup>19</sup>

Other photographers who deal with the nude black body include Dianora Niccolini, Rotimi Fani Kyode, Herb Ritts; the list is long. Many of these photographers are well known primarily for their work with the black body. It is interesting to note the specificity with which the black body, as subject of a photograph, is treated. “Specificity” meaning not only the general methods used to take pictures of the black subject, but the common lighting and positioning that runs as a common thread throughout most of the work. Essentially I am inferring a deliberate departure from what has become a standard way in which to photograph a black body by Chambers; I am also suggesting that his techniques, as well as contextual embellishments, alter the meaning of the photographs in such a way as to present the subjects as more, as I suggest most other artists produce, than an aesthetic exercise using the black body.

Notes: Chapter 6

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers also consistently uses models of different sizes and body types, with an ability to shift visual attention away from what can be called the “imperfect” body, while—ironically—at the same time, celebrating these imperfections.

<sup>2</sup> Ewing, 211.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Joyette, “Locating the Black Body in Canadian Art: A Perspective” Black Body: Race, Resistance, Response, Exhibition catalogue (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2001), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Charmaine Nelson, Through An-Other’s Eyes: White Canadian Artists –Black Female Subjects (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1998), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Joyette, 17. For an insightful reading of the depiction of the black female subject by white Canadian artists please see Nelson, Through An-Other’s Eyes.

<sup>6</sup> Gatens, iii.

<sup>7</sup> Gatens does not propose a theory of the imaginary *per se*, instead viewing it as a concept or system rather than a substitute for a theory of ideology. See Gatens, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Quote from Luce Irigaray as quoted by Gatens. “Irigaray suggest(s) (in later work) that the imaginary is not confined to philosophers and the psychoanalysts, but it a social imaginary *which is taken to be reality*, with damaging consequences for women who, unlike men, find themselves ‘homeless’ in the symbolic order.” Gatens, iii-iv. Emphasis in original quote.

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation, (Boston: South End Press, 1992). See also bell hooks and Cornel West, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life (Boston: South End Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1947), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, at the time this photo was taken only two Oscars for best male performance in a lead role have ever been awarded to black actors since the Academy’s inception May 16<sup>th</sup> 1929.

<sup>12</sup> At the 74<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards of 2002, actor Denzel Washington was awarded the Oscar for Best Actor, the second ever awarded to an actor of colour (the first being Sidney Poitier). Also at the 2002 ceremonies, actress Halle Berry received the Oscar for Best Actress, the first woman of colour to do so in the history of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

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<sup>13</sup> Slavery enforced a rigid systematic dissolution of families by the refusal to recognize family ties: Mother was separated from child, husband from wife, and sibling from sibling in the market of slave labour. In a sense this refusal became a part of the black familial mythology in which the genealogy of a child was always in question, thus establishing the saying “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” This particular system also insured the certainty of inheritance; those who could not own land had no need for offspring or genealogical ties.

<sup>14</sup> The character of Jean Veneuse in a novel by René Maran, questions his motives for marriage to his wife, asking, “...I wonder whether...in marrying you, A European, I may not appear to be making a show of contempt for the women of my own race and, above all, to be drawn on by the desire for that white flesh that has been forbidden to us Negroes as long as white men have ruled the world, so that without my knowledge I am attempting to revenge myself on a European woman for everything the her ancestors have inflicted on mine throughout the centuries.” René Maran, Un homme pareil aux autres (Paris: Editions Arc-en-Ciel, 1947), 11. Quoted in Fanon, 35.

<sup>15</sup> “In his concluding essay, “American Dionysus,” Patterson shows dispiritingly that this image of black masculinity as essentially predatory and ungovernable meets with little or no resistance in mainstream American culture—that it is, indeed, celebrated by it. Asking why black Americans, comprising only about thirteen percent of the population, have become an obsession of the majority, Patterson answers that “the Afro-American lies at the heart of Euro-America’s conception of itself as a ‘race,’ as a culture, as a people, as a nation.” He thinks that when blacks were seen as too different from, too alien from whites, they could simply be dismissed as inferior; but since the civil rights movement, African Americans have become “liminal figures,” and thus serve perfectly as a more physical, more expressive Dionysian foil to the intellectual and restrained Apollonian ideal of mainstream white America.” Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn review of Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries, reviewed in The New Republic, vol. 223, no 9-10 (August 28, 2000): 48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Cornel West, Race Matters (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Richards used the same type of argument to compare Sterling Brown’s poetry and that of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates’ theories in his introduction to The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. Phillip M. Richards “Signifying” in Commentary, vol. 105, no 6 (June 1998): 69.

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s work in federally funded museums in the US during the late 1980’s led to a new federal appropriations legislation, requiring artists to sign an affidavit assuring Congress that the funds awarded by the National Endowment for The Arts would not be used to promote, produce, or disseminate “obscene” or “indecent” materials. See also Robin Cembalest, The Obscenity Trial: How They Voted to Acquit in Artnews, vol. 89, no. 10 (1990): 136-41.

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<sup>19</sup> In reference to Mapplethorpe's Young Man with Arm Extended: "This boy with his arm outstretched, his radiant smile, though his beauty is in no way classical or academic, and though he is half out of the photograph, shifted to the extreme left of the frame, incarnates a kind of blissful eroticism." Barthes, 59.

## Conclusion

### **Producing the Self: Creating Images of the Black Male and Forgotten Beauty**

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*.<sup>1</sup>

While the late 50's, 60's and early 70's witnessed the tide of the civil and equal rights movements, photography had developed into an art form that extended itself into film and performance, becoming the mainstay tool of mass media. Massive upheaval in North American black consciousness centred on civil rights and the photographic image played a key role in the movement, which focussed on the rights of black Americans.<sup>2</sup>

This change, commonly believed to have begun in the late 60's and early 70's, actually took place during the introduction of the photographic process itself to North America with a number of black photographers being at the forefront of its technology and practice; Jules Lion, J.P. Ball, James Van Der Zee, and Roy DeCarava among others.<sup>3</sup> This history disrupts the common belief that blacks, both in the United States and Canada, were no more involved in the depiction of themselves than they were equal human beings. Such a need to construct ones image, to re-sculpt the fabrication of colonial displacement is manifest beyond the social and physical limitations that history has provided the black individual. Photography, especially in its infancy, was considered a cerebral art, and required of the photographer knowledge of the delicate science of light and chemicals. It can be no error that this technical art was culturally distanced from the tactile, physical, of the body experiences of blacks in North America at that time. Production of the image of blacks for and by blacks

became an emancipatory act, not from the slave chains or shackles of oppressive masters, but from the idea that only whites may visually construct non-whites.

It became harder, however, as fruit of the system that produced the displaced culture, to fall far from the tree. Mark Reid in his article "Postnegritude Reappropriation and the Black Male Nude" states that: "Authorial intent never insures against "burying" forms of reception since viewers tend to rely on certain master formulas to decode the unclothed black body."<sup>4</sup> This would mean that images created by artists of colour would not and could not be completely "free" of the constructions, both negative and positive, of the black male that were created by non-blacks. Blacks' view of themselves has long involved the abyss of shame and guilt. Both emotions stem from the complicity of blacks in the social construction and maintenance of the Black Body. This complex, Fanon names it an inferiority, is the outcome of a double process, primarily economic and secondly, the epidermalization of this inferiority.<sup>5</sup> In Chambers' work there is a sense that the artist acknowledges the position of blacks as participants, even if resistant and unwilling ones, in North America's contemporary mass culture.<sup>6</sup> He has long participated in the three practices inherent in a photograph; he is the operator, spectator and target all at once, able to be behind the camera and in front of it as well as the observer whose gaze consumes and regulates the images.<sup>7</sup> Through shared experiences, he becomes the model, transferring thoughts and emotions to the effort of placing himself where men of colour have not been acknowledged. In his work, one thing is certain: It is crucial that blacks recognize themselves in the production of their images.

However, Chambers risks perpetuating stereotype with his images since they can be simply consumed as aesthetically beautiful photographs. Those who do not recognize the messages embedded in each print can unknowingly accept the images as another form of the documentary body and never question its presence or significance, except to marvel at the photographer's technique and lighting skills. The sensual can also easily be interpreted as sexual, as many still view a nude body of any colour as having a direct relation to sex. This also disrupts any subversive message that the photographs may hold, as the nude is still a contested form in current critical debate. Discussions concerning public access, gallery and museum programs as well educational programs in schools and public art institutions are heated around the subject. The human body without clothing is still considered to be taboo, and it becomes admittedly difficult to create new ways of seeing black nude bodies within these strictures.

The negative that is associated with the naked body is all the more intriguing when the reader searches for the black nude in both Kenneth Clark's and Margaret Walters' studies on the subject, The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art and The Nude Male: A new Perspective. There are no photographs of black bodies in Clark's 1956 publication. One of the two black males that appear in Walters' book is one of a trio of nude boxers featured in a photograph from the London Evening Standard.<sup>8</sup> In this image, the black male is aptly feminized by the gesture of holding hands with the other boxers. The trio walk toward the end of a pier, and the image is laden with elements suggesting the futility of male emotional connectedness, and at worst homosexuality, as not unlike walking off the end of a pier. Another image, that of boxer Davey Moore, is featured in a painting by Audrey Flack, where the words "He

Fought, Talked, Then Died” painted across the top of the canvas, lend context to the hands of the boxer, spread open-palmed in a gesture of futility and perhaps even exasperation. The boxer seems to ask of the viewer for his next cue; “What do I do now?” becomes the unmasked, unanswerable question. This characterization of the black male as athlete is yet another repositioning of the documentary body that suggests and reinforces the marked absence of black bodies, male and female, from the store of bodily representations of the human race generated in the West for the past 800 years. The documentary body was possibly too present in the minds of these authors, as well as artists in classical times through to the Renaissance, that a depiction of a black nude body would automatically signal *less* or *lack*. The lack of black bodies as Hercules, Apollo, Venus and Diana speaks of a specific view that did not include the black body into the Pantheon of significant historical characters.<sup>9</sup>

The examination of these photographs is specific to the nude imagery only of this particular artist, Michael Chambers, and to the part of his production that dealt specifically with the black nude male. This in effect led to an examination of both the artist’s reason for his use of particular elements in creating the images and the reception of these kinds of images, that of black nude males, both in the past and today. In order to affect what I believe to be a more comprehensive examination of the public’s reception of the image of the black nude male body, examples of both the history of the social construction of the black male and examples of other photographic interpretations/depictions of these nudes of colour needed to be included.



An economic factor underlying a large portion of the discussion, involves identifying the middle class in North America and how this group figures into not only the production, distribution, but also the development of the image of the Black Male. It would seem to many that the middle class is comprised mainly of those who would perhaps have more access to particular spaces including art galleries and museums.<sup>10</sup> In essence, an argument can be made for the viewing of black nudes in the gallery setting as exclusive, part of the class that produced a large percentage of these images, often depicting both black men and women in various constructed personae, both negative and positive, that have remained fundamentally unaffected even in light of continual efforts on the part of concerned artists and creators of visual media. Yet Chambers' photographs are featured in many of these "exclusive" spaces settings where many, regardless of race, feel they neither belong nor wish to go. Current attitudes explored through imagery of restrained urban black bodies and the systems that keep these images, like those produced by Chambers, exist in a highly regulated form of circulation and distribution. The distribution of Chambers' images is mainly through the museum and gallery system; that is to say, Fine Art institutions. The circulation of his images depends on precisely the attitudes and beliefs of those who see them in the art setting; it will be by their reaction, be it acceptance or refusal, that the images will be accepted into the lexicon of fine art imagery, or rejected and moved to the margins only to be deemed original or avant-garde another day. Finally, these economic factors frame the discussion of race and reception, as does the Canadian identity of the artist. Canada has rarely figured the black male body in its national art and identity, creating a vacuum in which the black male nude has been sucked; still circulating in its controlled construction yet separate from the mainstream of Canadian visual identity, whether in the arts or the entertainment media. As

such, Canada also possesses a store of unrecognized, uncelebrated artists of colour, artists who have been working and producing in this country for many years without truly fitting into the complex jigsaw of Canadian visual culture. Photographs are important as documents and as art. However the photographs of Michael Chambers are significant because of his method of painful spectatorship. That is to say, Chambers utilises the very imagery that is loaded with stereotype and negative connotation and manipulates it in order to draw attention to the continual misuse of the bodies and symbols in those photographs. In essence, the hardest audience to reach may well be the black public. The difficulty has always been in the reception of the work by blacks; it would seem that the stereotypes are so firmly entrenched, so well believed, that one cannot help but to agree with Fanon's assertion that it is not as important to educate blacks as it is to teach them not to be the slave of their archetypes.<sup>11</sup>

Questions may be raised concerning the effectiveness of Chambers' methods in his effort to expose and destroy the prevalent stereotypes concerning blacks in North American society. The use of visual and cultural markers such as the burlap hood itself, and the positioning of the figure within the frame make it difficult to contemplate another image/idea besides that of the black historical experience. It is perhaps in this photographer's effort to use imagery that would disturb, imagery that would unnerve and disgust, as well as imagery that would delight and captivate, that his message becomes more strident and gains more solvency. Chambers is not afraid to show the black male body in a position of pain and expects his viewers to reach beyond the stereotype in their visual interpretations of his images. Chambers also does not flinch when depicting black subjects in a sensual rather than sexual manner.<sup>12</sup>

This manipulation implies an understanding of the situation depicted on one level but allows for ignorance of the more complex struggles at work on the other. Images such as Bullseye are beautiful and challenge the viewer only if the viewer can connect the irony of the target on the back of the man's head to the very current violence that exists in the lives of the majority of black males in both Canada and the United States. In photographing his friends the photographer deliberately shuns the professional modelling community which codifies the bodies of both men and women as commodities to be consumed while maintaining a comfortable distance implied in the purchase or rental of human flesh. There is no escape here, as all of the models are friends and at most acquaintances of the artist. This is one way in which Chambers disrupts common interpretations of his personal work: there are no professional bodybuilders or models among his group. In this way, representations, smiles, gestures and the subjects bodies themselves could all be considered parts of portraits rather than mere photographic constructions or observations.

I think again of the portrait of William Casby, "born a slave," photographed by Avedon. The (inimitable feature) here is intense; for the man I see here *has been* a slave: he certifies that slavery has existed, not so from us...I remember keeping for a long time a photograph I had cut out of a magazine...which showed a slave market: the slavemaster, in a hat, standing; the slaves, in loincloths, sitting...my horror and my fascination as a child came from this: that there was a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established *without method*.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty, the tension, in some of the selected photographs is the effect the photographer's choice has upon the viewer. Despite Barthes' observations concerning the photograph of the slave market, the decision to recreate, or in any sense refer to, particular instances and moments in the history of a people is problematic in that the strength of the

images does not guarantee solvency, nor does it cement the idea of a solution to whatever imbalance or wrongness is implied. That is to say that the use of a body about to be lynched, the head about to be shot and the body about to be shipped does not communicate a judgement but a *result*: our minds seek to fill in the next moment of the montage, creating a future or fiction which the reportage of the photograph encourages in its arresting moment. This fiction is *neither good nor bad but is*, thus perpetuating a behaviour based on inactive, uninvolved spectatorship. Clearly, the violence inflicted on black bodies historically is morally wrong, however, images neither confirm nor deny that moral assertion. In much the same way the word 'nigger' remains contested ground: some assert that the use of the word both creatively and domestically bring it into a contemporary setting where black people who use it control and effectively change its meaning. Others maintain that the use of the word perpetuates the negative stereotype that blacks have fought hard against, and that no amount of usage, by blacks, can alter its heinous and derogatory meaning.<sup>14</sup>

It is hard to look at any one of the photos without words like "beautiful" and "succulent." The bodies depicted are tangible and ephemeral at the same time. Or perhaps it is the identity of the subject that is deciduous; a mark, a limb or a shadow that stretches across the rippling texture of skin, transforms into a landscape of vicarious sensations, both emotional and physical. The transitive nature of these reflections—and they are indeed reflections of our selves, our thoughts and our subjectivity—is synchronous with the development of socially constructed devices that define non-Caucasian subjects differently, often in a mentally, culturally and materially inferior and aggressively sexualised manner.

The nature of the photograph, a two-dimensional light sensitive gelatine-emulsion on paper, encompasses the static characteristics of the subjects, or objects, portrayed: a Platonic simulacrum fixed, yet not incontrovertibly so, within a portable, affordable object for mass consumption. If these forms, these reflections are indeed ideas, suspended along with and perhaps even imbedded in, the chemicals that create images on the surface of the paper, then these ideas are promoted and distributed—one can also claim reinforced—by the very image the photograph depicts. The very assertion developed during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the photograph as an inarguably perfect and accurate representation of ‘real’ life patently illustrated occularcentric tendencies developed in Europe and in North America. Phrases such as “seeing is believing” were produced prior to photographic production, paving the way from representational art to photographic science. Photographs possess evidential force; its testimony bears not on the object photographed but on time. The power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.<sup>15</sup>

The image of the nude body has been constructed to express signifiers of morality, ethics, sex, religion, intelligence and social status among others. The addition of the race complicates the reception of such an image, involving aspects like repression, suppression, categorization and surveillance filtered through the gaze of both the producer and the receiver. Images of the black male nude produced by Michael Chambers may also be read as lyric, beautiful, intense, arousing, revolting and strong; in all ways complex, challenging and never as simple as black and white. In my eyes, Chambers has created a multi-voiced, polyphonic, self-reflexive, diversely genred oeuvre. He establishes his authorial presence with the authority of an informant, one who is on the “inside”. James Clifford, a widely

celebrated ethnographer of the post-modern era, focused his attention in 1988 on academia's acknowledged problems representing the authority of native informants in ethnographic field research. Concerning the difficulties of validating the authority of the informant in both literary and visual art texts, Clifford comments, "Current ethnographic writing is seeking new ways to represent adequately the authority of informants. . . ethnographic exposition routinely folds into itself a diversity of descriptions, transcriptions, and interpretations by a variety of indigenous 'authors.' How should these authorial presences be made manifest?"<sup>16</sup>

For history records the patterns of men's lives they say...All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be (the black man's) historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defence, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?<sup>17</sup>

This image has been fractured, some would say evolved, into several more benign examples of non-white bodies. These fractures as such, are manifested in images that are flecked throughout western material culture, creating specific set images that have come to define specific types of acceptable, distributable and familiar incarnations of the black male. Essentially, this thesis is about issues of violence, urbanization, exoticization, standards of beauty, and representations of the body.

Progress in the depiction of the other has been made. It stands to reason that the purpose of photography, to record and document a view, whether for artistic, personal or scientific aims, would over time evolve to include the many changing interests and concerns of those taking the photographs; the texts encoded in the image would change with the

attitudes and ideas of those who positioned themselves behind the camera, mediated by those who would see, or be exposed to, the image.

I am challenging the viewer to come and bring their weaknesses  
to the board...to the table...and see what they walk away with.

Michael Chambers, Toronto, April 2001

Fin.

#### Notes: Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Ellison, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Images include that of 15 year-old Elizabeth Eckford walking to the door of Little Rock High with the National Guard blocking her way (Sept. 16, 1957), and Rosa Parks in the front seat of a Montgomery public bus (Feb.18, 1957). It should be made clear that even as the civil rights movement was believed to also implicitly involve the concerns of black women, for the most part, it did not. The assumption that the feminist movement would also correct this omission was patently false: both movements signalled changes for *black* males and *white females* yet neither addressed the specific needs of the *black female*. For an insightful discussion of black women and the feminist movement please see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), and *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Van Der Zee was significant due to the fact that he also shot nudes and was perhaps the first black photographer to do so. Deborah J. Johnson, "Black Photography: Contexts for Evolution" in Coar, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Reid, "Postnegritude Reappropriation and the Black Male Nude" in *The Passionate Camera* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 217. "Accustomed to distorted messages given to us through the institutions of westernized culture, we often believe and repeat those images that offend and hurt us." Pamela Edmonds "In/visible: Coming Into the Light (Michael Chambers)" *Black Body: Race, Resistance, Response*, Exhibition catalogue (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2001), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Fanon, 11.

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<sup>6</sup> Lucie-Smith describes the turning point for African American art as being marked by the Civil Rights Movement and the pursuit of radical liberation to the exclusion of all else. Here he outlines the different categories of 'African American Propaganda art', namely the straightforward denunciation of social injustice; the pan-African inspired art; and thirdly, art that featured the African American artist as participants in the construction of contemporary mass culture. Race, Sex, and Gender..., 23-24.

<sup>7</sup> It is the limitation of experiences Barthes examines in his own role as participant in photography, being only able to observe or be observed, and he recognizes the extent to which he invests them with his *studium*; his measure of interest or enjoyment . Barthes, 9-10, 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> Walters, 308-309. The lack of black nudes is significant: in many seminal texts on the nude, whether male or female, blacks are not represented. The bodies that would be considered acceptable or that would conform to the standards set for publications on art, rarely feature non-whites outside of the documentary body as serious artistic subject matter: in the absence of anthropological relevance few considered blacks as cogent subjects in art for their own sake until the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>9</sup> One example of imagery that would present the black body in the aforementioned context, albeit for the promotion of the colonization of the black body, is the allegory, The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies by British artist Thomas Stothard. Its reference, according to B.A. Weisberger, was Botticelli's Birth of Venus and is an attempt to idealize the effects of the slave trade. However a stronger comparison can be made iconographically and with the intended ideological message, if the work were compared instead with Raphael's Triumph of Galatea in both its composition and mythology. Bernard A. Weisberger, The American Heritage History of the American People (New York: American Heritage Pub. Co, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that access to institutions and spaces such as galleries and museums are available to all, and that there are simply some who choose not to go. However, this omits or neglects the economic, social (language) and psychological restrictions to access that exist between social groups; the "choice" is not a present factor in the determination of access for most visible minorities generally speaking simply because—among other more immediate factors (lack of leisure time or money) there is an ever-present belief that they do not belong there. Chambers alludes to this in his critique of the lack of black involvement in the arts (of Toronto) as spectators. Michael Chambers, interview by author, tape recording, Toronto: 13 December 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Fanon, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Resistance to this type of visual reversal includes The Soulmate Calendar, published in 1971 by Poster Prints in Norristown, Pennsylvania. The calendar featured chic black (female) models in satirical civil rights with subjects that included Betsy Ross, minstrels, soul food, the Klu Klux Klan, slavery and the Civil War. According to the publisher sales of the



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calendar were low because it was thought to be too sophisticated for both blacks and whites: It was apparently most appreciated by a "radical minority." Mark Gabor, The Pin-Up: A Modest History (New York: Universe Books, 1973), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, 80.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this controversial word and the subject of its use, see Harvard Law Professor Randall Kennedy, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002). In it Kennedy discusses the history, origin and use of the word in American culture. Prominent author and activist Dr. Earl Ofari Hutchinson's article published five years before "Why We Should Delete 'Nigger' from our Vocabulary" Jinn Magazine (Pacific News Service: San Francisco, September 26, 1997) denounces the inclusion of the word in the 1997 edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, which defines 'nigger', in its 1996 edition, as among other descriptions "a member of a socially disadvantaged class of persons." [on-line text] Accessed February 2003; Available from <http://www.pacificnews.org/jinn/stories/3.20/970926-nword.html>; internet. Dr. Hutchinson's weekly online news and information service TheHutchinsonReport available from <http://www.thehutchinsonreport.com>; internet.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, 88-89.

<sup>16</sup> James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 45-46. In "Traveling Cultures" Clifford critiques establishment ethnography and sets up the ideal goal of ethnographic research. He asserts that, "in much traditional ethnography, . . . the ethnographer has localized what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins a 'culture's' external relations and displacements." He calls for analyses of "constructed and disputed historicities." Sterling Brown's sensitivity to depicting "disputed historicities" is perhaps best exemplified in his poem "Remembering Nat Turner." There, a cackling old Caucasian woman, herself on the margins of the dominant culture, is depicted as the repository of an eventful moment in African-American and American history, the rebellion of Nat Turner. But this hag-like person (as depicted in Brown's poem) is inadequate to the task of preserving and conveying even a single momentous event of African-American history. Her confused and distorted rendition of the events surrounding the Nat Turner rebellion, trial, and execution is reminiscent of many official lies and cover-ups that eventually become local truths, marring the scattered remains of African-American material culture. Beverly Lanier Skinner, "Sterling Brown: An Ethnographic Perspective" African American Review Terre Haute: vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 417.

<sup>17</sup> Ellison, 332.

## **APPENDIX**



Raphaello Sanzio, *The Triumph of Galatea*,  
(Trionfo di Galatea) circa. 1511-14.  
Fresco, 295 x 225 cm.



Thomas Stothard, *Allegory, The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, London 1810, 230 x 170 mm.



Jacques Étienne Victor Arago. Slaves with Iron Muzzles.  
Pen and ink illustration from the 1839 publication, *Scènes des colonies*.

Image Credit: The Bancroft Collection of Pacific Voyages, Historical Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego

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