

# BLACK BODYSCAPES

Photographs by Ajamu

Dedicated to the memory of:  
Rotimi- Fani- Kayode 1955-89  
Simon Alcide 1965- 93  
Marlon Riggs 1957-94

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## Foreword

One of the most controversial areas in the history of representation is the black male body. Images of the 1980's Brixton riots in London, Lenny Henry, Frank Bruno, Michael Jackson, the Robert Mapplethorpe "*Black Book*" and the Los Angeles police beating of Rodney King illustrate some of the complex attitudes towards black masculinity where there is fear /threat of the black man and also desire/fascination.

AJAMU's photographs- BLACK BODYSCAPES- explore this difficult and sensitive theme. His images of Black masculinities have come to represent part of a new generation of black photography that has emerged since the 1980's. The work also represents the way in which the innocent notion of blackness as a unitary and undifferentiated identity has been radically questioned in the work of black gay men.

Through an Arts Council research and development grant, money was raised to commission new work. From this new body of work, along with AJAMU's earlier work, a selection was made with the curatorial objectives of pulling together, a touring solo exhibition, which has a central narrative.

By focusing on the male nude, this series of highly constructed portraits of black men explores the concept of fetishism and fragmentation. Black muscular men, blond wigs and high heels are framed together

In a series of complex mise-en-scene scenarios to comment and contest the sexualised stereotype of the black male

# *The Camera as Kinky Machine:* NOTES ON AJAMU'S PHOTOGRAPHS

*Identity*  
*Is the crisis*  
*Can't you see*  
*Identity, Identity*

*Identity, X-Ray Spex, 1978*  
*Written by Poly Styrene*

*At the end of heavy breathing*  
*I engage in arguments with my ancestral memories.*  
*I'm not content with nationalist propaganda.*  
*I'm not content loving my Black life without question.*  
*The answers of Negritude are not absolute.*  
*The dream of King is incomplete*  
*I probe beneath skin surface.*

Essex Hemphill, 'Heavy Breathing' Ceremonies, 1992

Ajamu is a black gay photographer whose chosen subject is the black male body. Because photographer and photographed share similar social identities it would seem reasonable to observe that his work is centrally about 'identity'- but it is not: it is more about fantasy, desire, and sexuality, which are precisely the sort of things that brings ruin to the very existence of anything as final and fixed as an ego and its "identity" Choosing photography as his medium of artistic expression, Ajamu's project contributes to the dazzling and prolific creativity that has characterized the cultural politics of the black lesbian and gay Diaspora communities in Europe and the US in the 1980's and 1990's. And, as if that was not enough, Ajamu challenges the very idea of what an 'identity' should be, by creating powerful and playful images that come from the hybrid location that is as critically *queer* as it is critically *black*.

Take a look at what's on offer. Tell us what you see. A black male bodybuilder in a bra two sizes too small. A black boy in a leather harness. A black man in a blond wig wearing a kilt and nipple rings. Who is by, who is for, what is it all about? Carry on regardless. Don't judge, just keep looking. Another black man, in a white wedding dress, with woolly socks and roughneck boots, and he's not wearing knickers. Don't get excited, separate imagination and perception. A Blackman in a floral dress, looking a bit fed up, actually. A black dude in dreadlocks and leather boots, crouching in erotic submission. And what's this: someone's erect penis, the head of which is buried in a clenched fist, covered in a black lace glove. What's going on? I can't carry on, I must go on.

A black sado-masochistic couple, one partner in funky dreads laying his head

on the shoulders of a masked man, with so much care and tenderness. Look mummy, it's a Negro. I am frightened. Is this love or confusion? Eros born of chaos. When you believe in things that you don't understand, then you will suffer.

Ajamu enjoys pushing buttons. How was it for you? So this is what queer black boys like to get up to in bed. Promoting homosexuality on the public rates-who paid for this immoral naughtiness, is channel Four behind this show? Yes, well I know you're a victim of double oppression, what with being a minority within a minority and all that, but I'm rather afraid that if my eight year daughter came across them in a public gallery she would be a bit upset, so it should be kept private, you just don't have to flaunt it. Is this the image of the proud black male that we need to be seeing these days, when the family is in crisis, or is this a symptom of our sickness and how the white man is corrupting and perverting our people Yeah, so what: been there, done that, seen it all before. What difference does it make anyway? Whatever.

But, in fact, the whole point of Ajamu's practice as a black queer photographer-which gives it its volatile edge to the images he creates-is the utter unpredictability of the public response that it will meet it. His images do not bear one, unitary, meaning that is put there by the artist's intention to be retrieved by the audience; rather, the sheer multiplicity of interpretive frames involved in Ajamu's *mise-en-scene* of black gay male sexualities makes the prospect of pinning the text down to a single referent (such as the blanket term "identity" impossible in any case. Provoking and playing with, rather than appeasing, his viewers expectations-by carefully crafting a hybrid art practice which recognises the fluidity of worldly relations among authors, texts and audiences-Ajamu's is an equal opportunity enterprise: there is something to upset everyone, and get you going in one way or another. To me the key objective that comes to mind is PUNK, for it invokes a libertarian and transgressive, taboo breaking. Prerogative that unleashes an unsettling sense of ambivalence. Ajamu's images exude an "in-your-face" attitude of queer punk hybridity- a both of a mouth full, admittedly, but nethertheless a way of describing the questions, at once strange and familiar, which he strives to answer: to renew and replenish the democratic idea of 'liberation' by performing at the intersection of difference worlds-and at the limits of what is representable within them.

Ajamu's achievement is to be able to take for granted the synthesis and intermixing of distinct cultural traditions that have made Black Britain such a fertile site of hybrid aesthetics, and then to use this as a starting point for something new. As deeply immersed in the modernist counter-culture of homoerotic art, as he is grounded in the shifting Diaspora contexts of black photography, Ajamu taps into a rich repository of sources for black gay cultural expression that is conversant with the work of gay artists of Asian, African, and Caribbean backgrounds-such as Geoffrey Holder, Rotimi-Fani-Kayode, Sunil Gupta, Alan DeSouza, Lyle Ashton Harris and Christian Alexander-as it is with figures from the Euro-American canon-from baron Von Glodden and Frederick Holland Day, to George Platt Lynes, George Dureau and Robert Mapplethorpe. Furthermore, to the extent that what has made

Ajamu's project possible is the creation and existence of a transnational black lesbian and gay community, as much of the paradigmatic shifts in aesthetics and politics of black representation, his work extends such progressive practices of displacement into the highly contentious realm of eroticism, which can never be contained as a mere 'minority' concern, but is always of 'universal' relevance, whatever your gender or sexual preference.

You may have noticed that black lesbians and gays have been becoming more visible, more vocal and more central, and ever less marginal, silenced and invisible than we were before. From the poetry of Audre Lorde and Michelle Cliff, and the prose of Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, Melvin Dixon and Steve Corbin, to the films of Isaac Julian, Marlon Riggs, Pratibha Parmar and Michelle Parkerson, and the theatre work of the Pomo Afro- Homos (and you don't need a PhD in Gay Science to work that one out) - to say nothing of house music, voguing, club culture, banji-boy dress codes and Ru Paul! - New forms of community and co-operation have been brought into being by the efforts of activists, artists and intellectuals whose cultural presence in the post modern/post colonial west is busy transforming the relations between the parts that make up the whole. One key outcome has been the diffusion of a hybridised point of view which recognises that identities are political because of the oppressive way they are organised into binary oppositions in which the affirmation of someone's "I" always seems to depend on "Othering" of someone else's. By producing new cultural identities that cannot be coded into either/or mechanism that has dominated relations of race, class and gender for the last four centuries or so, what artists like Ajamu (and others besides) are able to do is to offer insight into the way representations construct positions of social recognition that shape our most intimate interactions in the realm of sexuality.

Hence, an erotics of queer hybridity. The two main threads of Ajamu's work assembled here in retrospective for the first time, concern gender performance and sado-masochism, which between them are themes that manage to disrupt and subvert the liberal humanist idea of a unitary subject, that is, the idea that in order to be a 'whole person' you have to choose within an either/or structure in which one position (masculine or feminine, master or slave, black or white) mutually the other that it depends on its own identity. Haven't we heard this before? Are you a *black gay man* or a *gay black man*: which do you value most, your blackness or your homosexuality? Oh please: stop terrorising me. Didn't you know that we have to choose to refuse the law of either/or in the first place? How else can we become who we are? Ajamu's awareness of ambivalent interdependence as an alternative to either/or-ism pursues a subversive line of flight out of the impasse in which much identity politics has got stuck: namely, that in the act of affirming an oppressed identity only in oppositional terms, the idea that an identity is an eternal and unchanging 'essence' is repeated in the counter discourse that challenge and contest the dominant ordering of difference in a straight, white, male supremacist society that is now irrevocably in decline ( thank god).

In this sense, Ajamu's core obsession with eroticism-transmuted into the high yield of visual pleasure that each photograph offers-departs from the

documentary tradition of 'positive images' and uses the theatrical space of the photographers studio as laboratory for experiments in the staging of sexual fantasy. Taking the post-Freudian view that sexuality is determined not by the genital identities we discover between our legs, but by the shifting boundaries of unconscious phantasy that takes place in our heads, Ajamu's images reiterate an ancient question: is sexual pleasure representable? In the tradition of thinkers like Georges Bataille, one is led to view that sex and death are intimately linked as neither is fully "known" in vernacular French, an orgasm is a "little death" in that what makes it inexpressible is the dissolution of the ego in the throes of ecstasy. Sex is felt to be frightening and threatening because, ultimately, access to erotic ecstasy depends on the loss of identity.

Today, for us, sex and death are again interlinked in the form of fear and loathing inspired by the AIDS crisis. Ajamu explores the rituals of sado – masochism not merely as a displaced form of safer sex, nor merely to overcome taboos in black culture that refuse to give permission to talk about sexuality in all its messy complexity, but because his is a serious undertaking – which never loses its sense of humour. Sex is funny because it reveals the imperfections that make us human.

Despite surface similarities within his white lesbian counterpart, Della Grace, the urgency that informs Ajamu's celebration of black men caring for other black men finds more resonance in *Serious Pleasure*, the collection of black lesbian erotica published by Sheba in 1988, or *Black Lace*, a magazine founded and edited by Alycee Lane in Los Angeles. Against the disavowal that SM imagery is either 'pornographic' or else a 'white thing' (merely reversing the binary splitting of racial Othering), we recall the notorious imagery of the Ohio Players LPs as a visual precedent for Ajamu's inquiries within black –on-black eroticism. More specifically, Ajamu's affirmation of the existential importance of the erotic, to Audre Lorde, recalls the work of African American photographers such as Calvin C. Anderson, who provided generous supplies of gorgeous minority ethnic beefcake in his *Sierra Domino* magazines, published in San Francisco during the 1970s, a tradition continued by Vega, based in New Jersey, who book, In *Our Own Image*, (1991) contains contributions by Ajamu as well.

For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. Now that black gay men's sexuality has been demonized as the ultimate "Other" to liberal humanist ego identity, in Hollywood movies and Broadway plays such as *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Six Degrees of separation* (1993) and when the desperate homophobia of rap and raga stars like Buju Banton demonstrates 'the absolute need of a nigger', that is an enemy within to bear the burden of hate and blame for what you most fear and despise within yourself, then one is forced to recognise that the binary metaphor of margin and centre is beside the point. *Tongues Untied* (1989), Marlon Riggs' bold, eloquent and insightful "coming out" film for black gay men, came out of the margins of the documentary tradition to ensure that the queer sons and daughters of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement would always be integral to a fully inclusive vision of what popular-democratic "liberation" means today. Yes, when New

Right columnist, Pat Buchanan, outrageously appropriated a clip from *Tongues Untied* in his TV ad campaign during the 1992 presidential election, in order to fan the flames of censorship issues ignited by the extremist views of Jesse Helms, it became all too clear that it was the worth and value of our lives that was at stake in this struggle.

As a child of the pan –African Diaspora, Ajamu draws deeply from multiple sources of resistance that enable us to survive such attacks, whether they come from the [political establishments or from those who would cheerfully beat us up on the streets. No, we are not expendable, or marginal, or exotic, or quaint: we are black and queer and we have always been here. If you are not prepared to burn your James Baldwin books and your Luther Vandross albums, then shut up and get used to it.

Like Poly Styrene, and all those quirky Black brits who contributed to postcolonial anarchy in a hybridised UK (from Malcolm Owen of the Ruts, to film maker Don Lets, or Barry Adamson out of magazine), Ajamu is a misfit whose time has come. Who but ourselves will liberate us from mental slavery? Producing imagery that is prepared to “read the riot act” to our enemies, Ajamu’s work is a gift to anyone eager to reinvent the possibilities of “liberation’ in this time of crisis we are passing through. In the immortal words of X-Ray Spex: Oh Bondage! Up yours.

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