

Challenging Race Relations: The Visuals of Ope Lori and Die Antwoord

Issey Scott

Exploring Frantz Fanon's seminal text, 'Black Skin, White Masks', allows the reader to encounter a curious first-person narrative, creating a highly humanised, personal aura to the text before Fanon has begun to address 'Othering' and its forming gaze. Seeking a gaze which would "give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost"¹ instantly outlines the binary between himself as a black man and the responsive white gaze. There is a clearly an ironic tone in this phrase, as the viewer feels immersed within the uncomfortable scenario of observing Fanon's attempt to gain validation from his white counterpart.

Despite being a visual and physical action, the gaze cannot be defined and dissected from a solely epidermal framework alone. William Pietz's work on the fetish demonstrates that "the fine arts and aesthetic judgment form a self-contained domain of human experience"². So while many artists handling racial and post-colonial issues choose to invite their spectators into the plight, or 'Lived Experience of the Black Man', to borrow Fanon's phrase, others have developed a rich investigation that has led to an almost racially neutral basis upon which to build their analytical work. Naturally, this seems like an impossible project, however by assessing all racial cases with equal consideration, the viewer's awareness is heightened towards the treatment of the 'Other'. Subsequent development of a scholarly field of 'whiteness' in response to racial and minority

¹ Fanon, F. (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, p.89

² Pietz, W. (2003) 'Fetish' in Preziosi, D. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.109

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studies has been problematised since its fruition, and is widely contested as justifying various episodes of modern history and exacerbating the social binary. Framing the notion of race as a mere social construct, Matthew Frye Jacobson observes that “caucasians are not born, these combatants now seem to understand; they are somehow made. It’s just a question of who does the making”³. It is this question of hierarchical power, which must be explored in order to remove racial inequalities from the dynamic in which they find themselves.

One case study in visual arts, which has been developed effectively in its means of highlighting race relations, is the multi-screen video installation by Ope Lori entitled *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*⁴. Defining herself as a “political artist”⁵, Lori uses six separate video screens to show footage of different figures walking by in slow motion: white and black males and females. Each character is being assessed by an opposing figure; for example, a black woman is sat on the chair as a white male walks past. This idea is reminiscent of Fanon’s objectification of himself as he tries to understand his own difference as ‘Other’; the gaze of a person different to himself brings him to the “discovery” of his “blackness, [his] ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders...”⁶, which Fanon is expressing as mere reinforcements of a primitive, mythological stereotype of black people. Within these racial stereotypes and commentaries, Jacobson identifies that race, while socially enforced in order to concretise colonial power onto an ‘Other’, is ambiguous and conflicting even internally to its classification: “racial designations such as white, Caucasian and Celt may operate in popular

³ Jacobson, M.F. (1998) *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. London: Harvard University Press, p.3

⁴ Lori, O. (2013) *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*. [six HD video screens] 198 Contemporary Arts, London

⁵ Lori, O. (2014) *Artist Statement*. Available at: www.opelori.com/artist-statement (Accessed: 17th December 2014)

⁶ Fanon, F. (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, p. 92

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perception and discussion simultaneously, despite their contradictions”⁷, emphasising that implementing race as an objective judgment does not consider its meaning beyond the basic aesthetic, epidermal element. It is with this that we can establish a critique of *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*, as although the artist wishes to highlight the preposterous, yet transferable (to gender difference), reactions on racial alterity, we are not made aware of variations within supposedly homogenous ethnicities, which would form a stronger argument against racial inequality. After personal correspondence with and research about Lori, I learned that the subtitles featured in her video piece are taken from comments found on pornography websites. This certainly adds another level of intrigue and reality to the piece, as we can see that a clandestine element of popular culture has been used to enhance Lori’s message. With the additional feminist stance of Lori’s work, we are presented with the figure of the sexualised black female, a symbol analysed by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak as “the proper carrier of a critique of pure class-analysis”⁸. Considering various black women in the public eye, from Nicki Minaj to Oprah Winfrey, it is common for attention in mass media to be brought to their successes via narratives about race and gender. Even the influential institution that is *Vogue* published an interview with Minaj with a headline implying the discussion of personal relationships and ageing⁹, a surprising move given that the rapper has much to say on the topic of race. The artist highlighting this gaze, influenced by a fusion of class, gender and race politics, does not necessarily liberate the black female performer from it; instead as a viewer we are

⁷ Jacobson, M.F. (1998) *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. London: Harvard University Press, p.5

⁸ Spivak, G.C. (1989) ‘Who Claims Alterity?’ in Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900- 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. 2nd edn. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, p.1094

⁹See Frank, A. (2015) *Newly Single Nicki Minaj on Feminism, Meek Mill, and Rapping at 50*. Available at: <http://www.vogue.com/10650415/nicki-minaj-interview-feminism-pinkprint/> (Accessed: 15th February 2015)

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drawn to the way in which each figure, regardless of gender or race, is being presented with various derogatory comments.



Installation view of Lori, O. (2013)

I Want Me Some Brown Sugar.

[six HD video screens] 198 Contemporary Arts, London.

Art Historian Kobena Mercer deems gender and sexuality questions under the subjective gaze as "indicative of a significant, generational shift"¹⁰ which can be identified in *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*, as the black female moves across the screen with the most charismatic screen presence. It is almost as if she knows she is being watched with the most acute attentiveness. Both compelling and disturbing, the strong image of the black female is contrasted against the provocative subtitles that lie beneath the moving image, one of which includes: "...a BLACK dumb bitch". Use of a racial slur in addition to standardised sexist language intersects semantic methods of racism along with the utilisation of women in pornography, which cleverly reinforces the repulsive nature of both.

¹⁰ Mercer, K. (1996) 'Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics' in Read, A. (ed.) *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: ICA, p.114

In *Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography*, Mireille Miller-Young analyses the glaringly evident figure of the black female in mainstream hip-hop music videos as the signifier of the rapper's fame, fortune and popularity. These dancers and models have become so frequently used that they are now barely acknowledged. Making the link between contemporary hip-hop and pornography, and its fusion, Miller-Young identifies that both fields "elicit complex responses of desire and disgust, pleasure and anger, and as illicit economies embrace deviance...and subversion of sexual codes of decency"¹¹. While there is no doubt that it is the black female who attracts the most attention from the viewer in said videos, the black male, usually the rapper is also subject to the white gaze as an Other. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed takes a similar position to Lori in her speculation that the domination of a 'whiteness' "orientates the body in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space"¹². If we use this in the analysis of hip hop videos, we find that the objectification of the black female is being used to catalyse the subverted "sexual codes of decency", supporting the misjudged stereotype of the primitive, sexually loose black woman, a burden that generally does not affect any other demographic in the same way. This performativity in the videos adheres to the archetypes employed by colonisers in order to oppress the 'Other'; the fact that the urban music industry is now wantonly using these strategies is both alarming and disturbing.

The huge global success of hip-hop became problematic when it became so accessible that while it was "taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic and intellectual movement...similar to

¹¹ Miller-Young, M. (2007) 'Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Vol. 8, (No. 1), p.269

¹² Ahmed, S. (2007) 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness' in *Feminist Theory*, (Vol.8, No.2)

previous African American artistic and cultural movements”¹³, as declared by Derek Aldridge and James Stewart, its origins appeared lost and misconstrued. As a genre it became decentralised when it began to create large volumes of money through its popularity, thus free to be interpreted by the white gaze that would have initially scrutinised its foundations and intentions. One contemporary, and highly masqueraded, example of this is the South African rap band, Die Antwoord. With their strong identities, or, in a cynical sense, their ‘unique selling point’ as alternative(ly) white rappers from the post-Apartheid, working-class suburbs of Cape Town, their brand imagery sets them apart from the established hip hop scene before we even consider their music. Their fusion of rap and rave music appears as a twenty-first century revision of the way in which hip-hop was initially described, as forming “an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth born between 1965 and 1984”¹⁴. Incorporating rap music with electronic beats on topics about working-class life seems to fit this succinctly as an updated version for young people born between the 1990s and 2000s.

At face value, there seems little wrong with the way Die Antwoord conduct and market themselves, however, exploring and deconstructing their music videos and lyrics uncovers that the privilege of the white gaze is difficult to omit from analysis of the band as a product of popular culture, especially in light of their tendencies to integrate visual culture into their work. While much of their lyrical content is generic in the dominion of rap music, the addition of Afrikaans lyrics presented to a Western audience alongside explicit, impassioned exclamation makes them a musical collective of note, if not a novel one. In their 2012 hit, ‘Fatty Boom

¹³ Aldridge, D.P. and Stewart, J.B. (2005) ‘Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present and Future’, *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, (No. 3), (Summer 2005), p.190

¹⁴ Aldridge, D.P. and Stewart, J.B. (2005) ‘Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present and Future’, *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, (No. 3), (Summer 2005), p. 90

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Boom’, the band state their opinion on the state of the industry of which they are now a part: “nowadays all these rappers sound exactly the same / it’s like one big inbred fuck-fest”¹⁵, positioning themselves as an arrogant force in their comportment towards their peers. In addition to their supposedly counter-culture audio output, Die Antwoord have attracted attention around the world for their unapologetic, gratuitous depiction of black culture and its people, which is widely received as humourless ridicule.

In his analysis of the ‘Fatty Boom Boom’ music video, journalist Adam Haupt writes that “it is white privilege that provides Die Antwoord with the means to “borrow” aspects of black cultural expression and project colonial notions of blackness”¹⁶. Symbols used in rap music, whether ironically or not, are largely superficial; absorbing the music of rap culture rarely imparts with the listener the authenticity, which it boasts. Since the rapid commercialisation of hip hop music, there has been a sharp decrease in the raw ‘humanity’ found in lyrics in favour of commodity acts, which are more concerned with branding. The emergence of Dr Dre as, in the words of the BBC’s Kim Gittleton, “the first hip-hop billionaire”¹⁷ in 2014 confirms the financial potential of the industry. Nicole Fleetwood addresses this with her assertion that “central to the evolution of hip-hop fashion and transformation into an industry is the fixity of the black male icon of hip-hop”¹⁸. Subverting this figure by replacing it again with the heteronormative, white, patriarchal system, however alternative they feel they are, poses Die Antwoord as an antagonising force

¹⁵ Die Antwoord (2012) *Fatty Boom Boom*. Cape Town: Zef Recordz

¹⁶ Haupt, A. (2012) *Die Antwoord’s Revival of Blackface Does South Africa No Favours*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2012/oct/22/die-antwoord-blackface-south-africa> (Accessed: 6th January 2015)

¹⁷ Gittleton, K. (2014) *Dr Dre: The First ‘Hip-Hop Billionaire’?* Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-27350075> (Accessed: 7th January 2015)

¹⁸ Fleetwood, N.R. (2011) “‘I Am King’: Hip-Hop Culture, Fashion Advertising, and the Black Male Body’ in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. London: University of Chicago Press, p.151

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against the position that hip hop once had as an inspiring alternative to the mainstream music charts and fashion trends.



Still from Noisey.com (2012) Die Antwoord – Fatty Boom Boom. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIXUgtNC4Kc> (Accessed: 17th December 2014)

Lori's use of an intensely viewed black female is also a motif in Die Antwoord's 'Fatty Boom Boom' music video, albeit in a very different format. Haupt makes an enlightening point about female singer Yolandi Visser's portrayal of blackface minstrelsy, a hideously atavistic historical figure performed by "white actors [who] painted themselves black and performed black characters to largely white audiences"¹⁹, and by highlighting race and its binaries, the video's artistic director provides a platform for Visser's brief blackface persona as an outspoken, contemporary female, as a neat contrast to the passive women we are more likely to encounter in hip-hop music videos. The figure of the mute, submissive accessory to the opulent rap star emulates the stereotypes which condoned and advocated slavery, that blacks were "'naturally' born to, and fitted for, servitude"²⁰, as outlined by Stuart Hall in his discussion of representing the 'Other', a term which comes with a high level of ambiguity, as there will always be

¹⁹ Haupt, A. (2012) *Die Antwoord's Revival of Blackface Does South Africa No Favours*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2012/oct/22/die-antwoord-blackface-south-africa> (Accessed: 6th January 2015)

²⁰ Hall, S. (1997) 'The Spectacle of the Other' in Hall, S. (ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publishing Ltd., p.244

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interactions between people with inherent differences. In addition to the fact that the blackface character is now disregarded on the basis of it being clearly racist, Yolandi Visser's outspoken, loud persona merely serves to reinforce the mockery being made of black history through the eyes of a dominant white direction.

Despite the fact that Lori and Die Antwoord have very different methodologies and aspirations for their work, they can be linked by Judith Butler's discussion, in her responsive text to the 1991 film, *Paris is Burning*, asking "whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalisation of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms"²¹. While feminist discourse would vary in its response to such a proposal, the 'whiteness' put forward by Ahmed would be the very denaturalisation that is being rejected, in favour of the gender and race neutrality which Lori attempts in *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* and her other video work. It is fairly agreeable that both Lori and Die Antwoord are providing parodies of the dominant forces in their respective fields. Lori's scenarios where "recognition and misrecognition take place, through the homoerotic images 'of' and 'between'...women"²² create a parody of the male sexual desire, and how this has been so consistently strong throughout history that, by means of binary, the non-white woman is objectified and positioned as an inferior being. Similarly but arguably less effectively, Die Antwoord challenge the normativity of black culture being so closely associated with hip-hop. Ultimately, one could contend that in white people interpreting a field traditionally dominated by black people, the band are forming a practice of not only racial neutrality, but a fluidity, where

²¹ Butler, J. (1993) 'Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion' in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, p. 85

²² Lori, O. (2014) *Artist Statement*. Available at: www.opelori.com/artist-statement (Accessed: 17th December 2014)

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race is not a barrier in producing work. Where this has been done from racial privilege and, more subjectively, with the sheer level of self-indulgence found in Die Antwoord, I would not yet like to support this idea. Fleetwood illustrates the public figure of the black male further, again as another branch of a mere archetype. This hyper-masculinity embraces “a mythic sense of virility, danger and physicality”²³, something that lead vocalist of Die Antwoord, Watkin Tudor Jones, has adopted, through the guise of his alter-ego, Ninja, to both parody and perpetuate the stereotype.

²³ Fleetwood, N.R. (2011) “‘I Am King’: Hip-Hop Culture, Fashion Advertising, and the Black Male Body’ in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. London: University of Chicago Press, page 152

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