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# DISIDENTIFICATIONS

Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics

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actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false once again, because "motherhood" is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance.<sup>29</sup>

Spillers's valuable appraisal of the way in which the dominant culture figures an overabundance of black womanhood as *the* problem when discussing the status of African-Americans within U.S. culture leads me to suggest that hooks's thesis is a reversal of the very same logic that Moynihan Report disseminated in the mid-1960s. This inversion (African-American men as lack instead of African-American women as excess) still subscribes to the ideology of black men and black masculinity as "an absence and a negation." It also positions black women as something of a magical excess that can correct the failings of black men. Hooks's point thus seems like a reversal of psychoanalysis's understanding of woman as lack—an inversion that seems just as unproductive. Representing the complicated and dire situation of black masculinity in U.S. culture is important cultural work that should not be disavowed as a limitation. It is also important to note that the logic of hooks's argument relies on a presumption that, if the artist incorporated more female influences and inspirations (assuming that a spectator or critic can ever *know* what such forces might be), his lack would be filled. This formulation comes dangerously close to reinscribing a heterosexist fantasy that the fulfilling of a normative male and female dyad would flesh out the incompleteness of the artist's production. I do not mean to imply that there is no need for potentially productive alliances across gender (and sexuality) to be formed in the African diaspora, but I nonetheless see problems with hooks's formulation. The danger lies precisely at the point when any enslaved person, to use Spillers's description of people of color in the United States, is understood as incomplete because he or she chose to deal with the specificities of gender and race coordinates without involving the opposite sex. Such gender-normative thinking, when not checked for its heterosexist presumptions, leads to unproductive ends.

A certain quality of melancholia was intrinsic to the African-American male cultural worker, a quality that was absolutely necessary to navigate his way through a racist and genocidal landscape—which is not to say that mourning and genocide are salient thematics in the cultural production of African-American women.<sup>30</sup> It is to say, however, that a recent history of African-American masculinity would read like Van DerZee's funeral book.<sup>31</sup> This is especially true of Basquiat's painting. The shrines, altars, and portraits that Basquiat produced are not limited to the status of works of mourning, but within them is the potential to become meditative texts that decipher the workings of mourning in our culture. They are melancholic echoes, queer reverberations, that make possible an identity or cluster of communal identifications that are presently under siege.

## Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*

### Deciphering a Dream Deferred

Black gay male cultural productions experienced a boom of sorts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. No one single type of cultural production trailblazed the way. Joseph Beam's now classic anthology *In the Life*, the videos of the late Marlon Riggs, the cultural criticism of Kobena Mercer, the music of Blackberri, the poetry of the late Essex Hemphill, the fiction of Melvin Dixon, the photos of Rotimi Fani-Kayode, the dance and choreography of Bill T. Jones, the performance art of Po-Mo Afro Homos, to name a handful of representatives from across a black queer diaspora, all informed and helped form one another. If one were to describe the unifying concepts, potencies, and tensions that bind these artists as something we might call a movement, beyond and beside the simple fact of their "identities," it would be the complicated work that they attempt to accomplish. This task can be summed up as the (re)telling of elided histories that need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces, including, but not limited to, states that blindly neglect the suffering bodies of men caught within a plague, the explosion of "hate crime" violence that targets black and gay bodies, and a reactionary media power structure that would just as soon dismiss queer existence as offer it the most fleeting reflection. In this shifting field of artistic performance and production, I would point out what might be thought of as a slippery center: Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989). I use the term *center* in this instance to describe the way that film, as a primarily collaborative art form, incorporates and displays other modes of black queer cultural production such as music, performance, poetry, prose, cultural criticism, and photography.

In this chapter, I resist the term *masculinity*. Masculinity has been and continues

to be a normative rubric that has policed the sex/gender system. I see very little advantage in recuperating the term *masculinity* because, as a category, masculinity has normalized heterosexual and masculinist privilege. Masculinity is, among other things, a cultural imperative to enact a mode of “manliness” that is calibrated to shut down queer possibilities and energies. The social construct of masculinity is experienced by far too many men as a regime of power that labors to invalidate, exclude, and extinguish faggotry, effeminacy, and queerly coated butchness. This is not to discount the possibility that a discourse on masculinity might produce some theoretical traction for scholars working in the field of gender theory. But I do aim to suggest that any such project that fails to factor in and interrogate heteronormativity and masculinist contours of such a discourse reproduces the phobic ideology of masculinity. An exemplary critical project that has reanimated the term *masculinity* is Judith Halberstam’s writing on “female masculinity.”<sup>1</sup> Halberstam dislodges masculinity from biological maleness, and in doing so opens up and reterritorializes the concept. Such a reterritorialization of masculinity can be understood as a disidentification with the sign of masculinity, which is to say a critical recycling of the term.

This chapter offers a reading that I hope will contribute to an understanding of both where this crucial wave of black queer work is coming from and where it currently stands, as well as a decipherment of this exemplary and central text’s densely layered, aestheticized, and politicized workings. In this analysis, I intend to carry out Sylvia Wynter’s call for a turn toward *decipherment* as opposed to the dominant scholarly mode of “interpretation” of the “play” of “meanings” and significations that a text produces. This decipherment of *Looking for Langston* (and what I see as its influential “co-texts”) will attempt to carry out the program for film studies outlined by Wynter in her article “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice”:

Rather than seeking to “rhetorically demystify” a deciphering turn seeks to decipher what a process of rhetorical mystification *does*. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*, it also seeks to evaluate the “illocutionary force” and procedures with which they do what they do.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter maps out two different tropes or structures of feeling—melancholia and ambivalence—that are central to a comprehension of the inner (textual) and external (social and political) work that the texts under consideration do.<sup>3</sup>

A grand and glowing mythotext, *Looking for Langston* makes no stale claims to documentary objectivity. It is, in Julien’s own words at the beginning of the film, a “meditation” on “Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance.” The word *meditation* implies a text that is not dealing with clouded imperatives to tell what “really” happened or to give the reader a plastic “you were there” sensation. The text is instead profoundly evocative, suggestive, and, as I will argue in depth later, ambivalent. A meditation like this invites a reader to join the author in a contemplative position. The invitation reads: imagine, remember, flesh out.

Julien’s film is a challenge to more terminal histories that work to dispel and undermine anything but flat empirical, historiographical facts. An example of this mode of history writing, one that more often than not excludes nonconventional, and especially queer, historiography, is Arnold Rampersad’s biography of Langston Hughes.<sup>4</sup> Rampersad dismisses considerations of the poet as gay writer for a lack of empirical evidence: the biographer was unable to find any living person (male or female) who would admit to having had sex with Hughes. Such naive reasoning from such an otherwise sophisticated critic is unsettling. This blindness to both the different economies of desires and the historical and concurrent bonds of gay intertextuality that Hughes shares with other gay cultural workers can only be construed as heterosexist. (Rampersad’s text is deserving of a long and rigorous inquiry that would take on the task of looking into the heterosexist logic of a study that dismisses a subject’s sexual identity altogether before considering a homosexual possibility that, for any attentive reader, is far from opaque.)<sup>5</sup> I would argue that Julien’s dynamic film offers all the “evidence” needed to make a case that Langston Hughes was queer.

The evidence of Julien’s film is not that of rigorous historical fact; it is, rather, the evidence of revisionary history that meditates on queer cadences that can be heard in Hughes when studying Hughes’s life and work. It is a mode of history reading that listens with equal attention to silences and echoes that reverberate through the artist’s production. I understand the historiographical project of *Looking for Langston* to be in line with the program called for by the historian of “difference” Joan W. Scott. Scott explains that it is insufficient and risky to propose historiographical salvage operations that troll for some “lost” and essential “experience.” Scott has explicated the implicit danger of such projects:

History is a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which categories appear as nonetheless ahistorical: desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, sex and even sexual practices become so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized. Presenting the story this way excludes, or at least understates, the historically variable interrelationship between the meanings “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” the constitutive force each has for the other, and the contested nature of the terrain that they simultaneously occupy.<sup>6</sup>

Julien’s cinematic practice defies the lure of simply propping up a newly found history of what the queer Harlem Renaissance might have been. Instead, this cinematic meditation does not confine itself to single meanings, but instead works to explain the lack of fixity of such terms as *queer*, *black*, and *male*, within the temporal space that is being represented. Indeed, the film itself works to undermine any static or rigid definitions of these concepts.

One of the first of many “key” Hughes phrases that one catches in the film is “montage of a dream deferred,” and the film, in its fluid dimensions, takes up the challenge of this image and attempts to imagine what it might look like. The classical cinematic theory of montage, first theorized and deployed by the Soviet filmmaker

Sergei Eisenstein as “a montage of attractions,” speaks quite fluidly to Julien’s project. The variation in the latter’s interpretation of cinematic montage is his reliance on the juxtaposing of “attractions” that are not just “shots” but fabrics not traditionally unfolded within the tapestry of montage cinema—materials such as poems, experimental fiction, still photographs, vintage newsreels, and blues songs. Montage cinema creates a certain rhythm in its stark juxtapositions of images that, on a level of traditional novelistic narrative logic, clash and set each other off. *Looking for Langston*, though stylistically elegant and apparently seamless, calls on this tried-and-true calculus of juxtapositions. Although the textures of the “attractions” that are used are not traditional film fodder, they do roughly line up around different poles. The poles are connected to the project of black gay male self-representation sketched earlier, a project that is carried out against a heterosexist culture’s hegemonic mandate that these lives not be seen, heard, or known. One of the two poles is the “historical self” that is represented by chiefly archival images from the Harlem Renaissance; the other is the contemporaneous self that produces images that represent an “under siege” reality. Both poles are embattled ones. The historical one is a counterhistory that must constantly define itself against “larger” more official and oppressive histories; the contemporary identity pole is populated by images that depict the dangers (and, of course, pleasures) of occupying a black and gay subject position during this particular moment of crisis. I do not wish to reify this dichotomy between “then” and “now”: the film certainly does not commit such an error. A successful montage—and *Looking for Langston* is definitely that—eventually uses the current produced by the binary juxtapositions to meld the very same binary into what might seem like an autonomous whole. This “wholeness effect” is enacted through the dialectical interplay of these conflicting elements.

In his essay “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” Eisenstein explains that it is not only the visible elements of shots that can be juxtaposed in a montage system. There is also the strategy of emotional combination that produces what the early film theorist has called “emotional dynamization.” According to Eisenstein, this brand of montage, if successful, ultimately leads to the “liberation of the whole action from the definition of time and space.”<sup>7</sup> The transhistorical crosscutting in Julien’s film achieves, through its use of evocative and sometimes elusive contrasts and similarities, just such a liberation. The concept of time and space that is generated occupies overlapping temporal and geographic coordinates that we can understand as a queer black cultural imaginary. It is important to keep in mind that this queer black cultural imaginary is in no way ahistorical. Its filaments are historically specific and the overall project is more nearly *transhistorical*.

Fredric Jameson, in writing about the triumph of Eisenstein’s cinema, sums up the “payoff” that montage can yield when trying to depict history: “Montage thus assumes the existence of the time between shots, the process of waiting itself, as it reaches back and encompasses the two poles of its former dynamic, thereby embody-

ing itself as emptiness made visible—the line of Russian warriors in the distance, or even more climactically, the empty horizon on which the Teutonic Knights, not yet present, impend.”<sup>8</sup> *Looking for Langston* resembles Jameson’s delineation of “montage” in that the film attempts to represent, make visible, and even champion at least a few different histories that have, by the strong arm of “official histories,” been cloaked.

It would be reductive to account for the dynamic transhistorical referents in the film solely within the terms of the inner working of the formalistic montage paradigm. In the end, this runs too high a risk of reifying history and the present. I myself am in a position of discussing binaries (as the reader will soon see) that flirt with this problematic. In an attempt to resist this trap, I will offer another structural model that considers the interplay of transhistorical elements in this text. Another mode of understanding the interchange between elements corresponding to different historical moments would be the idea of a dialectical interchange between present and past tenses. This seems right in that it speaks to the fact that, as a particular kind of avant-garde film, *Looking for Langston* is grounded in a complex relation of fragments to a whole. For heuristic purposes here, I would like to associate the first pole with a historical black homosexual “tradition” that closes around the images of male Harlem Renaissance queers such as Hughes, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, and Claude McKay, and I will associate the other pole with contemporary cultural activists such as Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Assotto Saint. It would be worthwhile to consider these texts as tangled within a complicated transhistorical dialogue—something akin to Gayl Jones’s definition of a traditional African-American oral trope known as “call-and-response,” the “antiphonal back-and-forth pattern which exists in many African American oral traditional forms, from sermon to interjective folk tale to blues, jazz and spirituals and so on. In the sermonic tradition, the preacher calls in a fixed or improvised refrain, while the congregation responds, in either fixed and formulaic or spontaneous words and phrases.”<sup>9</sup> With this pattern in mind, one can hear Essex Hemphill’s impassioned poetic voice crying out from one of these historical poles, “Now we think while we fuck,” and actually speaking across time to a “forgotten” or “lost” black queer identity painfully embodied in the hushed tones of Langston Hughes’s simple, sorrowful epitaph-like text “Poem”:

I loved my friend  
 He went away from me  
 There is nothing more to say  
 This poem ends  
 As softly as it began  
 I loved my friend.<sup>10</sup>

By pointing to this cross-time dialogue between black gay males, I am suggesting that Julien makes use of call-and-response to historicize black gay male history and

contextualize recent queer African-American cultural production. This technique is rooted in a black vernacular tradition while being a new and innovative approach to filmic production. The positing of this model as a tool for understanding the trans-historical narrative economy in the film does not completely eclipse the notion of the film as a montage. They are at least provisionally compatible paradigms that may melt into one another.

In general terms, I have discussed the situation of the nontraditional fabrics juxtaposed on one another in this “montage” or “call-and-response” weave. Many of these transhistorical pairings are of interest. For example, in a powerful early moment in the film, the voice of bisexual blues singer Bessie Smith is set off by and then briefly mingles with a contemporary song, “Blues for Langston,” sung by the songwriter/vocalist Blackberri. There is something uncanny about these voices resonating; the resonance produces a smooth superimposition that is visually impossible. In an interview, British filmmaker Julien commented on his need to turn to America to unearth a queer black history—there was no historical icon as provocative as Hughes on his side of the diaspora. The “American” element that factors into the film’s hybrid model can be best understood as a “blues aesthetic.” In his seminal study on this American aesthetic form, Houston Baker Jr. describes the blues as a “matrix”: “The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network.”<sup>11</sup> *Looking for Langston* incorporates the “matrix” function into its own hybridized aesthetic.

While recognizing this matrix function, it is important to note that the syncretic incorporation of the blues aesthetic does not overshadow the contemporary black British aesthetic that fills out much of the film. Julien wished to assert his own national identity; hence, British locales, actors, and voices are called on to establish a black British cultural presence that shares a certain symmetry with the African-American presence. Coterminous with this American blues aesthetic is the black British diaspora aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. One can view the film as being very much a part of this British aesthetic movement, which attempts to negotiate representation from a productive space of hybridity, situated between postmodernism and what Paul Gilroy has termed “populist modernism.” Gilroy describes the black British film movement (a movement central to the Black Arts Movement) as enacting a Du Boisian double consciousness: on the one hand, its representatives identify as cultural producers who are located *in* modernity and are clearly defenders, producers, and critics of modernism, but, on the other hand, they feel a moral responsibility to act as the “gravediggers of modernity”—to never forget that they are also the “stepchildren of the West” whose task it is to transform modernity and the aesthetics of modernism into vernacular forms that are “populist,” expressive, and not elitist. *Looking for Langston’s* cinematic structure as a transhistorical and transnational “weavelike” texture can be understood as a product of the discomfort caused

by traditional Western genre constraints that Gilroy locates in popular modernism: “The problem of genre is there in the desire to transcend key Western categories: narrative, documentary, history and literature, ethics and politics.”<sup>12</sup>

The remainder of this chapter will focus on what I see as the central binary of the film: a binary of photographic images. The juxtapositions and tensions of the photographic binary bear primary responsibility for shaping the film both visually and thematically. The two most crucial and structuring photographic presences in this film text are those of Harlem Renaissance portrait photographer James Van DerZee and New York avant-garde portrait photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

### The Picture of Melancholia

Before discussing mourning and the functions of the photo texts in Julien’s work, I would like to fill in my consideration of *Looking for Langston* as both a photocentric text and a mythotext. This populist modernist mode of “writing” history challenges and confounds traditional historiographies. This point becomes salient when one reads a passage that considers the relation of the photograph to history from Roland Barthes’s exquisite book *Camera Lucida*: “A paradox: the same century invented History and Photography. But History is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time; and the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony.”<sup>13</sup> Although the foundation of Barthes’s binary may be somewhat shaky, it serves to illuminate the unique relationship of the photographic document (producing the effect he calls “that-has-been”) and the “pure” intellectual discourse of history. The photographs of Hughes and James Baldwin, held up by beautiful queer putti during the film’s opening panoramic shots, serve as a fleeting yet powerful testimony to black queer presences within histories that often neglect them. The viewer is left in the position both of reading these vital mythologies and of spinning more narratives around them. The photograph in *Looking for Langston* is a charm that wards off “official histories” and reinscribes necessary mythologies. These mythologies are open spaces of inquiry rather than monolithic narratives full of, for many, identity-denying silences.

In 1915, Freud introduced a theory of mourning that is, like much of Freud, implicitly heterosexist yet riddled with queer possibilities. He writes: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved one, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”<sup>14</sup> Mourning, unlike melancholia, which he marks as pathological, is a process in which an object or abstraction becomes absent and the withdrawal of libido from the object becomes necessary. But these demands cannot be enacted at once; libido detaches bit by bit, perpetuating a mode of unreality, because, while the process of libido removal is transpiring, the lost object/abstraction persists. It is, in its simplest formulation, a gradual letting go. This process becomes the work of mourning. Van DerZee’s and Mapplethorpe’s pictures, for radically different reasons, symbolically represent and



Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. Photo by Sunil Gupta. Copyright 1989 Sankofa Film and Video and Sunil Gupta. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

stand in as "works" of mourning. In Freud's initial definition, melancholia spills into the realm of the pathological because it resembles a mourning that does not know when to stop.<sup>15</sup>

In his first account of mourning, Freud used the idea as a sort of foil to talk about the psychopathology of melancholia. In *The Ego and the Id*, he begins to deconstruct his previous binary when he realizes that the identification with the lost object that he at first described as happening in melancholia is also a crucial part of the work of mourning. The line between mourning and melancholia in this work of cinematic grieving is amazingly thin; it is a fiction that offers itself readily for deconstructing.

Through a highly formalistic route, Van DerZee's and Mapplethorpe's projects are heavily valanced as works of mourning. Van DerZee and Mapplethorpe are known as master portraitists, and the practice of portraiture suggests another interrelation. Jacques Derrida makes a crucial connection between the work of mourning

and prosopopeia, the trope of mourning that Paul de Man wrote about extensively. Prosopopeia was understood by de Man as the trope of autobiography, the giving of names, the giving of face: "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech."<sup>16</sup> The autobiography and the portrait do the work of giving voice to the face from beyond the grave; prosopopeia is also a way of remembering, holding on to, letting go of "the absent, the deceased, the voiceless." Thus, in the same way that she who writes in a biographical vein is summoning up the dead, by the deployment of prosopopeia, she who mourns a friend summons her up through elaborate ventriloquism. This contributes to an understanding of how the trans-historical call-and-response that I proposed earlier might function: a portrait of Hughes, with his less than perfect mouth smiling a characteristically disarming smile, enacts a strategic flexing of the autobiography trope that summons back a dead Hughes, gives him voice, and permits him to engage in a dialogue with the currently living black gay male body of Essex Hemphill. The photographic portrait first gives face, then gives voice.

This giving face and subsequently voice should also be understood as a component of the performative aspect of portrait photography. The portrait photograph is a two-sided performance, one having to do with the photographer who manipulates technology, models, props, and backgrounds behind the camera, and the other with the model who performs "self" especially and uniquely for the camera.<sup>17</sup> Mourning, in all of its ritualized gestures and conventions, is also performative insofar as the mourner plays a very specific role on a culturally prescribed stage. Viewing both portrait photography and mourning as performative practices, one understands the unique linkage between the two practices—in the case of portraiture a lost object is captured and (re)produced, and in melancholic mourning the object is resurrected and retained. Funeral photography, which grew out of the colonial American tradition of "mourning paintings," is situated at the moment in which both performances blur into each and take on a crucial role in each other's theater.

In many cultures, mourning is highly aestheticized. The scenes of mourning that are enacted in James Van DerZee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead* are lush and disquieting. In a morbid grammar (that is in no way devoid of wit), he spells out some of the issues that surface when considering mourning and melancholia. The painful attachments that refuse to diminish quickly during the actual process of mourning and the subsequent inability to check in properly with the reality principle are displayed in the section depicting children titled "Children & the Mystery of Birth." In a gesture that might seem macabre today, Van DerZee posed dead babies with their parents. Asked about this artistic strategy, Van DerZee replied: "It was my suggestion to have them hold the child while the picture was being taken to make it look more natural."<sup>18</sup> This posing of the dead child with the parents succinctly performs the melancholic and gives it a visual presence. This can also be easily read in

the photograph of the man buried with his newspaper because his family wished to imagine that he was not actually dead but instead had once again just fallen asleep reading the paper.

Another photo in the "Children & the Mystery of Birth" section employs a different strategy in its attempt to visualize the process of African-American mourning. In this photo, an older child is lying in the casket and a figure that can be presumed to be the father looks on. The child's Boy Scout uniform is laid over the coffin. The twist that Van DerZee achieves in this photograph is enacted through the technology of superimposition. "Ghosted" over the coffin hovers a family portrait. The portrait shows the lost object in question, the assembled nuclear family. The superimposition includes the lost mother, who is absent from the "main" image of the photograph. The viewer wonders where the mother exists in the "real time" of the funeral scene. Was she lost before the boy? Did she pass on with the child? Is her grief so great that she could not pose? This image clearly revolves around the subjectivity of the male figure mourning. The act of mourning in this photo frames no single one lost object (a child, a mother, a uniform) but rather posits a lost concept, an ego ideal that was contained within the fiction of the nuclear family. The work this photograph does involves the revelation of the status of the lost object in this African-American imaginary. The lost and dead are not altogether absent. Not only do they exist within the drama of African-American life, but they help formulate it.

A mortuary portrait of a young man in uniform uses the technology of combination printing to tell its story. The portrait is simply one example of the narrative impulse in Van DerZee's production. In this image, one counts at least four negatives in play. A poem is printed over the image. The poem recounts the sad story of burying a beloved soldier boy. Opposite the text one finds an odd battlefield image. The subject who most closely resembles the corpse holds a pistol during a battlefield scene on the top left side of the image. In this almost cinematic pose one encounters the defeated soldier drawing his weapon to protect an African-American nurse and her dying patient on the battlefield. The melodramatic image is bridged with the equally emotional poem through a smaller battlefield image of two medics transferring an injured soldier across a battlefield. The imaginary that Van DerZee weaves in this image is interested in telling the story of a lost noble soldier. The politics of staging this kind of image betrays one of the political projects of Van DerZee's photography. This image of the exemplary soldier, beautifully enveloped in a U.S. flag, posits an image of a black male as a war hero in a culture that at the time of its fashioning would not acknowledge him as such. The iconography in this instance is clearly uninterested in mourning one individual; rather, the move is to address the needs, aesthetics, and suffering of a larger community.

I first encountered a Van DerZee photo in Barthes's book on photography. On a certain level, both men's work is strongly associated for me: they are both cultural workers who revel in the most gilded and delicious hypersentimentality, both always

realizing the influence and limits of the parodic in their work. Granted, this connection is highly unstable, in ways both literal and metaphoric, because these men could never really "speak" to each other. Van DerZee was never in any position to read Barthes's stylized locutions and the commentary that Barthes offers on Van DerZee is flawed by a petty racism. When Barthes wrote about Van DerZee, he contented himself with making a few snide racist remarks about the middle-class subjects (a traditional-looking African-American family) attempting to, in Barthes's own words, "assume the white man's attributes."<sup>19</sup> Van DerZee's aesthetic utterly undercuts Barthes's writing about photography. Van DerZee, I would suggest, disrupts the hyper-subjective Barthesian approach to the photographic image. His pictures are never only the anticipation/potential occasion for mourning, like the Barthes Wintergarden picture discussed shortly, but are also a phantasmic illusion that starts from the "end" (death and a communal witnessing of death) and hopes to bring back the dead by a very self-conscious act of prosopopeia. In a strange, yet significant, way, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* beats *Camera Lucida* at its own game.

The photographic text itself, as Barthes has suggested, is already dead; therefore, as a work of art, the photograph is always already a text of mourning. But if death, as in the case of Van DerZee, is the obvious or surface subject of the picture, what might be the role of prosopopeia when considering these pictures? Barthes cathects a photo of his mother as a little girl in the Wintergarden. What fascinates him most about this old photo is the depiction of the time "right before he lived," the historical moment that most interests him because that is when his mother lived without him. This formula, if expanded to consider group identification as opposed to highly inter-subjective histories, would account for the power of Van DerZee's photos within the frame of the film. For a generation of black gay men engrossed in the project of excavating deeply buried histories (as far as "official" historical registers are concerned), these pictures depicting everyday life and death during the (queer) Harlem Renaissance show a very crucial moment: a "right before *we* lived" moment that is as important to this community as the moment in his mother's life before his own birth is for Barthes.

We can understand the importance of this move from the intersubjective to the communal moment of mourning by turning to Michael Moon's "Memorial Rags, Memorial Rages." Here Moon completes the task of theorizing the significance and crucial differences in collective mourning begun by Freud in *Group Psychology and Ego Formation*. Both Julien and Moon are keyed in to the power of collective mourning and both understand the need to play with potent queer energies that have changed the face of mourning in ways that are paradigm shaking; the following sentence from Moon's essay illuminates just what kind of tropological revision is at play in Julien's signifying on Van DerZee: "I invoke the social in the face of a predominantly privatized, heterosexualized, teleologized and "task-oriented" conception of grieving and mourning because I want to insist on the specifically queer energies at

play—or potentially in play—in our experiences of grief and our practices of mourning in the midst of the continuing desolation of our lives by AIDS.”<sup>20</sup> Moon calls attention to the characteristic of a dominant cultural logic of mourning that is, by its very premise and foundational principles, heterosexist. *Looking for Langston* works to undermine hegemonic constructions of mourning and instead prop up an alternate structure that is not pinioned by “privatized . . . and ‘task-oriented’” biases but instead posits the necessity for communal practices that speak to the current genocidal crises affecting black and queer communities globally. Julien explains this communal practice as an aesthetic process, relating in an interview that he “played with the surface” of Van DerZee’s photos so they would forge an “important relationship” between a contemporary gay scene and a “historical look.”<sup>21</sup> A subject is not locating her or his essential history by researching a “racial” or cultural past. More nearly, and most specifically in the case of *Looking for Langston*’s appropriation and reclamations of Van DerZee’s photographs and photographic aesthetic, what is transpiring is an insertion of contemporary “self” into a fiction of the past that generates in the communal and individual subject an imaginary coherence within the experience of homophobic representational elisions and a general historical “experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas.”<sup>22</sup> Van DerZee’s photos help the queer spectator visualize a past and thus enable an “imaginary” coherence that make the visualizing of a present and a future possible.

#### Disidentifying and Desire in Mapplethorpe

Tony Fischer, in an article on *Looking for Langston*, completely misreads what he calls the “AIDS subplot.”<sup>23</sup> The hierarchizing gesture of assigning main plots and subplots in this film shows a profound misunderstanding of the film’s structural and political formation. The moment of mourning in which we live informs Julien’s film in urgent and compelling ways. The best example of the centrality of AIDS mourning in the film would be a consideration of the influence of Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe’s pictures cannot, after the grim carnival of controversy around them, be seen any longer without a deep consideration of AIDS and both the gay and black communities’ current crisis of mourning. In a *Vanity Fair* interview right before his own death, Mapplethorpe commented that most of the black men who appeared in *Black Book* are now dead because of their poverty, lack of insurance, and the very high price of health care and medications such as AZT.<sup>24</sup> Although Julien’s project is, on one level, obviously the reappropriation of the black gay male body from Mapplethorpe, it is difficult to “read” these images and not be reminded of the terrible plague that robbed us of both the beautiful black men in front of the lens and the troublesome white patron/photographer behind the lens.

In considering the film’s aesthetic, one cannot miss the compositional influence of Mapplethorpe’s photography. Along with the dramatic and elegant Mapplethorpe lighting, the use and celebration of nude black gay male bodies makes visible the di-

alectical relationship between Mapplethorpe’s and Julien’s text. Perfectly chiseled black male bodies, framed in striking black-and-white monochromes, occupy the central dream sequences of the film. In his signifying on Mapplethorpe, Julien introduces a crucial topological revision: he displays black bodies and black bodies together as well as black bodies and white bodies together. In this instance he is rewriting the Mapplethorpe scene by letting these men relate to each other’s bodies and not just the viewer’s penetrating gaze. Julien and Kobena Mercer’s essay “True Confessions” can be read as the “written” theoretical accompaniment to the praxis that is *Looking for Langston*. In it the subject of black gay male pornography is dis-



Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*. Photo by Sunil Gupta. Copyright 1989 Sankofa Film and Video and Sunil Gupta. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

cussed in the following manner: “The convention in porn is to show single models in solo frames to enable the construction of one-to-one fantasy: Sometimes, when porn models pose in couples or groups, other connotations—friendship, solidarities, collective identities—can struggle to the surface for our recognition.”<sup>25</sup> This “accidental” positive identity-affirming effect that takes place in black male porn is being “pushed” and performed in Julien’s film;<sup>26</sup> and this is only possible through the playing with form, convention, and even frame that Julien accomplishes through his cinematic practice. This reading by Julien and Mercer casts Mapplethorpe as the exploitative author who sees these black bodies only as meat. But these charges were



made early in a debate that, like the current moment of AIDS mourning, has no facile end in sight. Mercer, in a large part as a result of the homophobic right-wing attacks on Mapplethorpe, has reconsidered the images he once denounced as simply reproducing a colonial fantasy: “[T]extual ambivalence of the black nude photograph is strictly undecidable because Mapplethorpe’s photographs do not provide an unequivocal yes/no answer to the question of whether they reinforce or undermine commonplace racist stereotypes—rather, he throws the binary structure of the question back at the spectator, where it is torn apart in the disruptive ‘shock effect.’”<sup>27</sup> The ambivalence Mercer speaks about recalls an earlier point I posited regarding the ambivalence toward a lost object bringing about melancholia. Melancholia is brought



Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. Photo by Sunil Gupta. Copyright 1989 Sankofa Film and Video and Sunil Gupta. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

about by the subject's inability to immediately work out the problems or contradictions that the object and its loss produce. Hence, the ambivalence brings about a certain “shock effect” that Mercer describes, which is, in a striking way, structurally akin to the inner workings of melancholia.

I wish to suggest that the pleasure that Mercer, Julien, and other gay men of color experience when consuming Mapplethorpe's images is a disidentificatory pleasure, one that acknowledges what is disturbing about the familiar practices of black male objectification that Mapplethorpe participated in, while at the same time it under-

stands that this pleasure can not easily be dismissed even though it is politically dangerous.<sup>28</sup> Like melancholia, disidentification is an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences. Mercer, Julien, and Jane Gaines have all explicated the ways in which the ambivalence that a spectator encounters when interfacing with these images is not only a racist exploitation of, but simultaneously a powerful validation of, the black male body. Disidentification, as a conceptual model for understanding the “shock effect” produced by these images, acknowledges what is indeed turbulent and troublesome about such images. Peggy Phelan has explained the way



Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. Photo by Sunil Gupta. Copyright 1989 Sankofa Film and Video and Sunil Gupta. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

in which “objectification” should not be the last word in any appraisal of Mapplethorpe's work:

Mapplethorpe's photography does “objectify” men, but what is astonishing about his work is how much room there is for dignity despite this objectification. His photography demonstrates that love and understanding of a body, while always involving objectification, precisely because it is made over in the mind and eye of the other, do not have to eliminate the private grace and power of the model.<sup>29</sup>

The “making over” in the eye and the mind is a transfiguration. The object that is desired is reformatted so that dignity and grace are not eclipsed by racist exploitation. Disidentification is this “making over”; it is the way a subject looks at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming. Disidentification happens on the level of both production and reception. The glance that cultural critics and workers such as Mercer and Julien direct at a text such as Mapplethorpe starts out a disidentificatory transfiguration on the level of reception, and later, when the images are incorporated into different cultural texts (Mercer’s cultural critique or Julien’s cinematic production), a disidentification is enacted that is linked to artistic process and production.

In the same way that one holds on to a lost object until the inner feelings of ambivalence are worked out, Julien sees the importance of our collectively holding on to Mapplethorpe’s images. These images are invaluable because they directly speak to the complicated circulation of colonial fantasies in gay communities, both white and of color. Identification in the fantasy narrative (colonial or otherwise), as Judith Butler has shown in her own essay on Mapplethorpe, is never fixed; one can identify not only with characters (occupying either the colonized or colonizer positions), but also with verbs or “acts.”<sup>30</sup> This identification, in Mapplethorpe, can perhaps be better understood as a disidentification that refuses to follow the identificatory protocols of the dominant culture. This brings to mind the scene in the film in which the white character takes a tour through the pages of *Black Book* that are projected on the walls of a darkly lit room. Can people who identify as belonging to a once or currently colonized group simply identify with *Black Book* images projected on the wall of the white “patrons” misty room, or must they, as Mercer suggests, confront their own identification with the white man, or even with the act of thumbing through this “dangerous” book and taking scopical delight in such images? I am suggesting that, for some spectators, this confrontation with whiteness does not occlude the pleasure that such images offer, but rather, that such confrontations can be part of a disidentificatory project that manages to partially recycle and hold on to these representations.

What binds these very different photographic presences in the text for me is a certain quality of mourning intrinsic both to the genre of portraiture and to the specific photographs of Van DerZee and Mapplethorpe used in *Looking for Langston*. Jeff Nunokawa argues that, long before the current epidemic, the history of gay men for mainstream culture has been one of death, doom, and extinction. He explains the ways in which the AIDS epidemic has been figured in the mainstream (straight) imaginary: “AIDS is a gay disease, and it means death, because AIDS has been made the most recent chapter in our culture’s history of the gay male, a history which, from its beginning, has read like a book of funerals.”<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, this genocidal wish of the straight mind has been partially fulfilled. Recent queer history, to no

small degree, does read like a funeral book. This is equally true of the history of the African-American male, especially the African-American gay male. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* and *Black Book* are both mourning texts that might, on first glance, appear to be such funeral books. There is in fact more to these texts that, when redeployed by cultural producers such as Julien, become meditative texts that decipher the workings of mourning in our culture.

### Rethinking Melancholia

I have tried to explicate this quality of mourning in somewhat abstract terms. If one zooms in on certain cinematic moments, a sharper understanding comes into perspective. My argument that *Looking for Langston* is a work of mourning hinges on some specific filmic moments. One of the earliest sound bites heard is the scratchy voice of a late-sixties radio announcer eulogizing Hughes, and the program he announces is called “In Memoriam Langston Hughes.” As I pointed out earlier, the film is billed as a meditation on Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. The next screen that appears, however, reads “dedicated to the memory of James Baldwin.” Grief is a precondition to this film. Mourning is never far removed from the “life” in *Looking for Langston*. The scene of mourning and the bar scene that represents the trans-historical space of gay life are separated by a winding staircase. Slow pans up and down show the closeness of these spaces. I do not look at these two scenes, the nightclub and the funeral, as composing a stark binary. This layering of different gay spaces serves to show these different aspects of gay lives as always interlocking and informing each other.

The establishing shot is the lavishly adorned casket surrounded by elegant mourners (a scene that reconstructs various images out of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*). Then there is a slow camera movement from an overhead unmotivated perspective of the filmmaker playing the corpse, body seemingly stiff within the coffin. The connection between looker (Julien conducting his cinematic investigation) and the object of the gaze (the figure of Hughes, who is, in one sense, “invisible,” yet very much present under the revisionary gaze) and the audience is radically disrupted and destabilized. This destabilizing of traditional cinematic positionalities is a mirroring of the destabilization and ambivalence of identification that are to be found at the center of the communal mourning scene.

Communal mourning, by its very nature, is an immensely complicated text to read, for we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we also mourn as a “whole”—or, put another way, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that is experiencing a loss of its parts. In this context, mourning Hughes, Baldwin, Mapplethorpe, or the beautiful men in *Black Book* is about mourning for oneself, for one’s community, for one’s very history. It is not the basically linear line that Freud traces, but a response to the heterosexist and corporate “task-oriented” mourning

that Moon describes. Whereas lives that are either/or/and black and queer remain on the line, there is no “normal” teleological end in sight for mourning. Mercer has described the achievement of *Looking for Langston* as working

precisely in the way it shows how desire and despair run together, and thus how desire always entails rituals of mourning for what is lost and cannot be recovered. There is a sense of mourning not just for Langston, buried in the past under the repressive weight of homophobic and [E]urocentric narratives, but mourning for friends, lovers and others lost to AIDS here and now, in the present. There is mourning but not melancholia: as Langston himself says at the end of the film, “Why should I be blue? I’ve been blue all night through.”<sup>32</sup>

I agree with many of the conclusions of Mercer’s essay. I wish here to add a corrective to that reading by depathologizing melancholia and understanding it as a “structure of feeling” that is necessary and not always counterproductive and negative. I am proposing that melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. The melancholia that occupies the minds of the communities under siege in this film can be envisioned as the revised version of melancholia that Freud wrote about in his later years. It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. I have proposed a different understanding of melancholia that does not see it as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism. Rather, it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names. In the end, this analysis does not dismiss the need for and uses of different activist militancies, but instead helps inform a better understanding of them. Douglas Crimp ends his manifesto “Mourning and Militancy” with this stirring sentence: “Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy.”<sup>33</sup>

Julien’s melancholic signifying on these two different photographs of mourning supplies a necessary history to a collective struggle. This history comes in the form of identity-affirming “melancholia,” a melancholia that individual subjects and different communities in crisis can use to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions of (im)possibility that shape the minority identities under consideration here. Finally, this melancholia is a productive space of hybridization that uniquely exists between a necessary militancy and indispensable mourning.

## Part II

### Remaking Genres: Porn, Punk, and Ethnography

8. Warhol himself, as Moon has shown us, was also not content to just "reproduce" Superman's image. He also let the paint splashes rupture the illusion of comic book perfection. Basquiat, in my estimation, follows this lead in his "homages" to childhood heroes.
9. Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966).
10. Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 207.
11. Paul Gilroy, "Whose Millennium Is This? Blackness: Pre-Modern, Post-Modern, Anti-Modern," in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 164.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Bodies: *Imitation of Life*," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 121.
14. Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 231.
15. Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, p. 227.
16. Andy Warhol, *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 572.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Quoted by Brathwaite, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," p. iii.
19. See Philip Brian Harper, "Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Response to the Death of Max Robinson," *Social Text* 28, no. 9.3 (1991): 68–86, for an excellent discussion of the African-American reception of Robinson's life and death.
20. Jean Laplace and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).
21. Hooks, "Altar of Sacrifice," p. 71.
22. Hooks rightfully explains that "In Basquiat's work, flesh on the black body is almost always falling away" (*ibid.*).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
24. For an interesting discussion of the "black life-world," see Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 261–79.
25. Hooks, "Altar of Sacrifice," p. 74.
26. Tate also points out the occlusion of black women in Basquiat's art, but he arrives at a very different understanding of this trend in the painter's work: "If you're black and historically informed there is no way you can look at Basquiat's work and not get beat up by the black male's history as property, pulverized meat, and popular entertainment. No way not to be reminded that lynchings and minstrelsy still vie in the white supremacist's imagination for the black male body's proper place" (*Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 238). Tate's statement should not be seen as an attempt to deny the history of the black female body's exploitation under white supremacy. Rather, I see his statement, like Basquiat's paintings, as an explication of the specific position of black men in the dominant culture's imagination.
27. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 2 (summer 1987): 65–81.
28. Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* ("The Moynihan Report") (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Transaction Social Science and Public Policy Report*, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 47–94.
29. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," p. 80.
30. Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) is a cultural text that examines

the workings of mourning and melancholia from a female perspective. Like this chapter's final section, her novel is inspired by a James Van DerZee photograph. It is set in 1927, seven years after armistice. Its location is Harlem. A door-to-door salesman who is married and fifty meets and falls in love with an eighteen-year-old woman. The affair ends with the older man, Joe Trace, sick and mad with love, shooting the young woman Dorcas in a fit of passion. The tragedy becomes even more profound when Joe's wife, Violet, in a fit of blinding madness, lashes out with a knife during the funeral and mutilates the beautiful light-skinned young woman's face as mourners look on horrified. This is where the book begins. It goes on to tell the story of the way in which Dorcas's face, captured in a photograph on the mantelpiece, haunts Joe and Violet. The character of Violet embodies an aspect of African-American female mourning. Like the Basquiat paintings discussed in this section, her story is a meditation on the workings of mourning in African-American culture.

31. The next chapter, "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*," reproduces an account of the specificities of black male mourning in twentieth-century U.S. cultural production.

## 2. Photographies of Mourning

1. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).
2. Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 1992), pp. 266–67.
3. Raymond Williams first used the phrase "structure of feeling" in his study *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For Williams, a structure of feeling was a *process* of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art. Williams explains: "The hypothesis has a special relevance to art and literature, where true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements. The unmistakable presence of certain elements in art which are not covered by (though in one mode, might be reduced to) other formal systems is the true source of the specializing category of 'the aesthetic', 'the arts', and 'imaginative literature'. We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements—specific dealings, specific rhythms—and yet to find their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing the extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced" (p. 133).
4. Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1988).
5. Rampersad also fails to explore the paths of an orientation that might be primarily autoerotic or in some way "bisexual" or perhaps even a non-"traditional" gender identification. In an interview, gay Harlem Renaissance figure Bruce Nugent himself refers to Hughes as "asexual." I do not wish to rule out the "asexual" possibility in the same way that Rampersad refuses to seriously consider any sexual option but compulsory heterosexuality. If one were to envision asexuality as more of a practice than a primary orientation, I do not see a necessary contradiction in being both queer and asexual. My intention is not to rule out the asexual as a species, but instead to decipher the ways in which asexuality is deployed from a normative heterosexual register as a mechanism to cancel queer possibility. For an excellent example of African-American biography writing that engages the queerness of its subject and the Harlem Renaissance, see Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).
6. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (summer 1991): pp. 773–97.

7. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 58.
8. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.
9. Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 197. For another useful account of call-and-response in twentieth-century African-American cultural production, see John F. Callahan, *In the African American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
10. Langston Hughes, "Poem," in *Black Men/White Men: A Gay Anthology*, ed. Michael J. Smith (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1983).
11. Houston Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 3–4.
12. Paul Gilroy, "Nothing but Sweat inside My Hand: Diaspora Aesthetics and Black Arts in Britain," in *ICA Documents 7: Black Film, British Cinema*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: ICA, 1988), p. 46.
13. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 93.
14. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 243.
15. My thinking about melancholia is enabled by the work of Judith Butler, who, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), describes the melancholic as a subject who "refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object be retained until differences are settled" (p. 58).
16. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," in *Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 75–76.
17. Peggy Phelan has written about this particular ontology of performance in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 33–70.
18. James Van DerZee, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (New York: Dutton, 1974), p. 83.
19. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 112.
20. Michael Moon, "Memorial Rags, Memorial Rages," unpublished manuscript.
21. Tony Fischer, "Isaac Julien: Looking for Langston," *Third Text* 12 (1990): 59–70.
22. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identities and Cinematic Representations," in *Ex-Iles*, p. 133.
23. Fischer, "Isaac Julien," p. 67.
24. Dominick Dunne, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale," *Vanity Fair* (February 1989). See Robert Mapplethorpe, *Black Book*, Foreword by Ntozake Shange (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
25. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988); reprinted in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), p. 170.
26. The "black male porn" I am referring to is nothing like lesbian erotica, porn produced for lesbians by lesbians. It is, in fact, just the opposite: porn made by white men for a primarily white audience. One could tentatively imagine that the pro-gay, pro-black, pro-sex charge that a black male porn produced by black men might create would indeed be powerful.
27. Kobena Mercer, "Looking for Trouble," *Transition* 51 (1991): 189.
28. This is not to imply that only gay men of color can disidentify with Mapplethorpe's images. Jane Gaines has written about the pleasure that straight white women can extract from Mapplethorpe. Gaines narrates her suspicion that "there may be fantasies of defiance as well as fantasies of discovery

worked out over these 'borrowed' and shared love objects" ("Competing Glances: Who Is Reading Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*," in *New Formations* 16 [spring 1992], p. 39). The working out that transpires in Gaines's account is, then, an ambivalent working through, what in the terms of this study would be understood as a disidentification with a complex object.

29. Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 51.

30. Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," *Differences* 2:2 (1990): 105–25. Butler's formulations in this instance are informed by the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Formation of Phantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986).

31. Jeff Nunokawa, "All the Sad Young Men: AIDS and the Work of Mourning," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4:2 (1991): 2.

32. Kobena Mercer, "Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Prathiba Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 253–54.

33. Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989): 18.

### 3. The Autoethnographic Performance

1. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 86.

2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 3.

3. Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 110.

4. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 34; emphasis added.

5. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

6. This coauthored essay appears in Bill Nichols's collection *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 201–28.

7. For further discussion of "pornotopia," see Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

8. The idea of the "native informant" has been discredited in contemporary anthropology and is now only written within scare quotes. The idea of indigenous people serving as informants to First World ethnographers has been critiqued throughout anthropology, critical theory, and postcolonial studies.

9. In contemporary gay culture, *top* and *bottom* are words used to describe people's sexual proclivities. Women or men who prefer to be penetrated in sexual acts are bottoms; those whose identification is connected with acts of penetration are usually referred to as tops. The words *top* and *bottom* do not capture the totality of one's sexual disposition, but instead work as a sort of cultural shorthand. Asian gay men, as will be explained later in this chapter, are stereotypically labeled as strictly bottoms in the erotic image hierarchy of North American gay porn.

10. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 226–27.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffery Mehlman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 18.

12. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 245.

13. Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, and Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 99–100.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

15. The phrase "figural anthropology" is developed in the work of Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 6.