

All That's Black Ain't SOŪLD: Performativity of Blackness in Fahamu Pecou's Work

by Shady Patterson



Fahamu Pecou, *Blak Maybe* (2009), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 66 x 51 in.

"The facility with which the definition and understanding of blackness in [Keith Obadike's] *Blackness for Sale* changes across the various scenarios listed in the product description indicates a preexisting liquidity, which in turn grants access to blackness as a detachable and usable experience."¹

Alessandra Raengo

One of the tenets of *liquid blackness* is articulated through detachment. Keith Obadike uses the metaplasticity of the virtual/cyber world to offer blackness as an "experience" to those non-blacks who desire it or to the blacks whose "blackness" is "at stake" or "in limbo."² This imagined alternate universe is made pervasive by today's gaming possibilities and technologies. Yet, if Obadike's commodifying and auctioning of his blackness might prove to be potentially profitable, for the buyer and seller, in an imagined universe, what about in real life?

In "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," Alessandra Raengo offers a basis for understanding *blackness* as a social construction distinct from the experience of *being black*, citing Marx's explanation of commodification: "That blackness and whiteness are distinct from black and white people is increasingly accepted today as is the overwhelming self-referentiality of the images circulating in our contemporary visual culture."³ Therefore, blackness does not describe the experience of black people, but attends socially constructed ideas and issues attached to peoples whose bodies are recognizably "black."

Raengo also affords a framework for attending issues and concerns civil society presents in the construction and maintenance of race and blackness using Henry Louis Gates' definition of the "Naturalist Fallacy." She explains, "the expectation that visual signifiers of race are responsible for faithfully and authentically representing 'black people,' rather than social relations" is helpful in interrogating the distinction of being black

and “experiencing” Blackness.⁴ Today’s technology-based society, social media outlets (i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter) offer instantiations of this paradox, where individual’s cyber surrogate enables an experience akin to realistic situations though lacking sensorial elements and the existential depth associated with the real/lived experience.

Fahamu Pecou offers a place to engage with the tension existing at the cusp of the real and imagined worlds [...] his body.

Fahamu Pecou offers a place to engage with the tension existing at the cusp of the real and imagined worlds thusly understood: his body. Pecou explores issues of black masculinity and race in contemporary culture. The performance aspect of his exploration offers insight into how society engages with the stereotypes, fantasies, and the fallacies of American hip-hop while working to subvert the image of the Black male body. His music videos, paintings, and “scholarshit”⁵ are loaded with a “trap” lexicon, in-vogue delusions of grandeur, and dandyism. Objectifying his body not only offers a site for society to safely examine a multiplicity of issues, but also exploits his body as a marketplace for the fostering of personal opportunities. Using himself as subject works successfully as a ploy for self-promotion and media saturation. In his work, Pecou muddles the boundaries between parody and reality by interrogating relevant contemporary social and pop culture issues, performing and lionizing blackness, and employing seasoned local hip-hop talent, like Starchile, Ekundayo, and Boog Brown. Though Pecou interrogates very specific issues, I will touch on topics of consumption and “black cultural traffic,”⁶ the mobility of blackness, and how it might operate in relation to African spirituality and practice.

Using the format of renowned magazine covers, Pecou reimagines himself

as a celebrity by painting a glamorous version of his likeness on large, oversized canvas. Unassigned to any particular series of work, these self-portraits appear and re-appear throughout his portfolio becoming narrations of his accomplishments as they are recognized by the world he imagines. *Blak Maybe* (2009) uses the format of *Lodown Magazine*, *American Gothik* (2009) mimics *Literal* magazine, and *The Code* (2009) uses *Creative Quarterly*. Through this convergence of real, tangible material worlds and imaginary marketing of self, these works doubly function as creative art pieces and as validations of worth using the influence, evaluation, and audience loyalty of each magazine he occupies. Instead of being pimped and sold at the discretion of today’s arbiters of culture through mediated materials, Pecou tasks himself as the artist and the master of his destiny reversing how identity is constructed and translated. He employs “celebrity” as a mechanism to introduce himself into the stream of pop culture and black cultural traffic, rather than his celebrity being the consequence of his efforts. Though interesting and maybe unfamiliar to the traditional Western canon of art, this stratagem is popular in hip-hop culture, European black dandyism, and furthermore West African traditions.⁷

In the early 1980s, Dapper Dan’s clothing boutique in Harlem revolutionized street wear and helped shape the look of hip-hop by pirating European designer logos and customizing clothing geared to his market. As a result, his clientele was able to access the lives of the rich and famous through the livery respective to their lifestyles.⁸ This performativity is engrained in the composition of African aesthetics, constitutive in black cultural products and surfaces time and again in Pecou’s work.

Irony (2012), a commentary on society’s relationship with black bodies through visual pop culture, was inspired by Jay-Z’s lyric “Truthfully/I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/but I did 5 mill/I ain’t been rhyming like Common since.”⁹ Here, Pecou scrutinizes the simultaneous recognition and



Fahamu Pecou, *American Gothik* (2009), acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 63.5 x 49.5 in.

dismissal of social responsibility in hip-hop artists. The amassing of capital seems to take priority over ethical reasoning. The tabling of one's own values and principles exposes the root of compromise and sacrifice constantly negotiated in a plagued and troubled community or the unforgiving mandatory performance in hip-hop. This psychological rupture is visualized on screen in the duplication of performing individuals throughout the video. Each performer appears cloned, bifurcated by the gray and in-static television screen, as the two different characterizations allude to an acknowledgement of the real/authentic self and the imaginary representation of self, however never distinguishing, which is which.

The pressure to perform at peak capacity, as a black man, is riddled with confrontation within the operating social order.

West African spirituality offers a framework to deal with this tricky-ness and reaffirms the value in the individual's mentality and lived experience. In *Tangled Webs* (2011) from Pecou's *Second Childhood* series, Anansi, the trickster and also West African Orisha, surfaces. In this illustration, Anansi, the spider, is depicted graphically on a child's pajama shirt worn on Pecou's adult, male, black body. As a mediated energy, Anansi percolates ideas about the Black man's anxiety surrounding the fulfillment of social expectations and obligations due to failure in the early childhood development in their lives. This piece can be thought of as a call to arms, a commandment of forces against the prevailing degradation of the black man, or in a less revolutionary vein, a resignation of the socio-corporeal experience. The pressure to perform at peak capacity, as a black man, is riddled with confrontation within the operating social order. Institutional racism and the prison industrial complex, mythologies and spectacularization of the black male body, and the panic and suspicion of intention living on the surface of their bodies explains the desire to escape

often felt and temporarily realized through performance and imagination. This consternation and negotiation can be deemed symptomatic of the historical trauma and an attempt at reconciliation with it; alternatively, it can be seen as illustrative of subsequent and constant propitiation experienced within the black community surfacing at points of racial interaction, survival, and approximation of freedom and indicative, or prototypical, of black and African aesthetics.

Fahamu's most current project *GRAVITY*, explores the clothing practice of sagging to comment on and illustrate the psychosocial conflict common in the "contradictions of mobility, access and agency for young Black men."¹⁰ In this series of portraits on paper Pecou depicts himself cramped and confined by the limits of the paper. In each portrait he wears the same uniform: he is bare-chested and only wears a pair of jeans and sneakers and multiple pairs of boxers. This exaggeration of underwear not only points to the actual practice of layered bottoms, but it also exaggerates and satirizes it in order to draw attention to issues of self-expression and fixity. Pecou depicts himself in different instances of mobility; in black and white, while splashes of brown watercolor appear where we imagine skin. While the parameters and style of dress challenge his mobility, his brownness facilely exceeds the edges of his depicted corporeality. His brownness has a liquid quality, suggesting the racialization of this style of dress; underscoring the "visible seam" of blackness in popular culture, it destabilizes one's perception of the body and respective ethnic categorization.¹¹ This thorny troubling pricks, but also visualizes the anxieties surrounding the profusion and irruption of "black" cultural material in national and international markets.

¹Alessandra Raengo, "Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity," *liquid blackness*, 1, no. 2 (April 2014): 8.

²Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Blackness for Sale."

<http://www.blacknetart.com/index1.1.html><http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html> (accessed on May 28, 2014).

³Alessandra Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," in *Beyond Blackface: Africana Images in US Media*, ed. Akil Houston, 4th edition (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2013), 159.

⁴Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," 160.

⁵Fahamu Pecou "Art. Rap. Scholarshit." <http://scholarshit.tumblr.com> (accessed May 26, 2014).

⁶Harry Justin Elam and Kennell A. Jackson, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁷Emily Zobel Marshall, "Anansi, Eshu, and Legba: Slave Resistance and the West African Trickster." *Bonded Labor in the Cultural Contact Zone: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Slavery and Its Discourses* (Münster: Waxman, 2010): 177-192.

⁸Jane Yeomans, "Dapper Dan's Designs". *New Yorker*, March 19, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/photobooth/2013/03/dapper-dans-designs.html#slide_ss_0=1 (accessed May 28, 2014).

⁹Shawn Carter and Marshall Mathers, "Moment of Clarity" (song lyrics), <http://www.metrolyrics.com/moment-of-clarity-lyrics-jayz.html> (accessed May 28, 2014).

¹⁰Fahamu Pecou, "Gravity." <http://www.fahamupecouart.com/#gravity/cfyo> (accessed May 28, 2014).

¹¹Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Visible Seams: The Media Art of Fatimah Tuggar," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 177-206.



Fahamu Pecou, *Gravity and Lord* (2013), graphite and acrylics on paper, 42 x 26 in.