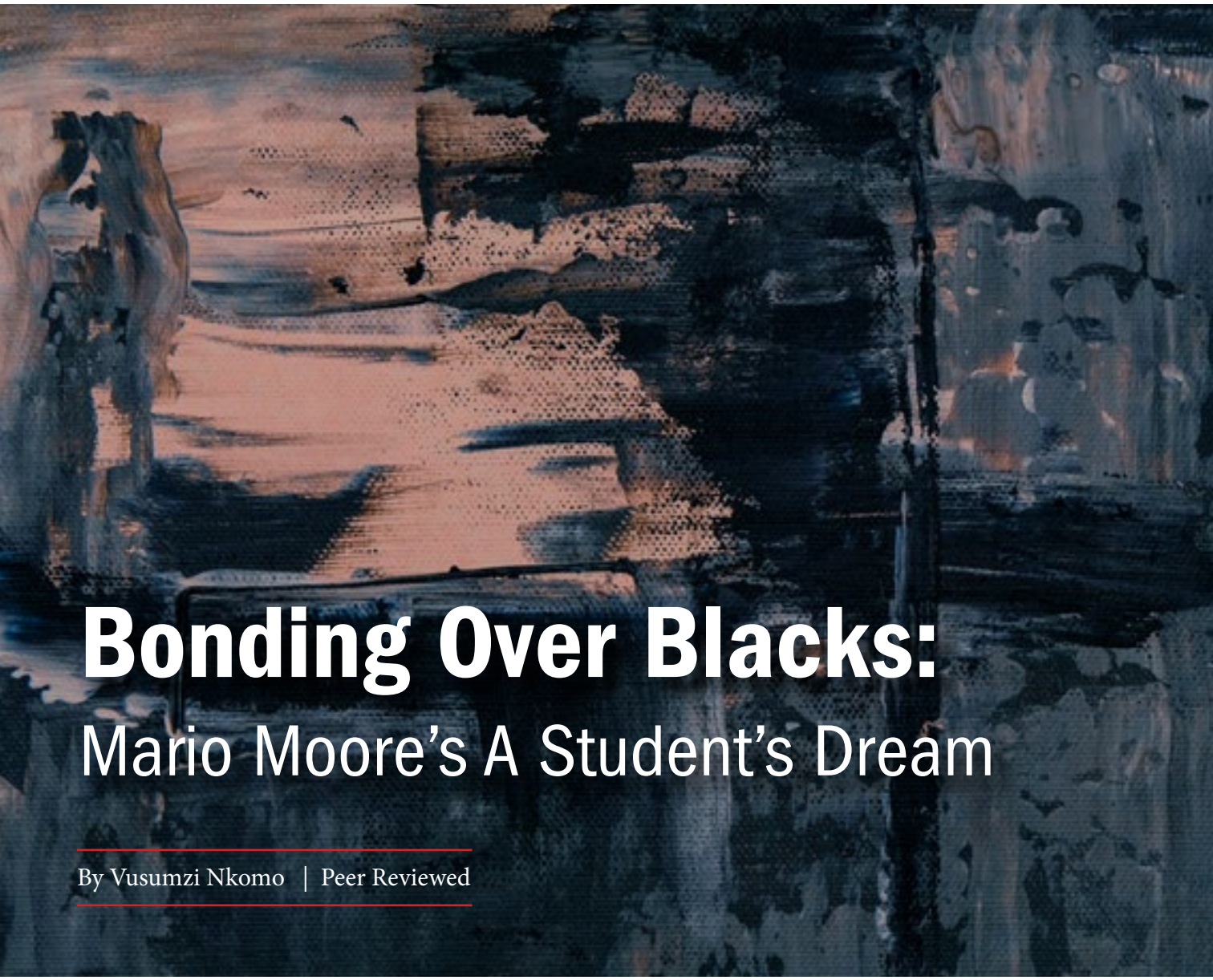

Bonding Over Blacks:
Mario Moore's A Student's Dream

By Vusumzi Nkomo | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Through Marx and Freud, scholar Frank Wilderson III asserts that 'there is no self to be known,' owing to the notion that the conceptual integrity of the Self relies on 'outdated notions of a unitary self.' I want to think about the implications of this provocation for Black subjectivity, and by extension take seriously David Marriot's lament, 'what do you do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?' I intend to demonstrate this tragic relation between the Black imago and the Black image/portrait, as well as its dependence on a global consensus (or civil society's collective unconscious) that regards the Black as an object (rather than subject/self) of enjoyment. At the risk of pushing this argument too far, I want to consider how Mario Moore, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Cinga Samson's Black subjects (and the worlds they inhabit) struggle against what Wilderson, by way of Marriot, describes as a phenomenon where 'all sentient beings, Humans and Blacks, bond over the imago of the Black.'

> 'Existence might be a daily struggle for us all, but for the black his being is the effect of a war fought on at least two fronts. He must enter into combat not only with the presentiments and premonitions of a world condemning him to nonexistence, he must also enter the lists against his own image.'
> — David Marriott, *On Black Men* (2000: 88)

Through Fanon, through Marriott, we might begin to *see* the horror of the intimacy that binds together the White-Human subject and the Black object (this crucial distinction follows what Marriot (2000) calls 'the paralysing split between being black and being human'); this binding might help elucidate the nature of the fantasies and anxieties that sit comfortably in the minds of, say, White people, which is to say, parts of themselves they can't shake off and, simultaneously, help us understand the fantasies and anxieties that sit nervously in the minds of Blacks. They can't shake these off not because of lack of will, but can't shake them off for as long as White people remain White, and Blacks remain Black[1], in ways that vouchsafe not only racist performances but the integrity and intensity of racial categories writ large.

It is by centralising this drama that I seek to *look* at some paintings of Black figures by Black artists, particularly Mario Moore's *A Student's Dream* (2017), to consider what *looking* at these images entails: for me, a Black 'man/person' (here, as Wilderson puts it, 'yes the scare quotes matter' (2009: 119)), for the artists, the figures in the artworks, the world *in* the artworks, the world outside the artworks, the 'extra-diegetic' where the Black 'people' (upon which these figures are mapped and figured) are always already corporeally and socially dead and dying. The Human subjects *looking* at Black people, looking at Blackened figures. Black people *looking* at themselves, *looking* at themselves being looked at (by an act of identification, the Black person doing the looking, attempts to identify with the Blackened figure and thereby begins to look at themselves looking at themselves[2]). In what follows, this text considers the implications of reading 'Black images' by paying attention to the processes of phobogenisis in relation to the unconscious[3].

It remains unclear what resistance, exactly, can a Black image put up against a racial and racializing *imago* (see Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988) that intrudes on the (in)capacity of its figures and ~~subjects~~ (this is struck through to underscore a peculiar subjectivity that is always under erasure and dead) to *appear* in 'their own terms'. The possessive 'their own' is complicated at best and thrown out the window at worst when one considers Fanon's declaration that the Black (~~person~~ or in this case, image) has no 'ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man' (Fanon, 2008: 83). As 'genealogical isolates', to borrow from Orlando Patterson (1982: 312), the socially dead fungible objects can never have 'their own' anything, which is to say, they can't have it in ways that are essential or seem to matter in *essential* ways. 'Genealogical isolates' have no 'terms'; in the sense of (i) not only language but speech (to summon language for the purposes of naming and the full expression of a unitary Self), an uncoerced speech that can be expressed with impunity, and 'terms' as in (ii) *times* or periodicity, a temporality that is not displaced and undermined, the *time* of a 'permanently belated' Black derelict psyche that is, according to Marriott, following Fanon, 'waiting…for an imago that is already there, lying in wait for him…a moment of suspension, one that delays, perhaps permanently, the timely expression of anything that might be called one's own[4] (2000: 82). We might add, a belated Black derelict psyche that has no time[5].

'It is in white terms,' writes Fanon, 'that one [Black] *perceives* one's fellows' (emphasis mine, 2008: 126). The White-Human ocular *hyper-capacity* for perception, for *looking,* (i) invades and conquers the on-*looking* Black, and (ii) *enjoys* the Blackened ~~subject~~ that is portrayed in the Black image. The white terms are the anti-Black racist culture's anxieties and phobias about Black people that are *enjoyed* by both Blacks and Whites-Humans 'to form a bond through racial antagonism' (2007: 211), a 'sick bond' (2007: 216) that is *constituent* to the white terms of *looking* and perceiving. I emphasise this degrading and wretch-*ing looking* to highlight it as a constituent element of *seeing,* which is to say the White-Human subject does not know how else to look at Black people even if it tried, and further, how *looking*, here understood not simply as a *way of seeing* but the very privileging of the sense of *seeing* (against a Blackness that, according to Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva, constitutes a 'threat to sense'), is always already an anti-Black endeavour that is parasitic on the Black object being looked at/seen.[6]

Furthermore, what is the place of Black images in the world of images, or what Barthes calls a 'family of images'? What this question is after is the place of images of ~~people~~ who have no place in the World because they have no World[7], no *people-ness,* no relationality that could resemble what is socially coded as the 'family'. What this question wants to take seriously is whether we could separate these Black images from Black *imagoes* and considers 'the place of the black imago in the white unconscious' that invades '*our*' unconscious.

Black desolation[8]

> 'As reeking tombs in the public life of culture, black men can be cannibalised, shredded and torn open because, like the living dead, they are imagined as vicious and parasitic, insatiably feeding off the lives of their living, white hosts.'
> — David Marriot, *On Black Men* (2000: 40)

Mario Moore's *A Student's Dream* (2017), from his solo show *Recovery* (2018), features three white men: two clad in clean white coats, the other in a black tux. The artist, or the figure of the artist, lies on a table with no support structure for his head, his eyes are wide open, we can see his shoulders, the rest of his body is covered with a white sheet. A dog rests under the table, closer to us a skull sits on a stool, *looking* at us. The light that lit or hits his face is not for me, which is to say not intended for my *looking* but I'll take what I can get from this blank Black face and emotionless and silent smile of a 'pained flesh' (Hartman, 1997: 56). The light is a prop and function of the operation. The absence of any surgical tools is quite curious: is his body torn open or simply accessible by virtue of open vulnerability to gratuitous violence? Are they, the white men, opening him up or just *looking* at him unjustly, looking at 'the within loss', as M. NourbeSe Philip puts it (2008: 28)? Is he numb (to it all)? We've established that the light is for their pleasure (of looking) and enjoyment (of his flesh).

> "The Human subjects *looking* at Black people, looking at Blackened figures. Black people *looking* at themselves, *looking* at themselves being looked at (by an act of identification, the Black person doing the looking, attempts to identify with the Blackened figure and thereby begins to look at themselves looking at themselves[2]). In what follows, this text considers the implications of reading 'Black images' by paying attention to the processes of phobogenisis in relation to the unconscious[3]."

The skull on the stool is him and all his deaths that he has died and will continue to die at the hands (or *seeing* eyes) of these white men. Their look(ing) is murderous; it is a 'history of [...] looking [at Black men],' writes Marriott, that 'reveals a trait of wanting to devour, to destroy and modify via the eyes' (2000: 41). This face being looked at (or experimented on), 'the living image of a dead thing' (Barthes, 1982: 79) can never die enough from this 'deadening objectification', to borrow from Saidiya Hartman (1997: 101). Listen to the painter:

> 'Mentally, looking at these images of Black men being killed, over and over, that trauma — and then a constant state of Black men having to work, work, work. This idea of resting is a mystery, fantasy land!'
> — Mario Moore (in Sharp, 2018)

Below his head is an uppercase 'DREAM.' – written in white. The end-quote mark, with the full stop sign, signals an end to a sentence, something said (the table is big enough to carry the title of Dr King's famous speech) but cannot be said loud enough without consequence. However, I'm inclined to read the (colour) 'white' of the sheet (with/and/because of the whiteness of the three men) with the visible word as 'white DREAMS' (of culture); resting is fantasy land because it is nothing but white (men) dream(ing), or white fantasies/dreams that are parasitic on and invade Black capacity for dreaming. This invasion by the white unconscious is the conquest of the Black unconscious that 'violently evacuates' (2007: 216) the self-~~subject~~; it is, Marriott argues, 'the intrusion, into [the Black's] unconscious, of phobias which racist culture project[s] onto the bodies of black people' thereby attaching to them racist imagoes.

'[T]he longer you look, the stranger it becomes.' These are the words of British art critic Jonathan Jones reflecting on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *No Such*

Luxury (2020). He could as easily be reflecting on Cinga Samson's Black figures. I continue to consider this 'strange wanting to look' at Black people; Jones *feels* it, the stakes of looking at a ~~subject~~ that always 'fails to escape its socially dead conception' (Marriott, 2016: 34) and so it remains (a) strange(r) and pleasurable to the 'devouring eye' (2000: 32) of others. It is as strange as Cinga's Black ~~subjects~~ whose flesh is equally *enjoyed* with equal force. I look at them, they are alive, even though it is 'specifically as a corpse that blackness appears' (Marriott, 2016: 34). These images seem to be *enjoyed* as 'corpsed' *sans pain*[9]; what we know about Black people '*in*' the World is carried by the viewer into the world of the artwork. What we could possibly know about us is already conquered and intruded upon by a racist imago and 'an unconscious that appears to hate [us]' (2000: 79).

Plantation Optics

Taking seriously the implications of a *seeing* that kills, and of looking at *things* that are killed by and when they are seen. A seeing that satisfies necrophiliac desires and pleasures, repulsions and phobias, fantasies and longings. We call this, here, Plantation Optics.[10]

One could feel that the pairing 'optic' and 'plantation' are curious phrasing. I am interested in 'optics' as (i) the study of sight and *seeing,* and additionally, (ii) the perception of events, bodies, courses of action by the public or within the codes of White-Human civil society. We want to think about optics in relation to Black corporeality, or/and bodies, and what *seeing* them *means* or rather the implications of *seeing* Black bodies. It is in the context of these meanings that we are drawn to the second definition of optics: how are these meanings (re)produced in ways that frame how the public-World sees Black people and images of Black people. The concept of the Plantation (pulled away from a definitive time and place but as the foundation of modern society) is considered here as foundational to these optics of/or *looking* at Black images-people; it is the 'onticidal terror/destruction/death'[11] of capture-captivity which finds and outlives the Plantation estate as a formal institution which informs this enquiry as much as it informs the modern World writ large, and the perceptible and imperceptible ways in which Black images-people are perceived.

Furthermore, *looking* in the Plantation, *looking* at the Plantation, can't escape the practice of 'overseeing' (a yoke so inescapably real for the Black bodies it oversees): the brutal exercise of force over Slaves, a terror that is foundational to what we know as policing. This power, vested symbolically and otherwise in the hands of all White people, marks what we now understand as the social death that marks all Black bodies as not only Slaves to their legal Masters but every single White person. In *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* Frank B. Wilderson III, by way of Orlando Patterson, defines social death as a paradigmatic *position*[12] (not simply an identity or 'anthropological accoutrements') of those who are 'generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality…' (2010: 11). According to Marriott, '[B]lack social death is taken to be a rule of life that prescribes to [B]lacks that they live under the command of death' (2016: 34). Discussing what he calls Afropessimism's most 'comprehensive and iconoclastic claim', Wilderson argues that 'Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death' (2020: 102), an inseparability that marks a profound shift in how we may think about not only 'conceptions of suffering' (Wilderson in Mngxitama et. al, 2008: 97) when the ~~subjects~~ are Black bodies, but as an extension of this; how we are *seen,* how we *see* the socially dead.

In *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011), visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that 'visuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign' (2011: 2). 'Visuality,' writes Mirzoeff, 'supplemented the violence of authority and its separations' (2011: 3) and, we should add, it was an extension of terror of and in the Plantation. The techniques of *overseeing,* embodied by the Overseer, constitute what Mirzoeff calls 'oversight' (2011: 10), a total violence and 'world-generating optic' (2011: 8) that we may think of as a force that makes the World-Modernity possible and structurally positions the Slave as a thing anyone can do anything to, including the capacity to *look* at.

I am interested in theorising the Plantation Optic as a framework to situate the terror of the plantation in and as the act of *looking*: to consider the violence of

the Human subject as constituent to the ways in which Black ~~subjects~~ are *looked* at and *enjoyed* 'as abject representatives of death' (Marriott, 2000: 15). How are the images of the (socially) dead *digested*? What is the nature of the *hunger* for Black images and can it be approached and/or theorised independently from the *appetite* for Black flesh? What is the function of this deadly fetish for Black flesh that (re)produces it as '*health tonic* for everyone who is not Black; an ensemble of sadistic rituals and captivity' (Wilderson, 2020: 40; emphasis mine).

Furthermore, Mirzoeff's 'Overseeing' connotes more than just a functionary of power operating at the level of the extra-judicial but points us to an excessive form of *seeing*, an unbounded *looking* embodied by Human bodies abundantly bestowed with ontological capacity that owes its integrity to the theft of bodies. This 'strange, and ruthless, world of wanting to look at black [people]' (Marriott, 2000: 34) is the function of Over-seeing that kills, a 'sadistic form of looking' (2000: 32) at the 'killable and warehousable objecthood of Black flesh' (Aarons, 2016: 5), the socially (and corporeally) dead-dying and only fatally alive. Overseeing *is* the Plantation Optic.

Notes

1. Beyond being a provocative statement, it must be noted that what I am gesturing towards is a theorisation of these categories (Black, White, as well as Slave, Human) as structural positions as opposed to identities. I argue, contentiously, that the people who embody them can only be free of them once we step into a new epistemological order, following the *end of the world as we know it,* a conceptual terrain where bodies will be imbued with different sets of meanings and capacities.

2. Probing what he calls Kobena Mercer's 'divided identifications', David Marriot (2000), in the essay titled 'Murderous Appetites: Photography and Fantasy', develops a sophisticated reading of Mercer's readings of Robert Mapplethorpe's images and asks us to consider the complex nature of a Black person looking at an image of another Black person/subject. Another example is provided by Marriott in Footnote 4 of the opening essay of *On Black Men* where he considers *identification* between a young Muhammad Ali and images of Emmett Till, as well as the black community looking at mass distributed images of Till's body, 'black communities who…are looking at an image of themselves – what they can become – in white culture' (2000: 22).

3. I am indebted to the literature of Afropessimists in my attempts to think the relation between visuality and the Black body.

4. Marriott is inviting us to reconsider the moment Fanon is *seen* by the violent gaze of a white child who, in a moment of horror (for him and Fanon), exclaims, '*Look*, a Negro…Mama, *see* the Negro!' (emphasis mine), and immediately followed by 'I'm frightened'. Fanon adds: 'Now they were beginning to be afraid of me' (2008: 84). What we witness, with and through Fanon, is an arrival that is too late to challenge the predominance of a Black imago.

5. To push this further, we might think this concept as an *anti-time* relation, an ontological dereliction that we can call an anti-narrative 'flat line' with no beginning and no end, a *disequilibrium-faux equilibrium-disequilibrium*, to borrow from the Afropessimist parlance.

6. I am not in any way suggesting that to liberate Black people from this Human hyper- capacity to *look* would amount to the so-called liberation of Black people, or the 'end of the world as we know it', to borrow from Aimé Césaire.

7. In his fine essay 'The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism' (2011), Jared Sexton argues that: 'Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in', and asks us to distinguish the 'World' from 'Earth'.

8. I borrow this phrase from David Marriot, *On Black Men* (2000: 32).

9. It is beyond the scope of this essay to argue how Black images that don't feature figures in pain, whether perceived/imagined or real, aren't immune to racial imagoes about Black people. This remains an interesting subject to explore in the context of an obsession and pervasive

consumption of Black portraiture in contemporary art. It is in this context that I mention Samson and Yiadom-Boakye, whose Black figures enjoy a relative distance to Black death (even though Samson's solo, *Iyabanda Intsimbi/The metal is cold,* at FLAG Art Foundation (2021), flirts with it, at least conceptually).

10. My interest here is tracing the history (which is to say, the past, present and future incarnations) of the desire and murderous appetite to look at Black bodies and how this phenomenon of a *looking that devours* can be located in the violent matrix inherit to the Plantation paradigm.

11. I am thinking about this total violence with the ideas developed in Calvin L. Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018).

12. Wilderson's intervention is crucial; there is a general tendency to conflate Blackness as a structural position and Blackness as an identity. Or to put it differently, how we may think the difference between how Black people are structurally or paradigmatically positioned in the World, as opposed to Black people's decision to identify as Black. The implications of this conflation are huge; this essay then concerns itself with the former as something that can be theorised separately from the latter.

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