Making myself visible: self-portraiture and representations of blackness in the work of Donald Rodney

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In her landmark postcolonial essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posited the notion of “epistemic violence”.\(^1\) Described as “the heterogeneous project to construe the colonial subject as other”,\(^2\) whereby the ideological perspectives of the coloniser are established as normative, epistemic violence may be enacted both explicitly and insidiously, whether experienced as political discourse or everyday racism. Applied to a late-twentieth century British context, epistemic violence may be understood as a pervasive systemic racism that sought to estrange Black British subjectivities from dominant – white – national and cultural narratives. As Kobena Mercer noted in 1994, “for Black Britain, the 1980s were lived as a relentless vertigo of displacement”.\(^3\)

Donald Rodney (1961–1998) forged his artistic career within this milieu of state sanctioned epistemic violence, and its counter force of radical black, anti-racist politics. A leading figure in the BLK Art Group of the early 1980s, alongside Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith, he produced politically inflected, challenging artworks, that addressed what he called “the vicious institutionalised racism endemic in British cultural identity”.\(^4\) Using mixed media, collage, found mass-media imagery, and often working beyond the confines of medium-specificity, in what Mercer has called a “hybridised aesthetic”;\(^5\) Rodney’s work engaged with the prejudices faced by Britain’s black youth, while simultaneously addressing colonial histories of slavery, derogatory anthropological classifications of the black body, and the discrimination faced by post-war Caribbean migrants in Britain.\(^6\) For Rodney, his artistic practice encompassed “the fears of Black life”.\(^7\)
which included not just public displays of physical or verbal attack, but the ways in which
discriminatory and dehumanising narratives of blackness were disseminated within the print
and broadcast media. Stereotypes of young black men as dangerous, if not explicitly criminal,
were commonplace, particularly in the wake of civil unrest – or riots – which occurred in
magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in
public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe
white supremacy”.

Through his use of self-portraiture (loosely defined), Rodney’s work
reflexively investigated his own position within this discriminatory visual culture. He stated,
“Black masculinity intrigues me because of being a black man and constantly being told that
I am a threat”. This paper will consider how Rodney appropriated and critiqued these
mediated perceptions of black masculinity through series of self-portraits that both ventured
beyond portraiture’s limits and challenged the homogenising effect of epistemic violence.

Fig. 1 Rasheed Araeen, *How Could One Paint a Self-Portrait!*, 1978–9, mixed media on
paper, 122 x 102 cm, Sharjah Art Foundation Collection.
For a younger generation of artists entering the British art scene in the early 1980s, British-Pakistani artist Rasheed Araeen’s politically motivated strategic interventions into the visual discourse of a dominant (white) imperialist culture became “benchmark”. In his artworks such as *How Could One Paint a Self Portrait!* 1978-9 (fig.1), Araeen presented his “colonized self”: a rendition of the self in which a discriminatory discourse of cultural imperialism has not only had a depersonalising effect, but has been internalised by the subject. Araeen’s portrait, with its brow-beaten, down-cast gaze, is obliterated with racist graffiti, including the phrases “Paki Go Home”, “Blacks Out” and “NF Rule OK”, sprayed in red and blue. In addition to these overtly aggressive and exclusionary slogans, Araeen also included small typed statements, collaged to the surface of the canvas. Amongst these statements is the rejection of his submission to an open exhibition, suggesting that alongside the visceral forms of racism endured, oppression, defined by Iris Young as the experience of “exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence”, persisted within the apparently egalitarian art world and expressed itself through insidious and seemingly generic vocabularies. Cumulatively, Araeen’s self-portraits articulated a “double consciousness” - the compulsion to always see oneself through the lens of the dominant culture - asserting that Black artists were denied the luxury of narcissistic individualism afforded to white artists, and were consequently destined to create self-portraits that were not representative of the self, but rather reflected a series of historically formulated stereotypes that cast the black body as primitive and degenerate. This proposition had a lasting impact on young Black artists, including Donald Rodney, who, like Araeen, sought solutions to the question: how is it possible to create a self-portrait under the enduring conditions of colonial oppression?
In 1991 Rodney reflected that, “The attempt to produce a self portrait when all black images have been appropriated and put under clearly defined areas of political and anthropological control has been a growing pre-occupation”.\textsuperscript{15} His solution regarding Black self-portraiture was to approach the genre metaphorically, testing the limits of its parameters and in doing so challenge the framing space of representation. In making his self-portraits Chambers notes that “[Rodney] was strenuously careful not to present himself within his work”.\textsuperscript{16}

Approaching the genre with the understanding that his identity as a black man automatically positioned him within the purview of distinct inferiorising and dehumanising stereotypes, Rodney eschewed the presentation of a “counter-position of a ‘positive’ black imagery”,\textsuperscript{17} as a strategy of contestation. Rather, in his self-portraits Rodney self-consciously took on the guise of those stereotypes in order to highlight and critique the ways in which all black men are essentialised as homogenous threat. As Homi Bhabha argued, the only way of displacing the stereotyped image is “by engaging with its effectivity”.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, in the project of decolonising the visual representations of black people, one of the central strategies used by Rodney was to appropriate pre-existing imagery in order to highlight the ideological intent of media images that circulated in daily life.
In a small drawing, *Portrait of the Artist taking a Political Initiative*, 1989-90 (fig.2), Rodney utilised a widely published media image of a young black man holding a home-made petrol bomb during the so-called Handsworth riots of September 9-10, 1985.\(^{19}\) However, rather than reproduce the photograph, Rodney presents the figure as a black silhouette. Emphatically present, but devoid of his identifying features, the figure literally becomes an unidentified black man, both visible and invisible; Rodney’s blacked-out body erases the identifiable ‘I’, and plays with the notion of an unidentified black threat; the shadow cast could be filled by any body. But, if any young black male is a threat, Rodney’s presentation of the silhouette as a self-portrait, as claimed in the accompanying caption, dynamically mimics that proposition to subversive affect.

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Fig.3, Donald Rodney, *Framed Youth*, 1986, print on constructed wall, 61 cm frame, no longer extant.\(^{20}\)
Rodney had previously utilised this press image of the black man striding purposefully with his petrol bomb in the collage, *Framed Youth*, 1986 (fig.3). When Rodney created the work the photograph had been published on the front covers of *The Sun*, *The Star* and the *Express* newspapers, and unnamed subject vilified as typifying the mindless, violent tendencies of Britain’s black youth; *The Sun* reported, “A black thug stalks a Birmingham street with hate in his eyes and a petrol bomb in his hand”.21 Like the majority of Britain’s black population, Rodney himself did not participate in militant or violent acts, and the work questions how the actions of a single figure may be upheld as typifying the attitudes and actions of a diverse group of people. *Framed Youth* suggests that the type of sensationalist reporting of the Handsworth riots was a continuum of the ways in which blackness and criminality had historically been interwoven within British consciousness by the media; in 1974, Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband charted how the British print and broadcast media’s construction of the black male as a source of fear and site of discriminatory reporting had a long and deep history.22 Similarly, in the seminal 1978 publication *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Stuart Hall and others discussed the ways in which black male youths were scapegoated by the police and local and national media in order to explain a rise in criminal activity.23 *Policing the Crisis* concluded that the presentation of crime as a “black problem” established the stereotype of the black criminal in public consciousness, while diverting attention away from the social inequalities and injustices faced by large numbers of black people.

Building on these publications, in 1987 Paul Gilroy argued in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, that black crime, like black immigration, came to be seen in Britain as disrupting the national status quo, in which unlawful outsiders were a threat to a law-abiding white population. Gilroy outlined how
black violence became for the media, “evidence of [black people’s] alien character and their distance from the substantive, historical forms of Britishness which are the property of white people”. As such, the presentation of black youth as criminal was regarded as evidence that black Britons – cumulatively – were a threat to national security. Rodney’s *Framed Youth* acutely demonstrates how those negative correlations between blackness and criminality permeated through British society; Caught within an enclosing square, the youth is surrounded, captured, and becomes proof of the black threat to civil society.

But Rodney’s depiction of the bomber in *Framed Youth* and *Portrait of the Artist taking a Political Initiative* is double-edged. Understanding the effectivity of stereotyped imagery, while also aware of the debates surrounding the role of violence in the processes of racial and political struggle against a more powerful oppressor, Rodney saw the petrol bomber as a type of “avenging angel”. In this regard, his choice of imagery, and his presentation of the figure as a self-portrait, suggests an empathy with the complaints and aims of the minority of young black people engaged in direct action and it is possible to discern Rodney’s appreciation of Frantz Fanon’s discourse on violent anti-colonial struggle. For Fanon, “The development of violence among the colonized people will be proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime”. Fighting fire with fire, the uprisings of the 1980s could be explained as proportionate responses to prolonged and sustained oppression. As such, Rodney does not sentimentalise or seek to downplay the militant intent of the black urban warrior, but rather champions him as an expression of “revolutionary consciousness”; here the black man is depicted as being pro-active in shaping his destiny. Rodney’s framed appropriation of the image in *Framed Youth* could also reflect a populist championing, wherein pictures of heroes are framed. Rodney’s problematisation of the frame thus anticipates Bhabha’s assertion that “In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as
a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation”, 28 wherein there is the potential that different audiences may construe different meanings from the same image.

Rodney returned to the dialectic of the artist as militant in 1992 and in a sketchbook outlined his ideas for an ultimately unrealised project:

The self portraits 10, 11, 12 would contain a milk crate filled with bottles of paraffin and plugged with rags … on the wall a thick glass frontage held in place by bolts. I would sandblast sayings about myself that become my identity, my self portrait, a chronicle of positive and negative, or happy and sad, a complexity of reading that place me as …

1: typical black male
2: individual
3: stereotypical figure of fear29

Together with Framed Youth and Portrait of the Artist taking a Political Initiative, Rodney’s unrealised self-portraits combining inflammatory sculpture and inscribed text can be understood as a challenge to recognise that colonial stereotyping has far-reaching consequences; bringing (or at least proposing to bring) the militancy of the street into the space of the liberal white-cube gallery, Rodney sought to challenge (white) audiences with regard to their own prejudices. Here is the possibility that an educated artist might fulfil an incendiary political role; it is a proposition that is threatening, not simply because it proposes a violent act, but because it undermines the notion that violent action undertaken by black people is always, and simply, mindless.
Fig. 4, Donald Rodney, *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*, 1990, lightboxes with Duratran/Dyratran prints, 190.5 x 121.9 cm, Arts Council Collection.

Although much of his work remained unrealised or no longer survives, Rodney’s photographic light-box, *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*, 1990 (*fig. 4*), perhaps encapsulates his approach to self-portraiture. Through his use of the metaphoric, Rodney confronted the elision of the young black male and threat, reflexively investigating his own position within a discriminatory visual culture. Discussing this work, he explained:

> I wanted to make a self-portrait. I didn’t want to produce a picture with an image of myself in it. It would be far too heroic considering the subject matter. I wanted generic black men, a group of faces that represented in a stereotypical way black man as ‘the other’, black man as the enemy within the body politic.  

Venturing beyond portraiture’s established objective of showing a true, physical likeness of the individual sitter, and/or giving insight into his essential character, Rodney engaged with the ways in which his personal identity became subsumed within a normative schema of generic stereotypes. *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy* comprises five lightbox panels, each containing a face, arranged to form a capital T shape; on the upper horizontal section
of the work, moving from left to right is a profile mug-shot of the left side of a man’s face, the full-frontal image of the same man, and a close up of a young boy with his head bowed. On the vertical section is a half-length image of the young boy, and below, an identikit reconstruction of a black male face. Although titled a self-portrait, none of the panels depict Rodney himself, and the images are reproductions of those found in *The Sunday Times, The Evening Standard* and a book on blood diseases. Cumulatively however, if we include Rodney’s reference to himself in the title, the work illustrates four different and distinct individuals and simultaneously presents and problematizes the categorization of undifferentiated black men as a ‘public enemy’. Rodney’s distillation of multiple black men into a single enemy demonstrates Bhabha’s assertion that a stereotype “is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation … [which denies] the play of difference”. The black man is fixed within the framing discourse of imperialism and despite the existence of multiple subjects, and therefore subjectivities, all are reduced to a single character by virtue of their common skin colour. In the simple identifying coda, *Black Men, Public Enemy*, threat is not only determined according to skin colour, but skin colour become evidence of a threat and as such, Rodney’s work articulates Fanon’s lament that “I am overdetermined from without”.

In his transgressive appropriation of publically available imagery of black men, Rodney demonstrates how distinct individuals are regressively distilled to become representative of enmity. For example, the inclusion of a composite photo-fit image highlights the ways in which the black body is scrutinised and criminalised within a surveillance society. The constructed nature of the black face, in addition to its pixilation due to Rodney’s enlargement of his newspaper source material, creates a grotesque image that presents the male as sub-human. Physical malformation becomes here, evidence of moral turpitude. However, it is
also noteworthy that this rendition of criminality is literally made-up; in contrast to the other faces represented, the identikit image is not real but rather rendered from memory that may or may not be accurate. Thus, the black face is a construct of white fantasy and subject to the inaccuracies of memory recall brought on by prejudicial fear. And arguably, in the moment of enacting a controlling gaze, the actions intended to control and contain the black body instead produce fear: “The white man’s eyes break up the black man’s body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed”.36 Similarly, the diseased or contaminated body, as presented in the images of the young boy sourced from a medical text, like the grotesque identikit face, is regarded as a threat and ostracised from society because it perceived otherness. Identifying that his image of the boy originated from a book on blood diseases, Rodney highlights not only the epidermalisation of racism but the historic, medical, designation of blackness as biologically impure and inferior. It is worth noting that Rodney made this work during a period of intense paranoid with regard to the spread of blood diseases; the clinical identification of, and subsequent public panic (fuelled by deliberately frightening government-sponsored public-health announcements) about HIV/AIDS during the 1980s resulted in a fear of any and all blood diseases. As such, the black boy in Rodney’s work is identified as biologically contaminated and potentially contaminating, regardless of whether his illness is contagious. In this infected state, the black figure is classified a threat to public safety and has parity with the black criminal. Given that Rodney himself suffered from a racially specific blood disease – sickle cell anaemia – Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy becomes a provocation to audiences: do we regard Rodney as a public enemy thrice over because of his skin colour, gender, and medical diagnosis?
That Rodney chose to utilise two versions of a mug-shot in *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy* is also significant. According to John Tagg, the mug-shot is a “standardised image” that “is more than a picture of a supposed criminal”.37 Tagg asserts that the mug-shot is representative of the views held by the dominating power structures and a product of a disciplinary society that demands the classification of those who do not conform to its particularities. In light of this controlling visual system, Rodney’s use of the frontal and profile mug-shots is confrontational. He makes visible the ways in which discriminatory power is exerted and forces audiences to recognise the ways in which the black subject is held under surveillance while simultaneously denied the right to assert his identity. The denial or absenting of subjectivity from the two mug-shots is achieved not simply by the disciplining framing of the portraits but also through the presence of the black rectangle over the man’s eyes. This use of the black rectangle, or censor bar, is a reference to the newspaper practice, common in Britain during the 1980s, of obscuring the suspect’s face so as to protect his identity, or to comply with legal requirements when the identity of a suspect cannot be released to the general public. Despite the supposed protection that this rectangle provides, when applied to the black face it instead becomes a mark of improbity. The young black man is placed within a self-fulfilling cycle in which he becomes the stereotype that he is branded with because of a suppressive act of branding. And if the censor bar acts as a signifier of criminality, it also serves as a blindfold prohibiting vision. Using the vocabulary of purportedly benevolent control Rodney invites audiences to actively look at the ways in which the individual black subject is denied agency through the denial of sight. Repeating the black bar over four of the portraits, the opportunity to return the discriminating look is refused, recalling Bhabha’s comment that the blindfold is used as a strategy for neutering “the threatened return of the look”,38 particularly when the returning gaze or look from the margins is an act of resistance and assertion of resilience. Although the men depicted in
Rodney’s work are unable to look for themselves, cumulatively, the artwork as self-portrait becomes the embodiment of the returning gaze of the artist. Rodney thus creates in *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy* a vertiginous artwork: audiences are invited to regard each figure and acknowledge both their individual particularities and the denial of those characteristics. The epistemic violence done to (representations of) the black body is highlighted while Rodney simultaneously challenges the ideological grounding of that violence.

Fig. 5, Donald Rodney, *Cataract*, Sketchbook 33, page 53, May 1990, 215x150mm, The Donald Rodney Collection, Tate Archives, TGA-200321-3-33-53.

In 1991 Rodney elaborated on the visual strangeness of the photofit image in his exhibition *Cataract* at the Camerawork gallery, London. The exhibition press release suggests that the show as a totality was conceived as a self-portrait, while sketches and notes held in his archive at Tate reveal Rodney’s initial plans (fig. 5):

“Within the complex make up of the City, video cameras serve the same purpose as the microscope or the X-ray; to spot or detect disorder. Video cameras will appear at various points as part of ‘war on crime’ specifically they are there for traffic control,
but are used to monitor political demonstrations. The black male has been
criminalized within the popular psyche, the image of the video surveillance cameras
serves as a code for this criminalisation. Fifty or more surveillance cameras will be
installed across the walls of the exhibiting space, confronting the viewer. Between
these cameras a photo-fit face will be projected, reminiscent of the artist’s impression
of black criminals, different facial features belonging to different people will create a
composite image”.

Fig. 6, Donald Rodney, *Cataract*, 1991, dimensions unknown (image from Press Release for
*Cataract*, Camerawork, London, Feb 13 –March 6, 1991, The Donald Rodney Collection,
Tate Archives, 200321/7/3).

Although the eventual exhibition did not include the surveillance cameras, the large photofit
portrait was projected (fig. 6). The image mimics the employment of composite photographic
facial images during the 1970s and 80s by the police, and the atomisation of the black
(male) body by that particular agent of socio-political power, while simultaneously referring
to the medium specificity of photo-montage to suggest subversive intent. Recalling the
history of collage and assemblage as rooted in a politics of dissent, in his use of
photographic fragments Rodney challenged the nature of the photograph as indexical record
by questioning the implicit assertion that a photo-fit could be an accurate recall of a real,
individual person. Making no attempt to obscure the suture lines between the different facial fragments, the collation and co-existence of different features belonging to different people in *Cataract* creates a composite that retains its visual tension and multiplicity. Rather than seeking to present a single subject, as in the photo-fit used in *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*, Rodney’s composite portrait presents a community of faces. In this regard, *Cataract* prefigures Mercer’s assertion that rather than see the hybrid as a grotesque that is at odds with a modernist sense of the holistic individual, “composite beings who exist in a state of incompleteness are by definition open to future possibilities of growth and further transformation”. As such, Rodney’s portrait is one of potentiality: of multiple black subjects coming into being.

In the early 1990s Pratibha Parmar noted that “The deeply ideological nature of [portrait] imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves”. Throughout his career, Rodney probed and challenged the explicit presentation of the negative figuration of blackness as an enemy to the status quo within British society. Engaging with the ways epistemic violence, in the form of media imagery, worked to stereotype and homogenise, Rodney created a series of provocative self-portraits that challenged and undermined normative inferiorising discourses. Aligning himself within the purview of militant or threatening blackness (whether that threat was real or not), Rodney put pressure upon the ease with which that stereotype may be applied to heterogeneous black constituents. As such, through his appropriation and unpicking of the Britain’s institutionalised discriminatory visual culture, his self-portraits may be regarded as not only attempts to decolonise the self, but provocations regarding the very nature of black identities.
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4 Donald Rodney, “Black Independent Film as part of the Black Art Movement” (BFA diss., Nottingham Trent University, March 1985), The Donald Rodney Collection, Tate Archives TGA/200321/2/1.


8 bell hooks was discussing a US context, but her point is applicable to the UK. bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (London: Turnaround, 1992), 1.


12 ‘NF’ here is shorthand for the National Front, a violent far-right group.


20 Image details as listed in Hylton, *Donald Rodney*, 109.

21 *The Sun*, September 11, 1985, as cited in Black and Solomos, *Race*, 82. The man was later identified as James Hazell, aged 32; he was subsequently jailed for five years by Birmingham Crown Court. For original press image, see [www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/youth-carrying-a-fire-bomb-on-the-second-day-of-the-news-photo/848234836? - youth-carrying-a-firebomb-on-the-second-day-of-the-handsworth-riots-picture-id848234836](https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/youth-carrying-a-fire-bomb-on-the-second-day-of-the-news-photo/848234836? - youth-carrying-a-firebomb-on-the-second-day-of-the-handsworth-riots-picture-id848234836) accessed March 15, 2018. The photograph was used on the cover of *The Sun* on September 11, 1985, and on the covers of newspapers *The Star* and the *Express* on September 13, 1985. In contrast to these negative framings, Hazell was championed as a working-class warrior by the direct-action anarchist publication *Class War*, October 1985; see [www.wussu.com/zines/clas.htm](http://www.wussu.com/zines/clas.htm) accessed March 15, 2018. For further discussion of this image, see Eddie Chambers, “Through the Wire: Press Photographs of Black-British People and the Riot”, *Nka Contemporary African Art*, no.36 (Spring 2015), 6–15.


25 Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney”.


28 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 46.

29 Donald Rodney, Sketchbook 38, 1992, 23, The Donald Rodney Collection, Tate Archives, TGA/200321/3/38/23.


32 For Chambers, Rodney’s use of the T shape resembled “the appearance of a Christian cross, with all is resonance of sacrifice and martyrdom”. Space does not permit a detailed exploration of Rodney’s use of religious symbolism here, but I agree that it is a significant point of investigation for discussions of *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*. See Chambers, “The Art of Donald Rodney” in Hylton, 34.


34 See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 74.


36 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 42

38 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 81.


41 During the 1990s, the use of the photographic composite declined, and was generally superseded by digital systems in which likenesses evolved holistically through witness recognition rather than being dependent upon the recall of specific internal facial features. See Graham Davies, Paul van der Willik and Lisa J. Morrison, “Facial Composite Production: A Comparison of Mechanical and Computer-Driven Systems”, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol.85, no.1 (2000), 119–124. As such, Rodney’s use of the photofit was historically specific and arguably, a commentary on the representation of Black men from his own generation.


43 Mercer, “Then and Now”.