

Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Influence on Sexuality, Race and Identity in British Art

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the photography of Rotimi Fani-Kayode in the context of late twentieth-century British art, exploring how his work addresses issues of sexuality, race, and identity. Fani-Kayode's images challenge dominant narratives by intertwining Yoruba cosmology with queer aesthetics, confronting homophobia, racism, and the AIDS crisis. Through an analysis of selected works, this article highlights his subversion of gender binaries, reclamation of black subjectivity, and critique of Western cultural hegemony. In doing so, it argues for Fani-Kayode's vital role in reshaping the boundaries and discourse of British art.

Keywords: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, British art, queer theory, race, Yoruba culture, postcolonialism

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this essay will focus on Rotimi Fani-Kayode's photographs, analysing how his art influences the narrative of British art in terms of sexuality, race and identity. Firstly, according to Lewis and Stephenson, between 1885 and 1967, British art was enriched by artists' attention to the LGBTQ community and the homoerotic tendencies embedded in the concept of artistic production.⁴⁰ In addition, this period also coincided with global transformation, and the multiculturalism brought about by global expansion led to the emergence of a multi-layered cross-cultural complexity in Britain.⁴¹ In this context, Fani-Kayode's artistic practice engaged in an exploration of sexual, racial and cultural diversity and difference based on his sense of the otherness.⁴² His art not only enriches the narrative of queer experience and black visual culture in the 1980s, but also challenges the definition of boundaries and

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⁴⁰ Reina Lewis and Andrew Stephenson, 'Introduction: Queer Visual Historiographies', *Visual Culture in Britain* 18:1(2017):1.

⁴¹ Rasheed Araeen, 'A very special British issue? Modernity, art history and the crisis of art today', *Third Text* 22:2 (2008) :127-130.

⁴² Rotimi Fani-Kayode, 'Abiku—Born to Die', in *The Invisible Man*, ed. Kate Love and Kate Smith, exhibition catalogue (London: Goldsmiths Gallery, 1988), page unknown.

expands the category of British art. However, it is worth noting that the existing literature on Fani-Kayode is largely based on his homosexuality and the impact of geographical dislocation on his artistic creation, lacking a concern for his connections to British art. At this point, this essay will address the importance of Fani-Kayode's art by placing it in a British context. The first part of the essay will analyse the artist's response to queer culture and the issue of AIDS and consider the relationship between his art and the British social context. The second part will look at issues of race and identity as devised by his photographic works and discuss the effect his art and concepts have had on British art. I will argue that Fani-Kayode's black and gay identity gives his art a duality. He visualizes queer self-expression and the impact of AIDS on the queer community, addressing the homophobia and discrimination prevalent in Britain at the time. Then, the artist introduces notions of race and identity into his work, countering the marginalisation of black and African culture in Britain by presenting black subjectivity and Yoruba religious culture. Therefore, Fani-Kayode's art not only challenges stereotypical discourses and prejudices against queer and race in British social perceptions but also contributes to enriching the aesthetic orientation and cultural diversity of British art.

I. PUBLIC DISPLAY OF HOMOSEXUAL POWER

As Nelson argues, a distinctive feature of Fani-Kayode's art is the demonstration of the power of homosexuality.⁴³ In this respect, the work titled *Bronze Head* (1987) (Figure 1) serves as a prime example of the display of homosexual erotica. In the work, the artist intercepts a scene of a black male placing his buttocks above a bronze head. The visual misalignment between the figure's buttocks and the bronze head as a sexual suggestion evokes the viewer's association with anal sex. But Fani-Kayode's symmetrical compositions and tonal adjustments to the photographs suppress the provocative nature of partial close-ups of the human body, creating a more subtle and aesthetic expression of sexuality and desire.⁴⁴ In this case, his aesthetic depiction of sex and sexuality can contribute to a change in the public's preconceived impressions of homosexuality, thereby repairing the group's absence from the mainstream narrative.

⁴³ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', *Art Journal* 64.1, (2005): 6.

⁴⁴ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 5.

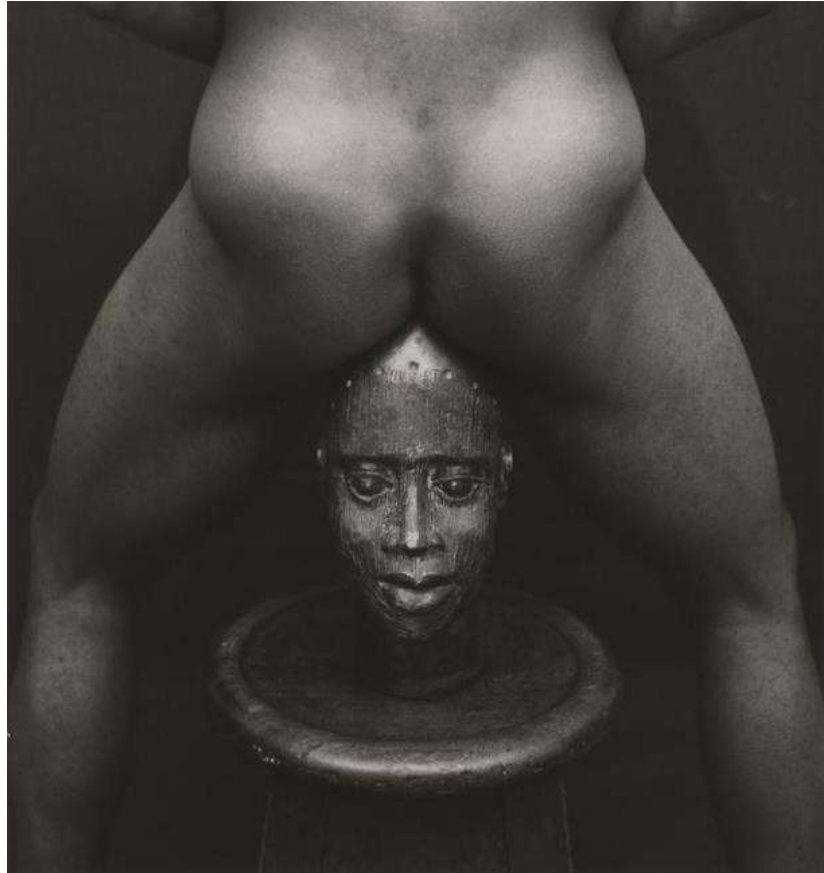


Figure 1: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Bronze Head*, 1987, Photograph, Gelatin silver print on paper, 403mm × 388 mm, Tate.⁴⁵

However, it is worth noting that although the decriminalization of homosexuality in England in 1967 provided a more open environment for artistic creation and expression, social opinion at the end of the twentieth century was still pervaded by a rejection of homosexuality. On this occasion, as the artist states, I

⁴⁵ Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Bronze Head*, 1987, gelatin silver print on paper, 403 mm × 388 mm, Tate.

am an outsider on three levels, and one of these aspects is sexuality.⁴⁶ In the *Bronze Head*, Fani-Kayode's elimination of colour from the photograph diminishes the difference between the figure and the background, creating the illusion that the figure's limbs are about to be swallowed up by the shadows in the background. The oppressiveness and composure of this slight colour difference are paired with the image of the figure with his back to the viewer to convey a sense of detachment from what is around him. In this way, the artist cuts off the possibility of communication between the male and the audience, emphasising the marginalisation of homosexuals in society and their own situation as outsiders. Moreover, Fani-Kayode also narrates the sense of disconnection between himself and his family of origin in this work. At the time, homosexuality was still considered a crime in Nigeria. The bronze head as a symbol of Yoruba tradition facing the viewer and the figure facing back create an opposite form, suggesting Fani-Kayode's separation from his past home. The incompleteness of the male body in the photograph may signify the loss, turmoil and threat of violence to the artist as a result of his sexuality.⁴⁷ His art embodies the tension between his desire to openly display the power of homosexuality and social barriers.

In addition, the artist's work also reflects his challenge to the dichotomy of gender. According to Drewal, the head occupies an important place in Yoruba culture, symbolising the spiritual centre of a person.⁴⁸ In *Bronze Head*, Fani-Kayode incorporates this religious concept by placing the bronze head under the buttocks of the body to convey the idea of the head as a “higher phallus”. This approach elevates sexuality to the level of the spirit and the self, reflecting the transcendence of sexuality over the binary concept of gender. Furthermore, Mercer argues that the androgynous nature of the bronze mask is indicative of the universal human tendency towards bisexuality.⁴⁹ In conjunction with this view, this subtle position between the male body and the mask in the picture creates a sense of ambiguity. It can express both the moment when the bronze head enters the body and the moment when the body gives birth. By simultaneously simulating sodomy and pregnancy, the artist shows the possibility of the feminisation of the male, thus expressing the concept of gender integration.⁵⁰ In this respect, his disruption of gender dichotomies not only critiques the homophobic and misogynistic ideas in society at the time but also shows other possibilities

⁴⁶ Rotimi Fani-Kayode, ‘Traces of Ecstasy’, in *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst, Photographs*, ed. Mark Sealy and Jean Loup Pivin (London, 1996): 5.

⁴⁷ Steven Nelson, ‘Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode’, 6.

⁴⁸ Margaret Thompson Drewal, ‘Projection from the Top in Yoruba Art’, *African Arts* 11: 1 (1977): 43.

⁴⁹ Kobena Mercer, ‘Mortal Coil: Eros and Diaspora in the Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode’, in *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 116.

⁵⁰ Steven Nelson, ‘Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode’, 10-12.

outside the mainstream.⁵¹ Consequently, Fani-Kayode's art expands the definition of queer in British society and provides an opportunity and platform for the voices of more sexual minorities.

II. THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

Fani-Kayode's artistic practice addresses the AIDS crisis, discussing the threats and dilemmas faced by the queer community in this context. Firstly, as Moffitt asserts, the AIDS epidemic broke out worldwide in the late twentieth century, but the neglect of the AIDS death toll by the British government under Thatcher exacerbated the spread of the disease among marginalized groups, such as homosexuals.⁵² And as a result of media agitation, a dominant perception emerged in British society during this period that homosexuality was a threat to public health.⁵³ In the face of popular condemnation of homosexuality and the fear of death caused by AIDS, the artist incorporates Yoruba cosmology into his artistic themes, trying to transform and eliminate the negative effects of AIDS through the power of religion and sexuality. For example, in the work titled *Every Moment Counts II (Ecstatic Antibodies)* (1989) (figure 2), he attempts to transcend the bondage of matter and death by simulating the "technique of ecstasy" of the Yoruba priests. He first introduces an animal mask into his work as a symbol of the spiritual world. The proximity of the figure's body to the mask may suggest a fusion between the physical and the spiritual. At the same time, the hand placed on the buttocks and the male touching of the bulb convey a quest for physical pleasure.

The baroque visuals created by the combination of brown and dark brown backgrounds and the stark contrast between light and dark gives the nude body an 'irrational power'.⁵⁴ On this occasion, the flickering electricity in the light bulb serves as a metaphor for time and vitality, still indicating the threat of AIDS that the figure is carrying. However, the hand pushing the body closer to the mask in the image symbolizes the figure's passage into a transient state of spiritual ecstasy through sexual desire. Fani-Kayode achieves Yoruba's ritual possession through the subconscious energy of sexuality, thus escaping death by placing himself between the spiritual and the mundane. This self-reconciliation transforms social hatred and disease into love and sex, freeing AIDS patients and homosexuals from the mental devastation caused by the illness and social exclusion.⁵⁵ And for the public, Fani-Kayode not only confronts the problems that exist in reality, but his artistic approach changes the traditional way of promoting AIDS through humor and

⁵¹ W. Ian Bourland, *Bloodflowers: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Photography, and the 1980s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 7-9.

⁵² Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', *Transition: An International Review* 118 (2015): 74-75.

⁵³ Matt Cook, 'Archives of Feeling: The AIDS Crisis in Britain 1987', *History Workshop Journal* 83:1 (2017).

⁵⁴ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies'. 78.

⁵⁵ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', 75-82.

documentary technique, thus avoiding the demonization of homosexuality that occurs through the direct depiction of death and disease. As a result, his artistic themes delve into the broad socio-political realm, critiquing the prejudiced discourse on sexuality in 1980s Britain.



Figure 2: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Every Moment Counts II (Ecstatic Antibodies), 1989, Chromogenic print, 62.7 cm x 60.6 cm, Autograph ABP.

III. RETHINKING RACIAL DISCOURSE

Meanwhile, Moffitt highlights that in Nigeria the artist's sexuality makes him a pariah and in Britain he is seen as the Other due to his race.⁵⁶ Fani-Kayode is aware of the racism that lies beneath the British narrative. His art visualizes the black male body as a site of interchange between race, sexuality and desire, exploring the black queer cultural politics of this period in Britain. In his 1989 work titled *The Golden Phallus* (Figure 3), he photographs a crouching male figure. The white mask worn by the man and his painted gold phallus echoes each other in the image, dominating the viewer's gaze. In the details, the artist draws on the symbol of the Venetian plague doctor mask to allude to the disease-infected body of the black male. The large shadows that appear in the image indicate that he is overwhelmed by fears of AIDS and death. But because the mask covers the face, the subjectivity and voice of the figure are deprived. The illness has caused him to be objectified and alienated from society, becoming the face and source of the plague. In response to this, in the late twentieth century, the black community was severely affected by AIDS due to the Thatcher

⁵⁶ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', 74.

government's curtailment of black welfare and the marginalisation of black people in society.⁵⁷ In this work, Fani-Kayode indicts the unequal treatment of people based on race in Britain.

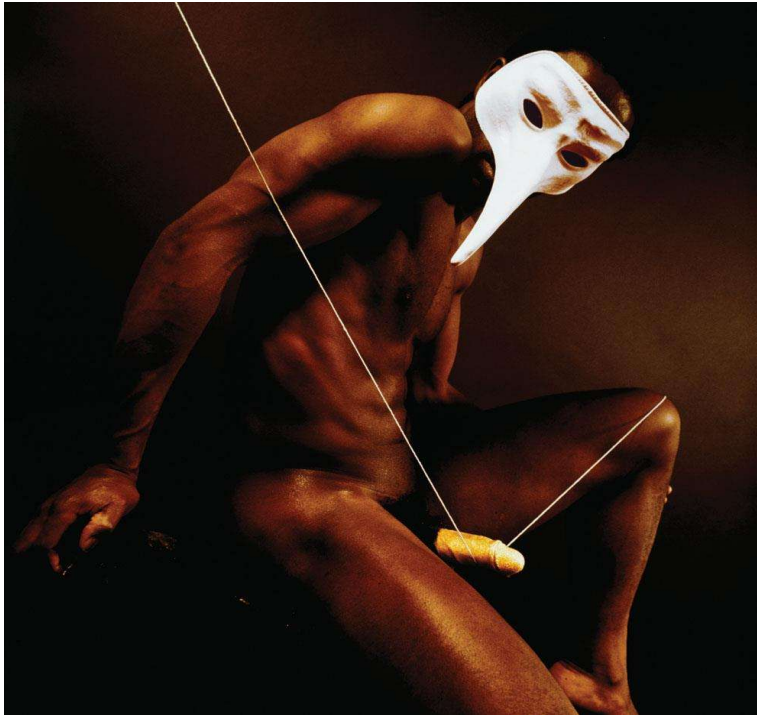


Figure 3: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *The Golden Phallus*, 1989, Archival c-type print, 51cm x 61 cm, Autograph ABP.⁵⁸

Moreover, in the photograph, it is worth noting that there is not only a visual similarity between the white mask and the male phallus, but also compositional proximity. In this way, the artist responds to the prevalent societal notion of linking AIDS to race and sexuality. By showing the mask as a symbol of death and the image of the repressed black man, he reveals the social violence suffered by the black queer community under this concept. On the contrary, according to Moffitt, the mask in the picture mimics in form the *ororo* of Yoruba culture and is the source of the individual's inner spirit.⁵⁹ In other words, Fani-Kayode uses the mask as a site of cohesion and displacement, confronting AIDS through the exercise of his own creativity and agency, thus achieving a transformation between death and life. And then, his evocation of ancestral memories also takes him to a place beyond the material plane. The expansion of the boundaries of the self frees him from Christian oversight and the politicisation of the body.⁶⁰ On this occasion, the artist's

⁵⁷ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', 75.

⁵⁸ Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *The Golden Phallus*, 1989, archival c-type print, 51 cm × 61 cm, Autograph ABP.

⁵⁹ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', 80.

⁶⁰ Kobena Mercer, 'Eros and Diaspora', in *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst, Photographs*, ed. Mark Sealy and Jean Loup Pivin (London, 1996), 116.

insistence on his African cultural and ethnic identity effectively resists Western hegemonic asceticism and social hatred.

In addition to the inequalities displayed in Britain's handling of AIDS, Fani-Kayode also attacks racial objectification and exploitation under the Western narrative. An obvious manifestation of this in the work *The Golden Phallus* is the string that surrounds the figure's body. Its tautness seems to indicate that there are two different forces pulling at either end of the image. In the process, the male phallus is manipulated and displayed. At this point, the title of the work creates an ironic narrative. It responds to the symbolization of black males in Western discourse that their autonomy comes from their phalluses.⁶¹ The artist enhances the visual appeal of the phallus by painting it gold to create a strong visual contrast with the surrounding hues. This artistic technique replicates the racial stereotypes of black male fetishism and the Western fear of the black phallus.⁶² Furthermore, in Western visual culture, the black male body is often positioned as an object of the white male gaze and sexual fantasy.⁶³ The artist's tailoring of the photographic composition closes the distance between the viewer and the figure. The audience's gaze is drawn to the string in the picture and is thus guided between the body of the male and between the mask and the phallus. Through the deliberate display of black eroticism, Fani-Kayode invites the viewer into this field of power between subject and object in relation to desire and gaze, recreating the act of queer voyeurism.⁶⁴ Therefore, it can be found that this artwork reflects the oppression and objectification of black males in Western racial discourse.

In response to the issues mentioned above, Fani-Kayode reinvents black subjectivity in his art, creating a more diverse black experience under British society. For instance, this photographic work titled *White Bouquet* (1987) (Figure 4) presents a subversive racist narrative. Fani-Kayode imitates the relationships and composition of the figures in Edouard Manet's representative painting *Olympia* (1863) (figure 5). However, in contrast to the original, the artist transposes the gender of the two painted subjects and the position between them. The image becomes a black male reclining on a bench, while the white male stands behind him, holding a bouquet of white flowers. At this point, the bouquet serves as a symbol of affection. The act of the white man delivering flowers reverses the relationship between these two figures and the

⁶¹ Kobena Mercer, 'Eros and Diaspora', 118.

⁶² Octavio Zaya, 'On Three Counts I Am an Outsider: The Work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 4.1 (1996), 24-72.

⁶³ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013), 224-6.

⁶⁴ Evan Moffitt, 'Rotimi Fani-Kayode's Ecstatic Antibodies', 83.

white-dominated visual code of Manet's painting.⁶⁵ The black man is no longer presented as a marginal figure to highlight the visual centrality of the white body but takes control of subjectivity and sexuality himself.⁶⁶ Also, according to Clark, the nude body of the woman and her direct gaze at the viewer in *Olympia* is a sign of her class, and commodification.⁶⁷ In conjunction with this view, the men in the *White Bouquet* turn their backs on the viewer, thereby blocking the involvement of external factors such as power and capital in their relationship. In this work Fani-Kayode conveys a desire to bridge the boundaries between races and genders. He deliberately adjusts the figures in the image to a translucent state. So, viewers can see part of the black body through the white male. This fusion of bodies brings about an erotic atmosphere.⁶⁸ And then, the bouquet and the overall blurred tones of the picture also reinforce this sense of romance. In this respect, the artist's portrayal of interracial and same-sex emotions and desires achieves a dual challenge to normative heteronormativity and racism.⁶⁹ His notion of equality and the integration of difference offers new possibilities for the British narrative.



Figures 4: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *White Bouquet*, 1987, Gelatin silver print, original dimensions unknown.

⁶⁵ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 6-7.

⁶⁶ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 7.

⁶⁷ Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015): 79-146.

⁶⁸ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 8.

⁶⁹ Steven Nelson, 'Transgressive transcendence in the photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 8.



Figure 5: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Oil on canvas, 130,5 cm x 191,0 cm, Musée d'Orsay

Furthermore, Fani-Kayode's intercultural background and sense of being an outsider also bring new definitions of culture and identity to Britain. According to Mercer, influenced by the post-modern and post-colonial context, the artist's art is characterized by hybridity and diaspora, assuming the role of being a “border rider for cultural difference”.⁷⁰ Take the artwork *Bronze Head* as an example. In this photography, the artist shows a head of a Yoruba god. As an exile, Fani-Kayode positions this mask as the embodiment of what has been lost through exile, and as a vehicle for his past memories. The physical contact between the figure and this mask in the picture implies an attempt by Fani-Kayode to recreate the Yoruba “technique of ecstasy”. In this way, he attempts to achieve communication with the deity and thus find his freedom and salvation in his own lost origins.⁷¹ Therefore, it can be seen the artist's reliance on and attachment to his Yoruba cultural identity and the profound influence it has had on his construction of identity. On the other hand, the pose of the male sitting on top of the bronze head in the work reflects Fani-Kayode's criticism and insult to the Yoruba power. In this case, his ambivalent attitude towards Yoruba culture reveals his challenge to the fixity of identity and the notion of boundaries. At the same time, as Zaya argues, influenced by the hegemonic position of white culture, non-Western culture is often appropriated and overshadowed by white-dominated narratives.⁷² On this occasion,

⁷⁰ Kobena Mercer, ‘Eros and Diaspora’, 109-111.

⁷¹ Kobena Mercer, ‘Eros and Diaspora’, 110.

⁷² Octavio Zaya, ‘On Three Counts I Am an Outsider: The Work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode’, page unknown.

the artist's exploration of Yoruba history and civilization not only compensates for the absence of African culture in contemporary discourse, but also effectively contributes to diversity within the British cultural system. Moreover, he subversively applies African cultural symbols to the theme of demonstrating the power of homosexuality. In this regard, the artist achieves a renovation of old cultures and old values, giving them a new role in the contemporary Western context.⁷³ As shown, Fani-Kayode's breach of boundaries has facilitated intercultural, inter-historical and inter-ethnic exchange and integration, contributing to the construction of a multi-ethnic and multicultural society in Britain.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was to focus on Rotimi Fani-Kayode's art and analyse the relationship between his artistic production and the British social context of the late twentieth century. The essay has demonstrated that his art addresses some of the issues in British society, critiquing prejudicial discourses about race and sexuality in Britain. Firstly, the artist's portrayal of homosexuality not only enriches the narratives related to the queer experience in Britain at the time, but also expands the definition of the concept of queer by breaking down the gender binary through the idea of gender integration. In the field of race and AIDS, his art revealing the social marginalization and unequal treatment of the black queer community. In this regard, Rotimi Fani-Kayode draws on Yoruba culture to realize a transition between death and life, thereby reducing the physical pain and mental suffering of AIDS patients. The artist's use of Yoruba culture and his portrayal of black subjectivity also effectively confront the white cultural hegemony and the objectification of non-white people, helping to reshape critical discourse on race in Britain. Further, his integration of multiculturalism and the breaking of boundaries contribute to a new paradigm of racial integration and cultural diversity in Britain.

⁷³ Kobena Mercer, 'Mortal Coil: Eros and Diaspora in the Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode', 116.

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