

W. Ian Bourland

B L O O D F L O W E R S

ROTIMI FANI-KAYODE,

PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE 1980s



B L O O D F L O W E R S

The Visual Arts of Africa and Its Diasporas
A series edited by Kellie Jones and Steven Nelson



W. Ian Bourland

B L O O D F L O W E R S

R O T I M I F A N I - K A Y O D E ,

P H O T O G R A P H Y , A N D T H E 1 9 8 0 S

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INTRODUCTION

NOTHING TO LOSE

If matter appeared to us as a perpetual flowering,
we should assign no termination to any of our actions.

Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*

BLOODFLOWERS

Consider two kinds of photograph. The first, printed in 1989, measures ten by twelve inches, about the size of a small painting. It is a Cibachrome, and its vivid color, deep shadows, and careful staging by the photographer, Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989), reinforce its lush quality. It is tonally rich, tenebristic in its use of light, like a lost artifact from the Baroque period. The figure in the picture—shirtless, gazing fiercely beyond the picture plane, bearing a small, vegetal blossom like a gift—could be one of the roguish saints or sinners commonly depicted by many seventeenth-century Italian masters. And the bloom that he bears calls to mind the *nature morte* so common to that era, especially in the then-ascendent Netherlands. Indeed, this photograph is called *Tulip Boy I*, named for an iconic flower charged with associations, from bulbous early modern commodity to pregnant symbol of springtime. The tulip is synonymous with sumptuous wealth, but even more so with the revivification of the cold earth after a deep winter. Another picture from this series, *Tulip Boy II* (figure Intro.1), provides a humorous counterpoint. Clearly from the same contact sheet, the figure here clinches the flower in his mouth, suspending it somewhere between consumption and display.

The second kind of photograph (Intro.2) is a variant on the first, produced in 1990 and signed in pencil by Alex Hirst (1951–1992), a Yorkshire-born novelist and writer, who reprinted *Tulip Boy* from the original negatives in the



Figure Intro.1 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Tulip Boy II* (1989). © Rotimi Fani-Kayode / Autograph ABP. Courtesy of Autograph ABP.

year following Fani-Kayode's sudden death in late December 1989. Hirst's posthumous elaboration of Fani-Kayode's work is indicative both of the intensity of their collaboration as lovers and partners during those final years of the decade, and also of Fani-Kayode's turn to alternate processes toward the end of his life. The first photograph bears the high finish and chromatic clarity common to Cibachromes. By contrast, the 1990 version is rougher, stranger, exuding the telltale qualities of the gum-bichromate printing method. Then as now, such a protomodernist approach was uncommon. It hearkens to a more arcane, alchemical phase of the medium and relies on a distinct chemistry—potassium bichromate, suspended in layers of gum arabic, hand ap-



Figure Intro.2 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Tulip Boy I* (1989–1990).

© Rotimi Fani-Kayode / Autograph ABP. Courtesy of Autograph ABP.

plied in washes onto a surface, typically paper. The application of gum in multiple layers produces spectral color and leaves a trace of the artist's own manufacture.¹

By using the gum process, the artist—in this case, Hirst—might lose the sharpness and tonal range expected of fine art photography, but gain a distinctive, dense materiality. A hallmark of the pictorialist camera clubs of the late nineteenth century who harnessed it to produce lyrical, haunting tableaux, this method was decidedly antique during Fani-Kayode's years of production, from 1983 to 1989, but had been revived in some of the darkrooms and workshops of South London. All the same, a picture such as *Tulip Boy I*, in its bi-chromate version, would have called to mind a parallel historical universe for most viewers. This photograph was not an example of the banal, postconceptual documentary or diaristic *vérité* characteristic of the 1980s but instead a callback to the minute, hand-tinted surrealism of Hans Bellmer, or the homoerotic studio portraiture of the Victorian-era commercial photographer F. Holland Day. Not merely a picture, the 1990 version is akin to a precious

gem, scarcely enlarged and measuring roughly nine inches square. It renders the figure in a wash of ochre, floating amid a diaphanous haze.

A knowing viewer might see in these *Tulip Boy* pictures still other resonances: the pose is almost an exact reconstruction of an image from the ritualistic collaboration of the Japanese author Yukio Mishima and photographer Eikoh Hosoe from some twenty years prior. And Fani-Kayode's contemporaries in downtown New York or South London (then a haven of black and queer artists, critics, and activists) would have seen parallels to the famed Robert Mapplethorpe, whose *Black Book* portfolio was released in the summer of 1986—a chronicle of naked black men, many of whom posed with evocative white flowers as Mapplethorpe maneuvered them before his lens.

In all of their multiple resonances, these two photographs are emblematic of Rotimi Fani-Kayode's larger arc as an artist. He was a cosmopolitan and erudite photographer who started his life in Nigeria, the son of a Yoruban family prominent for both its political and religious connections. The "Fani" in his name refers to Ifá, the orisha and divination practice in Yoruba cosmology associated with the reading of one's destiny, and the drawing of *àṣhe* (creative energy) into the world. The Kayodes were also part of a shared governance structure of a Nigeria that gained independence from British rule in 1960, before the 1967 secession of the Igbo-led state of Biafra inaugurated a three-year conflict that resulted in famine, displacement, and tens of thousands of casualties.

Nigerian elites had long nurtured ties to the colonial center in London, and Fani-Kayode's family fled the chaos of the postcolonial state. A young Rotimi was educated in the English countryside and sent to Washington, DC, in the mid-1970s to study what he called a "respectable" field, economics. But to the dismay of his family, he found a different path, one that wended its way through the subcultures and counterpublics of the DC and New York undergrounds, through loft and warehouse parties, to the black salons of Dupont Circle and Harlem, from rough-and-tumble punk bars to the neighborhood galleries and community centers of London, where he settled from 1983 until his death.

During this time he seems to have used his photographs to conduct a wide symbolic and psychic journey through what theorists at the time had started to call the Black Atlantic, a zone of cultural transmission and translation through which the African diaspora, its labor, and its radical traditions dynamically shaped modernity during the seventeenth century and beyond.

Fani-Kayode first staked out his own practice in hallucinogenic color before moving to the comparatively cheaper modernist tones of gelatin silver, shooting black-and-whites in the streets and in a makeshift studio. Later, in collaboration with Hirst and facing his own imminent mortality, he began to experiment with more esoteric choices of composition, scale, and materiality. He left perhaps a hundred photographic works behind, many subsequently reprinted or reformatted by others, some lost or destroyed. There are negatives and contact sheets beyond these, but during his life, his photographs mostly populated collaborative spaces and the pages of journals and catalogs that circulated in gay bookshops and the libraries of nonprofit organizations such as Autograph: Association of Black Photographers (Autograph ABP), which he helped found in 1988.

In the years since his death, Fani-Kayode's photographs have taken on a second life. His contemporary, the critic Kobena Mercer, wrote widely on the artist, and his words accompanied reproductions in several catalogs and a monograph that brought them to a global audience in the decade after 1989.² Okwui Enwezor also included Fani-Kayode in a seminal exhibition of African photography, 1996's *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* at the Guggenheim Museum.³ The curator later claimed that those pictures, which focused on contemporary manifestation of beauty, spirituality, and desire uniquely confounded expectations of African art, especially the troubling blend of voyeurism and pessimism that often accompanied it.⁴ Throughout the 2000s, those same photographs were gradually taken on in emerging queer histories of art and the twentieth century and, more recently still, in surveys of the 1980s, which have begun to detail his contributions to the politically charged landscape of the era, making tentative art-historical connections as well.⁵

The book at hand, *Bloodflowers*, for the first time draws together these threads—Fani-Kayode the Atlantic errant, the queer visionary, the formalist synthesizer, and the art-rock rebel. What follows is an account of his practice, both on its own terms and in light of its contributions and formation in response to the profound political and cultural shifts underway during his brief, six-year career. Precisely because his work defied many of the binaries through which the culture of the decade is often understood—modernist versus postmodernist, the aesthetic versus the political, identity versus class, and so on—it has maintained an uncanny resonance for an audience that seems to grow with each passing year. Perhaps more important, in retrospect one can

see Fani-Kayode's images not only as documents of, but as interventions in, the shifting cultural debates surrounding questions of gender and queerness, race and democratic inclusion, the enduring legacy of slavery and colonialism, visual responses to the AIDS crisis, the radical potential of photography as a medium, and the viability of transnational avant-gardes. In short, Fani-Kayode's photographs are early sites in which a present that now seems within reach was actively envisioned, negotiated, and captured in silver.

ROSES AND RESURRECTION

Fani-Kayode wrote only sporadically of his practice, typically enlisting Hirst to account for the photographs in text. Nonetheless, he left a definitive artist's statement that diagnosed the particular confluence of power and identity that circumscribed his life and compelled him to look toward visionary modes of subjectivity and artistic production. He incisively noted:

On three counts I am an outsider: in matters of sexuality, in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation, and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for. Such a position gives me a feeling of having very little to lose. . . . At the same time, traces of the former values remain, making it possible to take new readings on to them from an unusual vantage point. The results are bound to be disorientating.⁶

While Fani-Kayode was certainly correct that a crucial aspect of his pictures was their power to disorient and reorient the viewer, he was not, in the end, alone. Fani-Kayode's fellow travelers were Cuban *babalawos* and Afro-British video artists; American house DJs and punk rockers, or, back in London, the era's iconic frontmen—the perpetually morose and dandyish Smiths' crooner Morrissey or the Cure's Byronesque Robert Smith. The last was known for songs about loss and apparitional visitors, and such lyrics as “never fade / never die / you give me flowers of love / always fade / always die / I let fall flowers of blood.”⁷ The Cure were a fixture of the postpunk and goth scene in London from the late 1970s on, and listening to the aquatic tones of their nocturnal records on a fog-bound British evening, one could just as easily recall the words of the lyric poet Robert Herrick, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying.”⁸

Hence the title of this book, which references those end-of-millennium Robert Smith lyrics but also connects to a deeper root structure. *Bloodflowers* conjures beauty and decay, death and resurrection, classicism and modernity, communion and commerce.⁹ It suggests an uneasy balance between the vegetal and the sanguinary and nods in the direction of Fani-Kayode's play of subject and object, living and inert, and, more obviously, the HIV cells and ecstatic antibodies that punctuated the last years of his life. What's more, plant life is evident everywhere in Fani-Kayode's pictures—a floral crucifix in tight focus, or fronds and reeds revealed as glistening objects of sacrament. Ripe fruit appears as a symbol of offering and desire. Tulips, baby's breath, and wreaths of annuals form the regalia of the coterie of lovers, transsexual priests, and otherworldly figures who populate his endless twilight.

Accordingly, the echo of another time, of Charles Baudelaire's 1857 *Les fleurs du mal* is no accident.¹⁰ Baudelaire's poetic stanzas foreground anti-podes and refusals within a modernity populated by Paris's hidden rebels, its queers, artists, colonial creoles, prostitutes, and factory workers—those who militated against the alien, rational order of the Haussmannized city.¹¹ Like Baudelaire, Brassäi, Roy DeCarava, and many others who came before, Fani-Kayode would center and celebrate such figures in his own invisible cities. But as Hirst frequently alluded, a commonality that runs through all of these examples is a sense not of an infinite horizon but of fleeting time—loss, illness, heartbreak, even death. *Bloodflowers*, in the spirit of Baudelaire, suggests not our return to a classical beauty but, instead, a haunted one. Flowers bloom briefly and vividly but, ebbing with the spring, die all too soon. Then again, sometimes they return, like the tulips in the picture of the same name, a symbol of regeneration and resurrection.

OUT BEYOND THE BINARY

Fani-Kayode called his practice contemporary Yoruban art, and he specified his medium as “black, gay photography.” These descriptions may seem superfluous in light of his subject matter, which is obviously homoerotic, featuring black men on both sides of the camera. But Fani-Kayode's self-description is telling, as well—it locates him, even within the constellation of marginalized publics and counterpublics of the 1970s and 1980s, as radically possessed of a singular vision. He was black but had to contend with lingering elements of homophobia and misogyny *within* the black radical tradition; he was gay



Figure Intro.3 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Golden Phallus* (1989). © Rotimi Fani-Kayode / Autograph ABP. Courtesy of Autograph ABP.

but was openly critical of racism and fetishism *within* the gay cultures of New York and London.¹² He was Nigerian, but by going home he would have risked familial shame and perhaps even personal harm.¹³ He was a man but worked to complicate gender, actively drawing on feminist techniques and theories of subjectivity. Fani-Kayode's position was one of triangulated specificity, and he worked amid critical conversations that advocated for heterogeneity and freedom of vision over collectivist orthodoxies.

As a result, it can be difficult to define the nature of Fani-Kayode's practice. The editor Derek Bishton called him a black British artist, while Kobena Mercer dubbed him a "boundary rider of cultural difference," traversing the in-between spaces of alterity.¹⁴ The art historian Steven Nelson sees in Fani-Kayode a desire for transcendence and an intentional transgression of limits and taboos.¹⁵ All of these readings get at something central to the man and the work. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, it seems clear that while Fani-Kayode's photography was aesthetically pathbreaking, it was also politically vital because it brought new subjectivities and new ethnicities into focus. It set the scale, technical precision, and historical rigor of earlier modes of photography in productive tension with radical sonics and the vestiges of early modern painting.

In so doing, he gave visibility to a range of publics otherwise excluded from art making in general, and who more typically appeared on the picture plane as objects of ethnographic knowledge, scopic pleasure, or coarse stereotype.¹⁶ Again, it may be difficult to imagine, on the far side of the twentieth century, how significant a gesture this was, and how little support artists such as Fani-Kayode had. Now, in much of the world, nuanced depictions of black, queer, and postcolonial subjects are increasingly common. But in eighties London, such depictions were decidedly uncommon beyond an array of improvised conduits of production and reception. As Mark Sealy, the director of Auto-graph ABP, wrote in 1995, when Fani-Kayode tried "to generate interest in his photographs he experienced, more often than not, that the gatekeepers were out to lunch. . . . Curators found it difficult to grasp Kayode's terms of reference. Quite simply, his practice was not understood."¹⁷

And yet, black, queer, and diasporic subjects were always already integral to the history of the West and to modernity itself. What I argue here is that Fani-Kayode's photographs, beyond the story they tell of a time and place in recent history, beyond their evident beauty or technical virtuosity, are significant for their *relational* quality. They are important in their insistence on

bridging seemingly unbridgeable binaries—of past and future, self and other, black and white—into dialogic relation. In this way, his photographs enact and open onto to possible futures while critically bringing to the surface submerged histories. During his time, Fani-Kayode staked out as a matter of necessity provisional zones that one might now recognize as intersectional, elaborating and complicating an archive of international black, gay, and Yoruban practice. That is, he made possible in his work precisely what seemed impossible to many during those years. The spaces and subjectivities recorded in Fani-Kayode's photographs self-consciously worked to queer the avant-garde art world and to critically unravel oppositional binaries and static identities. As Hirst put it in the introduction to Fani-Kayode's first artist's book in 1988, "Black–white: fantasy-races in which infinite difference reveals infinite affinity."¹⁸ In place of the asymptotic horizon of essential difference, Fani-Kayode posits the self in a wider field of relation, a space in which subjectivity is performed, constructed, reversed, and revised.

In this way, Fani-Kayode's photographs begin to reanimate history as well, mining the past, drawing it into the present. The photographs stage a vast array of imagery, and he invokes the earliest days of modernity, in mercantile Europe and the first moments of the colonial enterprise and the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁹ Others have Fani-Kayode disidentifying with and signifying in the terrain of art history and its layers of citation and elaboration of the past: Neoclassicism, Romanticism, pictorialism, primitivism, and surrealism are all here. What these references have in common is that they mark larger historical sites of recognition and misrecognition, points of inflection and rupture in a long, global timeline of encounter and exchange. Fani-Kayode's pictures insist—they visualize frame by frame—that the history of the West is not one of the dispersal or assimilation of difference but, instead, a dynamic landscape of collaboration, desire, and commingling. He suggests that frontiers are illusory. He reminds the viewer that there could be no Europe without Africa, no white without black. This formulation, in retrospect, tracks precisely with the theoretical and critical breakthroughs of roughly the same period in the 1980s.²⁰ And, as I will show, although Fani-Kayode had notable peers in the realms of art, music, and literature, his practice was in and of itself unique and, in its temporal and historical vision, profoundly ahead of its time.

Appropriately, then, Fani-Kayode seems to have allied himself with what Paul Gilroy has called "countercultures of modernity" and what Michael

Warner has designated as radical counterpublics—those working within the structures of modernity but who, nonetheless, constitute its antipodes. Such cultural formations create pockets of refusal, revision, and negation.²¹ There are many words for such countercultures: they are Dionysian, they are avant-garde, they are marginal; they translate, retranslate, remix, echo, and generate “breaks.”²²

And while these modes of avant-garde practice have increasingly figured into accounts of modern art, for the purposes of thinking through Fani-Kayode’s work it is worth making two qualifications here. First, one can understand modernity as a constellation of countless, singular microhistories, but there do seem, too, to be insistent nodes of resistance—outsiders and exiles who embody a will toward disruption that haunts modernity in spite of its self-narration as a history of progression or evolution. Second, many have argued that there is no “outside” of modernity, that radical politics are in a sense baked in and ultimately subordinate to the very systems they seek to unsettle. Maybe so. It is up to the reader to reckon with the ultimate efficacy of the work itself, and of the forerunners that Fani-Kayode variously resurrects and riffs on. Whatever version of modernity with which one tries to make Fani-Kayode fit, one thing is abundantly clear: he persistently attempted a form of disorientation, inaugurating zones of relation and open-endedness. Fani-Kayode’s labor as a subject and an artist constituted a form of visionary praxis and cultural critique that sought to renegotiate inherited social realities.

ALCHEMICAL IMPRINTS

Treating Rotimi Fani-Kayode in art-historical terms raises several problems. As Sealy has argued, among his peers—especially photographers—Fani-Kayode was distinctive in producing work that holds up in a more explicitly aesthetic than documentary register.²³ Just as postwar African photography, with few exceptions, tended to be understood in terms of “struggle” journalism, then-emerging forms of black radical or gay liberation art also tended toward more literal approaches to representation or direct political engagement. By contrast, Fani-Kayode’s own account suggests an idiosyncratic, if earnest, search for deeper truths. His method was almost certainly a consequence of what he perceived to be the limitations of the various subaltern communities with which he was in dialogue as he made his way through the circuits of the

Black Atlantic. Accordingly, he responded by looking back to his Yoruban heritage, which for him had been hidden from view by the cosmopolitan and modernizing agenda of the postcolonial Nigerian state and by his upbringing in elite schools in England and the United States.

In this way, Fani-Kayode was out of step with the contexts in which he found himself but, paradoxically, uniquely a product of them. One argument of this book is that Fani-Kayode's project can only be understood in light of the broader sociopolitical climate in which they were realized and that his works, in turn, provide indexes of specific sites and moments. But the photographs were not, in most instances, conceived as mere documents; they were never framed as clear windows onto the recent past. They are more like core samples, fossilized amber congealing and materializing a dynamic and dialectic engagement between Fani-Kayode and the people and places that were interspersed in his life.

There are a few important consequences here. For one, it means that Fani-Kayode's art may not seem, for many readers, overtly political in its orientation and execution, especially in contrast with the collectivist and activist models that would have served as both a precedent and direct parallel during his life. Yet conversely, Fani-Kayode was able to transcend the agonistic binaries of both identity-driven forms of resistance and the day-to-day of juridical politics. In various ways, the pages ahead argue that Fani-Kayode was perhaps best understood as an *errant*, Édouard Glissant's exilic subject. The errant is a figure of nomadic mobility or transoceanic passage, able to see beyond the rigidity of seeming difference. The errant points the way toward a space of rhizomatic, unexpected interconnections that are sometimes hidden from view but nonetheless form the substance of our shared modernity. For Glissant, this is "very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation."²⁴

This seeking out of underlying spaces of relation—of finding and aligning points of convergence, dissonance, and symmetry between disparate traditions and temporalities—means that Fani-Kayode's work exudes a seemingly timeless quality. It refers to buried lifeworlds that precede and exceed the linear sweep of the modernist project and also reactivates the various technologies of modernity's many internal countercultures. This relational logic has also meant that Fani-Kayode's photographs shift in meaning and reception over time. While they were initially circulated in the community centers of

London and the pages of gay and lesbian publications, after the artist's death they took on a second life, as curators such as Sealy and Enwezor and scholars such as Nelson and Mercer brought them to the fore of what has become the fields of contemporary African art and African diaspora studies. And since the 2000s, those same works have found a much wider audience through digital pathways and renewed interest in Fani-Kayode on the part of major institutions and collectors. Like multilayered Rorschach tests, they offer different things to different viewers and cannot be accounted for as the patrimony of any one constituency. Such durability and reach would, perhaps, have been gratifying to Fani-Kayode, who sought to go beyond the quotidian to locate and elaborate more subtle membranes of connectivity through his practice.

It is tempting, then, to treat these photographs primarily as interpretive puzzles, attending to their rich iconographic citations, their familiar but distinctive play with canonical tropes, their literary or hagiographic allusions, and their technical precision. Fani-Kayode was clearly calling on and responding to the discourses around a transcultural set of art-historical codes. As such, close reading of the objects, their dense materiality and multiaccultural reference, is crucial. Indeed, a positive effect of the efforts of so many during the last several decades has been the gradual centering—however partial or complicated—of once marginal practices at the heart of the global contemporary. Accordingly, more traditional historical or interpretive work on artists such as Fani-Kayode is possible and long overdue. And given the progressive momentum of the 1990s and early 2000s, one could imagine writing this book ten years ago using more narrowly art historical parameters as a kind of political intervention in its own right, signaling a move from “black” or “diaspora” art to contemporary art tout court.

Certainly, Fani-Kayode's photographs provide more than enough material for such a sustained project of description and analysis. What's more, writing in 2005 Mercer himself argued that perhaps framing art in terms of more general social or political currents might be insufficient, that the next phase of historicizing diasporic and black radical culture is one of carefully attending to specific objects rather than holding them up as exemplary of a particular polemical or sociopolitical project.²⁵ This suggestion echoes Sealy's concern that the black British moment itself has been, to an extent, reified in recent years—that a revisionist fixity has been given to what was, in effect, a small network of often disparate and overlapping individual interventions.

Importantly, Fani-Kayode made his work in direct tension with the align-

ment of social and spatial forces of his own experience in the 1980s, with its particular blend of life in the United States—one inflected by openly public models of gay freedom, black gay consciousness, punk, and postmodernism—and the United Kingdom, with its postimperial melancholia, its multitudes of recent immigrants, its persistent but diminished legacy of left politics, and its new sonic and sartorial formations. This book argues that his was an art inextricably linked to that moment, an art that responded to and complicated the cultural politics of a decade by visualizing new forms of subjectivity.

Some thirty years on, more progress has been made on issues of equity in Western institutions and its art worlds than Fani-Kayode might have thought possible. Nonetheless, from our current vantage point, that progress seems by turns fragile or illusory. A younger generation attuned to a resurgence in ethnonationalism, Islamophobia, anticosmopolitan skepticism, and persistent violence against black bodies might understandably consider attempts to delink art from politics and power (even rhetorically) as naive or misguided. They might, indeed, find helpful precedent for the present situation in those first years after the conservative retrenchments of 1979–1980—when clashes with the police, confrontations with quotidian racism, and official discourses that propped up xenophobic and homophobic visions of Britishness galvanized action by artists, musicians, and writers. They might, finally, look to Fani-Kayode’s photographs, which staked out the contours of a queer, diasporic, antisogynistic, and inclusive world that is still being fought for today. Those photographs and Fani-Kayode’s written work with Alex Hirst speak not to a utopian prospect but to a life in which the past is always present and progress itself is contingent, if not merely transient. For all that, in those same words and pictures tragedy is invariably counterbalanced by moments of rebellious self-determination, Dionysian communion, and small but powerful gestures of transgression and freedom. In practice, they contributed to a crucial process of negative dialectics while also seeking paths of transcendence.

My goal here, then, is to echo Fani-Kayode’s method. I do not argue for the primacy of one position over another but follow the open-ended and rhizomatic connections manifest in the work wherever they lead. There are inevitable excursions into nested and contested histories of art, visual and sonic cultures, and the broader sociopolitical matrix through which they were constituted. In this way, *Bloodflowers* follows Paul Gilroy’s suggestion to explore “the detailed unfolding of cultural formation. The aim of this is not to construct a history of simple hybridity to offset against the achievements of the homogenizers

and purity seekers. Instead, local and specific intervention can contribute to a counterhistory of cultural relations and influence from which a new understanding of multicultural Europe [might emerge].”²⁶

This book aims to balance close investigations of material cultures and the lived experience of them not to delink art from life but as a way of contributing what will, undoubtedly, be one of many close analyses of the constituent forms that have, in practice, articulated diasporic modes of subjectivity so effectively theorized by others in recent decades.

As a closely related note, it should be clear that while this book takes Rotimi Fani-Kayode as a focal point, it is not an attempt to retroactively canonize him or to subsume him within the more universalizing economy of authenticity and valuation that he and many around him carefully sought to subvert. For one, it is clear that while Fani-Kayode’s photographs evince a singular confluence of semiotic and material interests, he himself seemed to draw not on conventions of originality so central to Western modernism but instead on what he and Hirst dubbed “premodern” models of storytelling, masquerade, and reinvention. Of course, such aesthetic strategies never really went away, surviving in the diasporic practice of signifying on received symbolic or narrative scripts, or through the more general principle in much West African cosmology of the artist as a medium for spiritual or creative energy as it enters the world. Moreover, Fani-Kayode frequently relied on masking and costuming his sitters and constructing tableaux of energetic transformation. He did this in order to undermine the very notion of static identity while, in the final years of his life, staging his process as a collaboration with Alex Hirst.

In a slightly more abstract register, I also agree with Kobena Mercer that a core strength of Fani-Kayode’s work was its insistence on the proposition that “self and Other are always mutually implicated in ties of identification and desire . . . its emphasis on the constitutive hybridity of the postcolonial and diasporic subject.”²⁷ Mercer elaborates how Fani-Kayode and contemporaries such as Lyle Ashton Harris, Marlon Riggs, and Isaac Julien worked at the confluence of traditions, cutting into and working against the grain of “master codes”—be they canonical or tied to identity-based forms of collectivity such as gay liberation or black (inter)nationalisms. In this way, to lionize Fani-Kayode according to the logic of Western art history or one of its categorical shorthands (black art, queer art, African art, modernist, postmodernist, and so on) is to miss the point. The following makes clear that Fani-Kayode, too, intentionally negotiated the relative margins of exile and the productive ten-

sion that he located at the intersections between existing categories. As such, he quite openly resisted affiliation with any particular group or ideology. It is therefore insufficient to simply note that he was a diaspora artist; rather, the task here is to find out what diaspora means at discrete moments of its articulation as part of a slower kind of historical work. This is the primary goal of the chapters ahead.

With that in mind, *Bloodflowers* is perhaps best understood as what the art historian George Baker termed an “anti-monograph.” His writing on Francis Picabia centered “a marginal period, a marginal figure, a blind-spot for art history” so that from “this half-forgotten, not-yet-congealed historical moment can emerge a re-reading.”²⁸ But a rereading of what? For Baker it is the terms of Dada itself; for *Bloodflowers* it is the specificity of diasporic practice between the years 1976 and 1989, a marginal period not unlike interwar Europe: seemingly stuck between more belabored historical moments, at once consciously optimistic but wearied, even traumatized by the long shadow of resurgent nationalism, a catastrophic virus, violence in the streets, and tectonic shifts in the political landscape.

Dada was (like diaspora) routed in upheaval, in the transnational, and in the transgression or appropriation of master codes. Fani-Kayode, in turn, explicitly tapped into the various countercultures of modernity activated in the interventions we retrospectively call Dada, using tactics of bohemian earnestness and bitter irony. And diaspora (like Dada) loses its edge as a revisionary force at the moment of its canonization: each forces the historian to chart the avowedly amorphous, to resist hypostatizing its adaptive and resistant energies without arresting it in the process. *Bloodflowers* attempts to do so by homing in on the layers encoded in different photographs, which are revealed, like Baker’s Dada strategies, as dialogic, as “mediating forces” in a “much larger cultural phenomenon.”²⁹

A second ambition of *Bloodflowers* is to offer case studies in the formation of an emerging account of, indeed, a much larger phenomenon—the long 1980s itself. Fani-Kayode staged his work in response to debates around the role of art in pressing political conflicts (from institutional recognition for marginalized subjects to adequate responses to the AIDS crisis), and the resulting photographs prompt the viewer to reckon with the wider landscape of 1980s cultural production and the polemics that defined it. Fani-Kayode’s practice provides powerful examples of ways in which then-contemporary art transcends some of the more ideological critiques of the period. For example,

he notably did not make the sort of explicitly postconceptual photography that was championed by many prominent critics but, instead, drew on earlier conventions within a self-consciously aesthetic lineage. Fani-Kayode built on a range of countercultural practices within modernity, such as Romanticism and homoerotic portraiture, and materialized modes drawn from musical cultures, ranging from the black radical tradition to punk.

A long-standing concern among critics—especially those who came of age in the tradition of the neo-avant-garde and the New Left—was that with the fragmentation and stylistic eclecticism often associated with postmodernist practice meant the end of an era, and with it, a tradition of critique and political engagement. It is perhaps for this reason that a great deal of art historical writing of the past decade has tended to pick up on art produced in the early 1970s, or after 1989, with the efflorescence of projects dealing with questions of democracy, globalization, and participation.³⁰ And while there has, of course, been writing to date on the 1980s, much of it has emerged from the realm of criticism written at the time, or in the form of broader political retrospective. As Fani-Kayode's peer Keith Piper poignantly remarked: "The 1980s has emerged in our contemporary consciousness as a misread, misaligned, and misinterpreted decade. Trapped somewhere between the heat and light of the 1990s, when the strategic intervention of marketing moguls created an environment within which to be young, British, and an artist was to be conferred almost instant celebrity status, the 1980s has become a decade consigned to the murky shadows of prehistory."³¹

To some degree, the presence of such a blind spot is unsurprising. The 1980s was, for many, a decade out of time. To the seeming dispersion of modernism's linear flows, one might add that the popular culture of the decade was awash with nostalgia, from conservative fantasies embedded in discourse as far ranging as sitcoms and Saturday morning TV to the proclamations of iconic leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Both of the latter appealed to conceptions of society of which Christianity, the heterosexual nuclear family, and free-market capitalism were central pillars. The historian Sean Wilentz and theorist David Harvey, in different ways, have pointed to a "long 1980s" that began somewhere in the decade prior: the 1980s were borne out of a pushback against the gains of the civil rights and Stonewall era, the rollback of organized labor in the United States and England, the deregulation of financial markets, the emergence of the religious right, and a tragic—even willful—mishandling of the AIDS epidemic.³² As such, many

might recall these years as either a protracted nightmare, symbolized literally in the Eisenhower-age bromides and rampant consumerism of the film *Back to the Future* (1985), or else as prehistory—indeed, as the run-up to an unfettered neoliberal capitalism with postmodernist art as its visual culture.³³

Nevertheless, while the 1980s can be seen as a critical period of transition, that transition was rarely contested. As a range of curatorial explorations have compellingly demonstrated, eclecticism often correlated with heterogeneity, a willingness to break with orthodoxy and transcend boundaries, in the process actively renegotiating inherited notions of identity, location, and value. The 1980s was a time of confluence between activism and cultural production during which the various strands of identity politics that emerged in the wake of the 1960s deepened in complexity, cross-pollination, and public address. Fani-Kayode's work was formed within this crucible, and it documents not only debates *within* key counterpublics of the era but potential futures and usable preludes that paralleled or were pushed to the edges during those years. Both his writing and Hirst's describe life in some of the world's wealthiest cities, where a chasm loomed between those who profited and those who were left behind—people of color, people with AIDS, people who had helped to build those cities but were nonetheless too recently arrived. Such histories were sketched eloquently at the time by theorists and critics such as Stuart Hall, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Gregg Bordowitz. With respect to Fani-Kayode's art, in particular, Hirst summed it up: "in this tangible Western world of not-enough light, the sight of human (and more specifically, male) flesh 'exposed' really is fantastic . . . a temporary and marvelous relief from the glare of analysis and the tyranny of capital gains."³⁴

In short, I agree with Helen Molesworth in her contention that the 1980s was a decade marked not merely by excess, by regress, or by mere eclecticism.³⁵ It was, instead, a time in which art, politics, and (importantly) love—desire, fantasy, memory—all coalesced to do vital work. Her inclusion of Fani-Kayode in her landmark 2011 exhibition was no accident. So a second aim of this book, beyond drawing sustained attention to Fani-Kayode and his oeuvre, is to connect them meaningfully to larger histories of the 1980s. My goal here is not to periodize the decade as such but to argue that there are meaningful questions to be addressed through the lens of Fani-Kayode's photographs. For example, in what ways can the black radical tradition or surrealism be enlisted in the cultural politics of the day? What avenues beyond direct agita-

tion could be pursued to address the AIDS crisis? Which extant knowledges or facets of traditional practice might be brought to bear productively after modernism? And what new syncretism could be unearthed or envisioned in so doing?

FULL BLEED

This chapter opened with two photographs called *Tulip Boy*, first processed as Cibachromes and then again as gum bichromate prints—one of the several “alternative” methods being taught in London during the late 1980s, along with platinum and Van Dyke brown processes. Fani-Kayode had experimented with printmaking as early as 1978. He and Hirst hand-tinted black-and-white prints more consistently in 1987, and gum bichromates in marine blues and earthy reds soon followed. And Hirst continued in this vein between 1989 and 1992 as a sort of afterimage of their collaboration. While these techniques are closely associated with the photographic vanguard of a full century prior, in procedure and effect their meaning was clear, marking a sharp contrast with a modernist standard that valorized precision, clarity, and tonal control.

In this way, falling on the far side of the modernist divide, Fani-Kayode’s alternate process prints align more closely with what Kaja Silverman has theorized as the “liquid intelligence” of early photography.³⁶ She means liquid in a literal sense, as in the application of flowing collodion to glass plates, but also as a more ambient sensibility: of motion captured by open shutters, of the potential for chance, error, and perhaps even the occasional specter to irrevocably materialize as the fix is applied. This formulation also rhymes with what Derek Conrad Murray has elaborated as a contemporary aesthetic of “liquid blackness,” in which subjectivity is understood as perpetually adaptive and contingent, where blackness itself is an unbounded, pliable affective force.³⁷

While Fani-Kayode used technology that came into fashion some thirty years after wet collodion, he too partook of a liquid sensibility through the dynamism and dissolution of figures in his black-and-white prints, and in the gum bichromates, with their imprecise hand application of photo-sensitive metals. Neither technique relies on aqueous chemicals per se but on multiple or rapid exposures—the repeated snaps of the camera or the successive bursts of contact printing used to build additive chromatic layers in pictorialist prints. Multiple exposures capture time, in the blurred duration of movement

across frames, in recurrent pulsations and multiplicities, and in the physical accretion of surfaces, built on paper supports like sedimentary layers.

Metaphors of fluidity, admixture, spectrality, and mobility abound in the chapters that follow, but the framework of the book is based on the logic of multiple exposure itself: in this type of photograph, any one opening of the shutter registers a single image that is, in its way, real. But once the final image is processed, those single shots are revealed as incomplete. The coherence of the image is built through multiple returns to the same substrate. And so, rather than proceed in a linear or biographical fashion, the chapters that follow can be thought as individual exposures that accumulate and might be seen in hindsight as a provisional whole. As such, the same objects, people, or places are revisited, but they appear in different layers, inflected by shifts in time, in methodological filter, or in theoretical starting point. Again, part of the longevity of Fani-Kayode's photographs is their density of resonances and affinities. His gift was not so much for appropriation or remix as for drawing together referents seemingly alien to each other on a unified, viscid field.

The first half of the book is oriented spatially, around particular physical locations, sites of publicity and counterpublicity, and the transnational flows that gave rise to emerging forms of identity and their attendant aesthetics and politics. Exposure 1 charts the terrain of Brixton, South London, where Fani-Kayode settled and produced his entire body of mature work. I argue here that rather than representing Nigerian, African, or black art as they were defined in the 1970s and early 1980s, his photographs underscored and contributed to an emerging conception of ethnicity and black radicalism in London that built on earlier diasporic modalities while also responding to specific pressures of race and nation, as well as to the powerful theoretical and artistic discourses forged as subjects from the postcolonies settled in the city.

London after 1976 had, more generally, emerged as a cultural capital of underground sonic cultures formed through material flows and psychic affinities between England and the Americas—from the roots of early punk rock in New York and the pulsations emanating from Caribbean sound systems and a subterranean network of urban dance clubs and loft parties. Exposure 2 explores the ways in which avant-garde energies were reinvigorated through communities forged in relation to music, the spaces where it is played, and its diffusion through vernacular forms such as posters, magazines, clothing, and hair. Fani-Kayode was implicitly and explicitly in dialogue with such musical communities and, taken together, a picture of the 1980s begins to emerge

that works against the grain of long-standing, commonplace narratives of art-world excess and post-1968 fatalism.

Exposure 3 considers the role Fani-Kayode played in the queer politics of the 1980s. Fani-Kayode's photographs first found purchase in the global circuits of gay literature and erotica—his work extended visual codes that obtained since at least the Victorian era and gained in visibility during the post-Stonewall years of the 1970s. In London, gay and lesbian liberation politics remained less overt but were nonetheless potent in an array of counterpublics. Fani-Kayode connected a transatlantic constellation of visual culture with nascent projects that dealt with the specific challenges and openings presented in the postcolonial metropolis. He did this, in no small part, by merging black American and specifically British articulations of liberation and black gay consciousness. As a result, he contributed to the emergence of intersectional and performative modes of subjectivity that would, in the following decade, be more fully theorized as disidentificatory and queer.

The second half of the book shifts to interpret the far-reaching citations and appropriations apparent in many of the photographs, theorizing Fani-Kayode's uses of a wide array of referents drawn from a geographically and temporally broad archive. While each of these three chapters undertakes sustained semiotic readings of the work, outlining Fani-Kayode's practice of subversion, signification, and juxtaposition, each also takes his own claims seriously—namely, that his was a contemporary practice or Yoruban spiritual invocation that he termed a “technique of ecstasy.” As a result, Exposures 4 and 5 build from this self-understanding, which complicates Fani-Kayode's uses of arguably antiquated countercultural strategies within modernity and, indeed, helps to explain the reappearance of Romanticist and surrealist currents in the 1980s as much more than ironic or nostalgic revivalism.

One of the most notable harbingers of the end of modernism was the widespread rephrasing of antiquity as pastiche or site of semiotic play, notably with the return of Neoclassical motifs in architecture and the visual arts. Fani-Kayode was not immune to this impulse. But as the final chapter argues, this return to the premodern was for him not a matter of style, cynical self-mythologizing, or commentary on the exhaustion of originality. Instead, Fani-Kayode and Hirst sought in their last photographs to enlist techniques and forms of encounter that were then thought to be the province of theatricality or ritual but were once an integral function for the artist in Europe and Africa alike. These photographs amplify secret histories of “Western” art that could,

if applied anew, reveal the marvelous in the world or, perhaps, even talismanically resist death, as in his final series, which was addressed to the AIDS crisis. In the process, Fani-Kayode worked in parallel with his contemporaries not as an activist but by turning back to art as a place of communion, interconnection, and unimaginable potential in an evidently tragic, disenchanted world.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. This made the gum process especially important in the protomodernist era of photography in the 1890s, before the Lumière brothers developed their Autochrome in 1907.

2. See, for example, Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also the exhibit *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966–1996*, which ran at the Caribbean Cultural Centre in London through autumn 1997 and was accompanied by a catalog of the same title edited by M. Franklin Sirmans and Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

3. Okwui Enwezor, Clare Bell, and Octavio Zaya, eds., *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, exhibition catalog, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 24 May–29 September 1996 (London: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

4. Okwui Enwezor in Brent Hayes Edwards, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (New York: ICP, 2006), part 3, n.p.

5. See, for example, Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, eds., *Art and Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon, 2013), 150, and Helen Anne Molesworth, Johanna Burton, and Claire Grace, eds., *This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 159–170.

6. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, “Traces of Ecstasy,” in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (Cambridge: MIT Press / London: Iniva, 1999), 276.

7. From the Cure song “Bloodflowers,” 2000.

8. From Robert Herrick’s poem “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (published 1648).

9. Fani-Kayode’s pictures in *Black Male/White Male* are a thoroughgoing investigation into the transient and transformational nature of mirrors.

10. It is a veritable survey of a gothic Romantic tradition. See Charles Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985).
11. See, for example, Walter Benjamin from the Exposé of 1935, in "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002), 10–12.
12. This is theorized in depth in Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
13. Reports of routine and institutionalized homophobia and violence in Nigeria and elsewhere (e.g., Uganda) continue to make headlines as of this writing.
14. See, for example, the accompanying essays for the unpaginated catalog edited by Mark Sealy and Jean Loup Pivin, *Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst* (London: Revue Noire and Autograph ABP, 1996).
15. Steven Nelson, "Transgressive Transcendence in the Photographs of Rotimi Fani-Kayode," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (spring 2005): 4–19.
16. An ongoing, multivolume project to produce an archive of such visualizations of black subjects in art can be found in David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).
17. Mark Sealy, "A Note from Outside on Rotimi Fani-Kayode," in *Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955–1989)* (Syracuse, NY: Light Work, 2015), n.p. This version of the essay is a near reproduction of its original from twenty years prior, featured in the book *Communion* (London: Autograph ABP, 1995).
18. Alex Hirst, introduction to *Black Male/White Male* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1988), 3.
19. Defining modernity is a Herculean task, and not one that I fully attempt here. Of course, the thrust of this book is to align Fani-Kayode with expanded but, in the eighties, contested visions of the field of modernity, in the work of Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and many others. For an excellent analysis in this direction, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (summer 2000): 821–865.
20. See, for one, Hal Foster's "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (autumn 1985): 45–70.
21. See Paul Gilroy's "Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing Same,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (autumn 1991): 111–136. Michael Warner's theorization of counterpublics is in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002).
22. See Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 15. For Edwards, "it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to 'step' and 'move' in various articulations."

23. Conversation with the author, 19 May 2017.
24. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 18.
25. Mercer, "Iconography after Identity," in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press in collaboration with the Institute of International Visual Arts and the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, 2005), 49–58.
26. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 145–146.
27. Kobena Mercer, "Busy the Ruins of the Wretched Phantasia," in *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 66.
28. George Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 14.
29. Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, 15–16.
30. See Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
31. Keith Piper, "Wait, Did I Miss Something?," in Baily, Baucom, and Boyce, *Shades of Black*, 35.
32. See Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009); and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
33. This is the diagnostic, of course, of Fredric Jameson, who argued in 1984 that postmodernism in culture and politics more broadly is merely a neoliberal mode of production made manifest.
34. Hirst, *Black Male/White Male*, 3.
35. Molesworth, *This Will Have Been*, 14–46.
36. Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy; or, The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 67–85.
37. Derek Conrad Murray, "Base Materialism: Meditations on the Intersection of Blackness and Form," paper given at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, 16 February 2017.

ONE / BRIXTON

1. Alex Hirst, introduction to Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst, *Black Male/White Male* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1988), 3.
2. The common practice is to date all pictures from the collection as 1983–1987, reflecting the period after Fani-Kayode finished graduate school and before the publication of *Black Male/White Male*. Given that many of these images have been posthumously reprinted and resized, it is difficult to ascribe an exact date to most