



Now Pretend, L.Franklin Gilliam, 1991. Courtesy of L.Franklin Gilliam and Cinenova Distribution

A Many Selfed Portrait

She had already been told off for her dress. A dress she had gone to extensive effort to make and since this incident she had not worn. The stuff her mum got made for her never really fit or wasn't her style, she didn't think this could be because of her shape, at least Nigerian tailors would understand her proportions. In preparation for her trip, her first solo trip to Nigeria, she had found her own tailor recommended by a friend and prepared several references for a dress that would suit her. She wasn't exactly completely happy with it; it was more revealing than she had thought. It sometimes caught her by surprise, the way in which her body spilled out, but she had gone to the trouble and so wanted to wear it. She hadn't the entire six weeks in Nigeria. In all honesty, she felt it wasn't stylish enough for Lagos, seemed twee almost. But the village would do, so on the day of her grandmother's memorial, after slipping out of the badly constructed uniform fabric shift dress, she put it on. As soon as she walked down the stairs into the compound yard that had been festooned with canopies, chairs and a monumental sound system, a woman she had been introduced to only that morning, but she knew that she should show deference to, told her to change. And so, she turned on her heels, without much fuss because she didn't want to spend the whole day pulling at the dress to cover errant skin, and returned upstairs to put on a more modest orange lace dress she had worn only once before to officiate the baptism of a baby's friend.

You sit in the chair, looking at the blank television unable to speak to your friend N, the willing volunteer, over the ominous buzzing of clippers. You watch as clusters of tight black curls float down your chest and you brush them away, off the towel you are clasping in your left hand. You try not to look at your reflection or touch your head, you remain still, holding your breath. You reach down towards a small feeling that it will be alright. N struggles against the thickness of your hair and jumps up on the arm of the sofa to get more purchase. On hearing N's smothered laughter, the pit of your stomach drops. "Shit!".

After longer than you imagined shaving off someone's hair would take, N brings a mirror to your face and eagerly looks on. You raise your head and are relieved. No weird shapes or bumps are exposed on your skull, just an average smooth curved shape. You run a hand from your crown to the nape of your neck, and a tingle fizzles up your spine as you do so. You smile, imagining the looks on their faces.

I walked down the alleyway gingerly, remembering times spent running the lengths of these streets, jumping out of cars, or waiting in long queues for plimsolls, records, and gig tickets. It occurred, then, that the tattoo was a really stupid idea, people may laugh, words are too fixed, and the meaning is maybe inscrutable. This thought is quickly dismissed, I am reassured that it is just a small scribble marking the passing of time. Marking me. I entered the tattoo shop with a shy nod to greet E, a soon to be friend. (A strange way to try and make friends.) I laid down on the chair after the shortest consultation where I agreed to every suggestion E made. I pulled off my shirt reclining back towards the cling filmed chair, with my stomach and carefully chosen bra (not too lacey, clean, black but not a sports one) exposed. She told me not to move so I hold my breath, first hearing the

gun hammer against my breastbone and then feeling the short sweet stabs that I know how to endure.

What if I told you all three of these people were the same person, one self, one body, many times, but me?

No surprise.
Of course, you knew.

It's obvious.

Grammatical trickery cannot obscure the solid line that unites these three figures. I am not sure I would have known this would have been me then, or will know that same thing of my self, in the future. I don't have the language for her. When discussing *Now Pretend* with L.Franklin Gilliam, their self socialised by their mother in black consciousness, politics and pride, an "Afrocentric world"¹, can be difficult to reconcile with the same self that played a game with their sibling, as children, which prized the physical attributes of whiteness. It's hard not to recall Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Pecola's outsized and inconceivable wish that works to obscure, from her peers, the trauma and grief of lost childhood.

But that wasn't what Gilliam was doing,

"This game was a very specific thing that we did that drove my mother crazy. And it completely created a whole, kind of like, ideological mess for her. But it was, it was a really unique kind of thing. And when I thought about it later, I was like, we didn't want to be white though, that wasn't actually the goal. It was something about the hair."²

This is sticky, and intricate and loaded and I don't know who I am talking to.

Will you comprehend my shorthand or take it all too seriously? It also feels overdone, like I don't need to retrace conversations about hairstyles, music tastes or dancing technique. I don't want to be at that surface.

I am interested in the self through time and how we can represent them in conflict, humour – relationship – to hegemonic monoliths. There, I said it.

A friend noted that I always write in the first person, because she likes me she hid the observation in a compliment, "**you're an / guy**". Because I am critical, I wonder if my writing is up to much if I always fall on the trope of the */*. I don't want my writing to be a series of personal critical essays that I look back on and increasingly fail to recognise the self, speaking from a place of some kind of authority. That has the temerity to think their */* is an important enough location to pass comment on social predicaments.

In a café, in the city in January of this year, I was asked if I wrote a zine about being bisexual when I was twenty living in Bristol. I have no memory of this writing, not because the description does not match my own, but because I do not recall this self. It could be true, they promised to consult their copy and get back to me, so I may soon have to be accountable for her.

Gilliam, who situates this film in their student days and as a response to their studies in French philosophy and semiotics, brought up the mirror stage in our conversation and I wonder shamefully if I reside firmly in it.

Now Pretend traffics in the possibility of multiplicity in the representation of multiple selves, multiple presences, multiple blacknesses through film. Franklin introduced me to the term presence in relation to the production of the film's soundtrack,

"Something that I've always liked [in making sound] is just sampling and then also recording presence, like just using the presence of different environments to suggest or to round out the image. So this was the first time where I just did a lot of presence recording."

What is the sound of my presence, the sound of my many black selves through time? The sound of the child scared of heights, unable to look down from the Beckton flyover, or the teenager that smashed a brick wall outside a community centre in Hornchurch, in a heady concoction of repressed desire and crushing insecurity, or the adult that reached a hand out to cup a stranger's face on the floor of Cafe Oto and sang, sang to them with eyes wide open and locked on.

My presences.

Being present.

In presence.

I love this description of presence, being at a particular time and space as oneself, from Gail Lewis,

"Presence, or in fact the verb 'presencing', which Simpson conceptualises as a process of 'here-ness' and 'aliveness', is a decolonial move through which counter-histories, counter-spatialities, subaltern epistemologies and modes of being are created and announced."³

Now Pretend enacts a presencing, one that faintly touches, aligns, resides beside my own presence, over here far away, from Gilliam, and at a different time. The film considers the anti-monolithic through the contrast of John Howard Griffin's failed, fictional, attempt of a coopted blackness and a portrait of Gilliam's many selves. Repudiating his misunderstanding through

surface,

rupture,

texture.

Onyeka Igwe, 2022

1. Interview with L.Franklin Gilliam, 6 October 2021
2. Ibid
3. Lewis, G. (2017) 'Questions of Presence', *Feminist Review*, 117(1), pp. 1–19. doi:10.1057/s41305-017-0088-1

Part of a new Cinenova project titled 'The Work We Share' – a national public programme of newly digitised films from the Cinenova collection addressing representations of gender, race, sexuality, health and community. The films are captioned by Collective Text, and supported by response commissions from contemporary artists and writers.

Written to accompany the new digitisation of L.Franklin Gilliam's 16mm film *Now Pretend* (1991, 10 min).

Distributed at 'Now You Go Into Oblivion: L.Franklin Gilliam, Alia Syed & Onyeka Igwe', a screening at The Pyramid Theatre, Leeds University Union, 21 February 2022. The event also included Alia Syed's 16mm film, *Fatima's Letter* (1991), a new sound work by Onyeka Igwe, and contributions from Dhanveer Singh Brar.

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