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Queering Black Gay Historiography: Performance, (Mis)Identifications, and Possibilities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Theatre/Performance Studies

by

Thomas Howard Fitzgerald

2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Queering Black Gay Historiography: Performance, (Mis)Identifications, and Possibilities.

by

Thomas Howard Fitzgerald

Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Sue Ellen Case, Chair

This dissertation will examine black gay theatre/ performance in the United States from 1970 to 2010. My intent is to establish a genealogy of black gay performance by situating performance strategies of visibility employed by black gay men in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century utilizing various performance genres such as revue, theatrical biography, the “event” and history play. Specifically, I am interested that this writing act as a discursive in interrogating the historiography of the tactics of black gay visibility in contrast to and in concert with traditional heterosexual black masculinities where the overall effort was to distinguish a queer black aesthetic separate from the white gay project. My research is necessarily involved with both gay and black performances in this period, since a study of black gay performance practices cannot be pulled away from the black experience in America. Identity politics is the conduit to self-empowerment for black and gay liberation movements, for similar reasons. Accordingly, the project study will concentrate on three areas: (1) social trends and historiography, (2) select black gay performances in this period, and (3) theories of queer and racial identification.

The dissertation of Thomas Howard Fitzgerald is approved.

Shelley Salamensky

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Gary Gardner

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2013

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my lovely sister, Althea

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I started the doctoral program in an unawareness of where it might lead me. Of course I knew of the prestige that accompanied a doctorate degree but as I understood more of what was expected of me, I saw that it wasn't just the letters after one's name that brought prestige but the work behind those letters. I can hardly say that the work was a labor of love all the time but I came to realize the significance of what was I was trying to complete. The idea of being an educator, of being a public servant and of being an asset to the professors who mentored me along the way took precedent in my striving to fulfill this awesome honor. It is to those role models, personal and professional, that I owe a great deal of gratitude and respect.

My committee chair, Sue Ellen Case welcomed me into the doctoral program with a strict dense of direction and mentorship. I will be forever grateful to her for directing me toward a precise scholarship. Her seminar on "Identity and Identification" was my inspiration for this project. We spent hours in her office, sharing our love of theatre, discussing the complications of gendered and racialized performances. Amidst the many revelations (while she shared half of her lunch with me) was a relaxing sometimes humorous but always illuminating exchange of ideas. Her words helped to renew my flagging interest in the theatre conveying to me a new perspective on the theatre's possibilities in its treatment of the marginalized. I owe the shape and theoretic stylings of this dissertation to her long time and esteemed experience.



Many thanks of gratitude to my committee: Professor Shelley Salamenksy took me “home and away.” It was in her seminar where I discovered the intriguing mystery of historiography and the motivation to keep digging through archives for more questions and answers. I am beholden to Professor Arthur Little who steered me toward excellence in my writing eccentricities. He also provided me with many resources of the Afro-queer experience outside of the theatre. Professor Gary Gardner gave me encouragement and support and a warm smile.

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“Civil Sex: The Life of Modern Black Gay Activist Bayard Rustin.” ATHE 2012

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## INTRODUCTION

A movement of modernity is underway surrounding identities and identifications of black and gay performance/performativity of masculinities. In reaction to an absence from American culture, black and white, the black gay subject has reclaimed a vandalized ontology as free agents returning from an imposed (sometimes self-induced) exile. Particularly, black gay men have sought avenues of resistance to this “death by perception” through stage performance. To this effort, black gay theatre practitioners have found the creative means to affirm what Essex Hemphill, 1980s Afro-queer activist, would call “the ass splitting truth” to their respective constituencies altering the public discourse on black male gayness. Moreover, the relationship between the circulating representations of black gay males in concurrence with a pervasive and resilient image of black hyper masculinity in the American theatre has undergone such disruptions that gradual acknowledgment of sexual variance in the black community is evidence of shifting generational attitudes. Even though the inconsistency of black gay theatre has yet to yield the wished for renaissance in queer black stage characterizations, as the stage is reflective of societal dynamics, windows of possibility of such a notable movement is feasible. In contemporary theatre, a nascent black gay performativity rejects the taboo of traditional strategies of virtuous representation and the radical heteronormative is replaced by a range of black male representations.

My project looks at the identifications and mis-identifications in contemporary black gay performance. Using a historiographical lens to see the “dead” queer black male, I draw on material written and produced by black gay men except for the play in chapter one which was adapted to make it about a black gay man. I am interested in the intersection of black male

performativity with stage representation interrogating the reasons behind the lack of sexually variant black male representations. The hyper masculine black male is and remains the dominant character in contemporary black drama where the black gay male who may be conformist or not is almost never seen. My research leads me to certain conclusions that conflate the pivotal moments of trauma in the lives of African Americans when suddenly a countervailing black male representation emerges (generally the drag queen or sissy) to begin the discourse anew. Still even in the midst of a community's unacknowledged but closely watched transgressors, a distinguishable black gay/queer/same-sex performance/performativity is always present. To be clarify my point: the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s gave way to the hyper masculinist dramaturgy of many emergent black playwrights including LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) to the Black Arts Movements whose manifesto decried anything but the normative for black performance to the AIDS crises where black gay men take to the stage to the complicated hip hop culture where hyper masculinity is juxtaposed against RuPaul's popularity to the present where the exponential incarceration rate of young black men opens up yet another discourse on black masculinities.

Mediated "events" became the conduit through which black gay representation could be interred into the wider conversation surrounding identifications and mis-identifications of black male sexual variance. I assert these events are built on a foundation that Harry Elam calls the "reality check,"<sup>1</sup> where traumatic moments in the history of black lives galvanize the community into taking action in visible acts of resistance in a demonstration akin to an ensemble acting troupe as they performatively "act out" the rage of injustice. Elam uses the images of Emmett Till and Rodney King to illustrate his theory for the homogenous black community. I would

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Elam, "Reality Check." Critical Theory and Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 173.

submit AIDS as the example of the reality check for the black gay community as well as the larger black community. I contend as the black community responds to events so does the black gay community. It is in the nexus of the two identifications that the “reality check” is useful in describing a commonality in the work against the injustice of invisibility. As the theatricality of the protest in its performativity constructs and instructs an assembly of the like minded resulting either in the momentary skirmish or organized procession, the aim of the event performed as reality check for the black and black and gay communities in its synchronicity finds an instructive outlet in cultural genres such as poetry, film and theatre.

Anecdotally, I saw my first public display of homoerotic affection between two black gay men on an AIDS Project Los Angeles poster advocating for safe sex placed in the advertisement case near a bus stop on a Los Angeles street. I realize now because they were representing black gay men who were potential carriers and therefore branded, the depiction was deemed acceptable. It is at these periods where black homosexual men have been most present in public life. Troubling the hyper masculine performativity amongst theatre practitioners initiated a direct affront that interrogated commonality. Emergent from these galvanizing moments, black male variance saw debate on the theatrical landscape. Coming out of this traumatic period of shifting racial and gender discourses, the dynamics of black same sex subjectivity began to creep out of the closet with these movements, soon to establish a connection to yet another looming traumatic event, the AIDS epidemic. It is at this juncture of intense re-socialization within the black community and a health emergency that the black gay male asserted his identity on the American stage.

I have chosen four plays to support my understanding of the complicated black male representation but have specific things to say about the way in which black gay men have come

to think of themselves as citizens and artists. Extrapolated from this analysis is the traditional reaction from the black community to black gay theatre projects. The playwrights have opted for four contemporary dramaturgical genres in which to present their narratives: melodrama, solo performance, event and the revue. The plays that I have chosen to illustrate the black gay experience have been written by black gay men except for one, *Norman is that You?*, a gay play written by white playwrights for a white cast but I examine a curiously popular “event” production where the family has been re-cast with black actors. Even though the black gay plays written by openly black gay playwrights are not well known, I chose these particular plays because they emphasize a possibility for future black gay playwrights (I want to emphasize this because I think the stories of black gay men need to be told by openly black gay men to break this cycle of silence). The reason behind their obscurity is that the sexually variant black character has yet to make a significant impact on a mainstream theatre audience. The responsibility must fall on successful black playwrights (straight and gay) who continue to re-circulate the familiar heteronormative paradigm to the black community and as a consequence, the commodification of the black gay play remains at bay.

The first chapter looks at an early 1970s play, *Norman is that You?* The play began its production life as a story about a white gay man suddenly confronted with coming out to his parents. After a less than tepid response in its Broadway debut, the play’s circuitous journey found a venue in Los Angeles where the family was changed from white to black and suddenly a black gay man was on display in what became an “event” for the black community where Los Angeles is the signifier of the city as theatre of protest. What happens to the play as it is produced for the next seven years is dependent on a translocal mobility where the redlined boundaries of Los Angeles become the opening for blacks to travel from the south side known as

the ghetto into the more white establishment of the west side of the city. It is here I contend a community that had never seen a black gay man in a mostly positive portrayal discovered pre AIDS that they could sit in a theatre and watch a conformist representation of a black homosexual with a sissy white lover confront his parents in what was essentially a Jewish comedy and find commonality in the humor and perhaps most importantly the sense of a family (always a major theme in black dramaturgy) finding if not acceptance tolerance for the situation. Even though the play itself is minor in the archive of gay plays of the 1970s what it did for this particular community was offer a “reality check” in that it unified a community at least in the short time to move beyond the legal and self imposed boundaries to gain another perspective on a swiftly changing society. The black community had been so influenced by the heteropatriarchy of both the Civil Rights Movement and then the Black Power movement which elicited a certain black male performance in theatre where the black homosexual was essentially denounced. As a reaction to the fraught status of African Americans in American culture since the days of slavery, a sexually variant black male was invisible and for all intents could be discussed as the “dead” black male. The discourse became more complicated and homophobic in the 1970s and not until the traumatic event of AIDS did the black community begin to engage with their homosexual children and spouses. So Norman offered a way into the subject through humor where the parents actually win the argument over their gay son but at the same time seem to understand him and love him even when he identifies as a homosexual.

In chapter 2, I discuss Post Modern African Homosexuals (Pomo Homos). The three openly black gay theatre practitioners was an ensemble who performed in a revue like exploration of black gay experiences. Their stories are an olio of biography and commentary on the black and gay lived experience where stories about black homosexuality are suddenly being



written and performed by openly black gay men. It is visibility that makes the difference in moving the discourse from assumptions and sophomoric renderings of the real lives of the marginalized that distort the spectators view. What the Pomos did was a revolutionary act in that a black gay life was the *raison d'être* for their public activism. Beginning with *Fierce Love* and then *Dark Fruit*, these plays gave a wide range of black male performativity where masculinities can be seen as complicated by historic racism and bigotry from without the community and homophobia within the community. The Pomos did not seek validation because the black homosexual had always been a part of the consanguinity of the black family in America. These gay men were sutured to the legacy of being an African American. It is their absence in the cultural life of black Americans that needed to be amended by acknowledgement. If the epistemology of the closet prevailed in the black gay community as was the case in the homosexual community as a whole, the tacit was no longer workable particularly as the AIDS epidemic established a firm grip on the many black men and women who contracted the virus. Founding Pomo member, Brian Freeman's *Civil Sex*, a bioplay about James Baldwin completes the chapter.

E Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea* is a documentary theatre piece that takes the lives of black gay men in the American South as another example of genealogy of black male performativity. Johnson's project emerged out of a series of interviews with black gay men where he compiled their narratives into book form. Following the ethnography theories of Soyini Madison, Johnson described his work as "performance ethnography." He utilized the tools of the ethnography in giving an overall rendering of the Southern black gay men. The narratives then became a reader's theatre where he would represent perhaps ten of the men conceived as lens into the experiential. Incorporating history (black and gay), sociocultural observances and sexual

practice, the monologues were then adapted into a stage presentation where Johnson performed the men in their own words. The play is representative of the documentary genre made popular by the work of Anna Deveare Smith. But in Smith's case, there is a performance of gender and color, in *Sweet Tea*, the audience sees a range of black gay men whose commonality is their sexual identity and regionalism. It is an illustration of the technologies of self as the men who give accounts of life in the Jim Crow South as well as Post Stonewall life, where the tacit acknowledgement of their families is one strategic move for survival's sake. The language of the closet insinuates itself into their acceptance of their homosexuality and the incremental openness as the American society slowly shifts its attitude of intolerance to a middling discourse. The play attempts to find a the varying degrees of black male performance as suddenly gaining a visibility and a voice building on what the marginalized have use as tactic: tell your own story. There is a conversation between the men and then the black and white communities, gay and straight. The complications of the documentary format itself where the stories though "real" have the tendency to lose their realness as the men are seen as characters over a period of time.

Chapter four examines Donald Jolly's history play *bonded*. It is a recent production where Jolly has expounded on the slave narrative to include same sex relationships. The play relies on a melodramatic format that sees all of the characters in a complicated situation in Manichean terms. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. Jolly's homoeroticism on a Southern plantation is a welcome addition to the black gay drama archive but the play illustrates what may happen when the two black men, Sonny and Asa, who act on their attraction as they compete with the conformist paradigm at a time when sexual variance was seen as something unnatural and evil. The men have been written as the iconic top/bottom where the somewhat effeminate and educated young man from the North is kidnapped and brought back to the South

as a slave. He finds himself powerfully attracted to the masculine top whose back story reveals a past same sex relationship that ended when the love interests was killed during their attempted escape. In the meanwhile, the lone black woman on the plantation is set on “jumping the broom” with Sony. The situation becomes more and more wrought with emotion as Asa the young slave declares his love for Sonny too. Jolly being a playwright of a younger generation makes the bold assumption of same sex relationships but reveals his own post Stonewall, post AIDS, homonormative understanding and perhaps sympathies as he writes the idea of traditional marriage for his gay male characters. Even if they manage to escape the plantation, what lies beyond for them? Knowing the laws are decidedly against anything remotely resembling same sex relationships, Asa’s desperation speaks to the virtue/vice of the melodramatic structure. This is particular to the period of the abolitionist movement to free the slaves adopted the strategy of blacks being more virtuous than whites (read more Christian and thus family oriented). However, melodrama is elemental to the play’s overall effectiveness. The climactic scene is amplified to the most frantic of actions as is typical of the melodrama. Still it is the desired conclusion because it allows the gay audience heroes, more significantly heroes in love with each other.

I position the black gay men represented in these chapters as exiles and nomads, in many instances “dead” to their communities, families and society, who are most visible at the times of great traumatic events such as AIDS or the outlandishly unequal incarceration rates amongst black men. Binaries of white/black, straight/gay and rich/poor have the power to define the sightings of black gay men in American culture. The idea had always to allow a certain amount of publicity when the times called for an opposite representation of a certain image of black men at once inferior in their intellect and sexual prowess. The reaction in the community is to safeguard a knowledge power connection in order to control the public discourse surrounding

black sexual variance. But then RuPaul is elevated to a level of celebrity that elicits a reaction for and against the effeminate black male, the male who likes to dress in drag, circumnavigating the deeper conversation about transgender in the black community. What if Trayvon Martin, the young black man shot to death in a Florida gated community by a bigoted white resident because he was suspected of criminal activity simply because he was a young black man wearing a hoodie walking through the community had been wearing a bright pink hoodie with jeans tight enough to see a nickel in his back pocket? What if he had sashayed as if he were on the runway of a great fashion house, would the threat that incited violence been more attributed to blackness or gayness? Having the opposite representation to contrast with the prevailing misrepresentation particularly in public performance has relied on the hyper masculine performative for survival's sake but clearly the hyper masculine performance is as fraught with danger as the sissy. For the variant black masculinities, even though the range of acceptance has widened, it remains in a very real sense an evolving project commensurate with class, gender and political events.

As a black gay theatre practitioner and scholar, it was the frustration at my absence from the stage of American culture and a conscious awareness yet persistent tacit acknowledgement of the black homosexual in the black family structure that led me to research black gay subjectivity as here/gone marginalized consanguinity. Protecting a normative image through mediated cultural projects had been the years-long strategy of assimilation in the trajectory toward equal rights. However considering the number of profound shifts in conservative arenas of black life such as the recent allowance of *Ebony* magazine (one of the longest and largest black publications in circulation) announcing black gay male weddings, I am forced to re-evaluate what I believed to be a conspiracy of silence to keep black gay men invisible in the panoply of black masculinities. As black gay identifications become more visible to the black community a

centrifugal currency infuses mainstream black culture and on into the larger American society. Consequently in the flux of things, convergence is a possibility.

Furthermore, while the research has altered my understanding of the sudden appearance of black gay men, I affirm there is more to be done. Even when the “progress” implies a gradual movement, what at first appeared as erasure was actually a strategic pause for political alignment. Black gay men have had to bide their time. I am reminded that for the marginalized in America, when the most liberal of allies advocated for the gradual, it has been to their credit that a vision of the luminal space was enough for the transformative to be present and active. It is a gesture toward modernity when black gay men feel that they can truly come out without the self-recriminating language of the closet. If the reflexivity of coming out prepares for the next one coming out then momentum builds. This can be seen in so many identity politics movements where one bold action weds itself to another until there is a torrent of alteration. In the process the communities, black and gay evolve. Even if the idea of “becoming” does not connote stability and I mean a consistent act of acceptance for black gay men as stasis, I see “becoming” as an opening for possibility. Even Antonio Gramsci, a theorist most suspicious of “progress” as a deceptive political chimera, sees agency in possibility. He tells us, “Possibility means “freedom.”<sup>2</sup> It might seem that that freedom is still subject to a host of regulations by the majoritarian but from what these black gay men have demonstrated their agency derives from a sense of shared oppression and condemnation with the straight counterparts. But my sense is that here was never capitulation. The black sissy joined with the good Negroes (not that they could never be one in the same) in times of tumult a common sense of survival and ultimately coming to terms with their situation, possibility found its way into their strategic planning.

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<sup>2</sup>Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebook.(New York: International Publishers, 1971) 360.

As a final word, my desire to witness and participate in the black gay lived experience on stage and off is a lifelong project that will either lead to more visibility or less. Even as I see immanence emerging from what Jose Munoz calls the “dead citizenship”<sup>3</sup> of black gay men, the performance space is the lifeline where we connect with communities, local and global. Staying alive should be the priority for black gay theatre as the avant-garde in an amended discourse on black performance. I am reminded in French *avant-garde* means to be “in the vanguard”, the front line of a movement where the idea is to seek out and sift through human possibilities for further elucidation and illumination. If we could consider ourselves the *flaneur* for a moment, one who moves about the city with the non judgmental gaze like the birds that fly overhead, then we are open to a manifestation of black gay agency.

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<sup>3</sup> Jose Munoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 49.

## Chapter 1 Norman is that You?: A Black Gay Man in Exile

:"The "event"—unique, verifiable, with protagonistic social actors--also poses problems of objectivity because what gets constituted and recognized as an "event" what qualifies as verification, who emerges as the hero, and how that vision of the past gets archived is determined by the analyst"-- Diana Taylor, *Performance and/as History*

"As reality checks induce a series of performances, they also produce new audiences and audiences within audiences. They function in dichotomous, symbiotic inversions of witnessing and participation, impotence and action." --Harry Elam, *Reality Check*

"...it is the process of identity formation that occurs when one is in transit that forms the basis or starting point for analysis."--Michelle Stephens, *Re-Imagining the Shape and Borders of Black Political Space*

"I've never been to the Midwest. Do you think I'll like it?"-- Garson, Norman's lover from *Norman is that You?*

Finding a play with a black gay man as the lead character, preferably staged in Los Angeles in the early 1970s was a daunting task. I came across *Norman is that You?* at the One Institute, the LGBT archives near downtown Los Angeles. I had heard about this play forever. Growing up in Los Angeles during the late 1960s and 1970s, the play was advertised continuously on black radio. Moreover, it was publicized as an "event" held at a community friendly venue at the border line between black and white Los Angeles. As the play was advertised as an uproarious comedy, it drew not only the targeted black audience but a substantial white audience as well. Beginning in 1972, *Norman is that You?* emitted a populist theatre aura which kept the play in the public awareness for the next seven years. How did this happen? The Norman of the title was a gay man, a black gay man. Having discovered or re-discovered a black gay themed play in the midst of a transforming black community dynamics whetted my curiosity as to the reasons for the plays' longevity as well as the positive reaction of the black audience to a play featuring a same gender loving relationship.

Michelle Stephens' quotation above is aimed at the extraordinarily disruptive and deliberate periodic migratory patterns of blacks in the United States that produce a direct effect on the contours and borders of their political space. The migratory movements of blacks within the U.S. liken them to exiles in a strange land. Moreover, these movements often occur at pivotal moment in their political projects. Even though sexual variance is rarely considered when studying the identities produced by these movements, I would aver that the black community was certainly aware of sexual differences within its population. I will argue that their overall political strategy was to be considered as citizens and as heteronormative citizens at that. Nevertheless, at eventful moments when blacks found communal identifications within the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movements, as the communities found themselves traversing traditional borders of identity, so came changes in their political identity. This chapter explores just how sexual identity insinuated itself into these transitory movements.. Rather than offering a model of an essentialized sexual identity, I want to trace how it actually interrogated other forms of black communal identification, prompting a deeper understanding of how it was situated vis-à-vis majoritarian attitudes. I want to argue that It is precisely in these eventful eras that a re-imagined identity is possible.

Writing about re-imagining the shape of black political spaces, Michelle Stephens says, "...it is the process of identity formation that occurs when one is in transit that forms the basis or starting point for analysis."<sup>4</sup> I would go even further than Stephens and say that when one is in transit, it does not matter if one moves ten miles or one hundred, if a place once forbidden becomes accessible to the marginalized so does the opportunity for the assessment of one's status. This is particularly true within the social geography of Los Angeles where a black

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<sup>4</sup> Stephens, Michelle. "Re-Imagining the Shape and Borders of Black Political Space." *Radical History Review* 87 (Fall 2003) 172.



playhouse, not located in the ghettoized environs of South Los Angeles but on the white Westside, presented a gay play that the black community supported for more than seven years. I would argue that this play provided, a “reality check,” as Harry Elam describes it in the quotation above, which offered the community the possibility for a re-evaluation of what had been the traditional response to sexual variance and for the moment allowed them to perceive it differently.

*Norman is that You?* is a relatively obscure gay comedy from the early 1970s that stages a re-imagining of sexual taboos through a shifting social and cultural geography of the black community. The community’s embrace of the play is unique, given that the only other plays that addressed homosexuality in the black arts movement did so in homophobic renderings such as Amiri Baraka’s *The Baptism* (1966)<sup>5</sup>. Although *Norman is that You?* offers an innocuous portrayal of homosexual relationships, it unwittingly brought a new awareness to the community through its “event” status. The play’s long run demonstrates an attraction that is prismatic in understanding its popularity. The play itself can be understood as a useful artifact to unpack the political representation of black and gay subjectivity in period that required the inhibition of sexual variance and black male performativity within the movement. Thus in an historical moment in which black communal openness to change was celebrated, the play offers a pedagogical potential for perceiving a performance of black masculinity apart from the hyper masculine norm set by the movements. Forming a space for change, the play offers a migration from the ghetto homeland of seemingly fixed identifications. The play might help the audience to recall not that homeland, but the identificatory adaptability forced upon black peoples through

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<sup>5</sup> Baraka’s *The Baptism* (written when he was LeRoi Jones) is an acerbic comedic look at the hypocrisy in the African American community using religion, social institutions and homosexuality as its primary targets.

exiles and migrations, creating another galvanizing moment that brings to the community a discourse on the useless conservation of old ways in reaction to the transgressive.

My objective is to examine the play prismatically in relation to a regional audience, in this instance the Los Angeles black community in the context of the early 1970s. I am only interested in the play's theme of homosexuality as it is re-adapted to apply to a black man. In this historic context, the play may never have been the success it became had it not been recast from the original white Jewish family as black. The play's writing problems concern my analysis only in the contextualization of furthering stereotypes about gays in general but at the same time confronting a black man who identifies as gay. Furthermore, its comedic aspects became a recognizable humor surrounding sexuality and family for the black audiences of Los Angeles. In its own way, while opening a conversation around the possibility of black homosexuality, the play allowed the black community to laugh at its adherents. Thus the reality check for the black community becomes a place of enlightenment, affirmation and catharsis. This is not to say the negative aspects of the play were not also resonating elements for an audience that wanted to find the encroachment of an open sexual variance in their midst threatening to their heteronormativity. However, without these acknowledgements, the play acting as phenomenon *in situ* would have had no more longevity in the City of the Angels than in its original setting in New York City.

The play though mostly dismissed by theatre practitioners is remarkable in that it found a space in the divided and cordoned landscape of Los Angeles, "this essentially deracinated city"<sup>6</sup> redlined into black and white populations with patrolled borders. It is as if blacks were seen as exiles meaning their legally circumscribed space acted as what was so commonly referred to at

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Davis, City of Quartz. (Verso, 2006) 17.

the time as the “ghetto.” As with other diasporic sense of the word, the ghetto was their designated space and their political agency could be exercised while they adhered to this racist notion of separate but equal. However, this community of exiles was able to traverse these redlined boundaries to witness a play about a character whose choices are revelatory to his audience yet remains a “nomad” to them and to himself. For reasons that I will support throughout this chapter, the idea of an exiled audience who can relate to the nomadic life even though they have never considered their circumstances to be so named, is the intriguing premise of this obscure play and its impact on a community at large. Considering the play in this manner is significant because it is in the transformative power of a localized system of knowledge that results in a consciousness of recognition even if a totalized inclusivity is not achieved still the discourse changes.

Hence, my project serves two purposes: 1) thematically it introduces the community to a same sex relationship through comedy and 2) the play provides the ingress out of the confined space of the ghetto and into parts of the city unknown. The combination frames my interrogation of a question of how a cultural artifact provided a progressive movement into other environs of body and mind that ironically had always been the transformative agent in the historiography of African Americans. Moreover, both result in a transformative engagement with what Saba Mahmood calls “autonomy and freedom.”<sup>7</sup> Mahmood’s reference is the feminists and their reading of women’s oppression in Muslim traditions but Mahmood theorizes beyond this premise in the same way I would propose this newfound self-empowerment amongst the ghettoized blacks of Los Angeles acquired a consciousness of its own agency. Some in the black community found the autonomy to go beyond the traditional limits, those set by the civic law and

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmood, Saba. Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 12.

those imposed by the community itself to venture beyond the predefined borders to what had been deemed a kind of forbidden zone. But more concisely this spatial practice or habitus<sup>8</sup> of this community created the opening for an intervention into normative African American male performance.

Thus the “event” performance that prompts activity in facilitating a community awareness of venues that initiates a conversation dealing with the black gay subject even when it appears to be presented in a manner that implies alacrity in its treatment. The play’s event positionality raises it to the level of serious contextualization as genealogy in black gay performance. Having recovered its historic uniqueness offers an opening into a different conversation in the black community about male gender representation and most specifically the bridge between the performatively hyper masculine black male image as staple black male representation from the late 1960s black cultural movements that echoes contemporaneously. As an archival object the play assumes an unusual positioning in the repertoire of black gay performance fitting in perfectly with Hayden Whites definition of the event as “unrepeatable”<sup>9</sup> In my research I found the initial enthusiasm for the play was not repeated when it was “updated” because of the rapid changes in the LGBT community from 1979 to a newly published 1997 version of the play. Lost in the wilderness of those intervening years the play gained very little notoriety while its venue acclaimed at the time of its heyday went into decline to the extent where it was erased from the Los Angeles landscape. As a student of Performance Studies, it is not the profundity or banality of what comprises the event but rather that it took place and its

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<sup>8</sup> “Habitus” should be considered as the ...”lifestyle, the values, the dispositions and expectation of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life.” I use the term as a lens through which to understand the black community’s sudden embrace even if temporarily a cultural entity that deals directly with a black gay male’s relationship with his parents.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, Diana. “ *Performance and/as History*”. *Drama Review* (50.1) 69.

impact on the community. It is even more interesting to discover that years later this “irrelevant” event provided solvency through which a community theatre was able to stay operative while other little theatres came and went.

Unequivocally, the black community made this play an event through their unflagging support and attendance for over seven years. The experience of the collaborators and audience defined the adapted play to their own needs and levels of comfort. In so doing, certain imbalances become consequential. The “event” does classify the play but that classification needs to be unpacked. Diana Taylor argues, “The “event”—unique, verifiable, with protagonistic social actors--also poses problems of objectivity because what gets constituted and recognized as an “event” what qualifies as verification, who emerges as the hero, and how that vision of the past gets archived is determined by the analyst”.<sup>10</sup> In *Norman*’s case, the black community becomes the verifier of the piece. The problems of objectivity surfaces when this audience decides the hero is not the black gay man but his father. Furthermore, beyond the recognition of the city as the venue becomes a place of homage to its founders, the play’s comedic twist on same-sex relationships is along with the venue is almost entirely erased.

Taylor’s offering is cautionary but not dismissive of the “event” Because of the changeability of the verifier, it is incumbent upon the historian to seek for further documentation. Taylor adds, “Perhaps this is where performance studies, as post disciplinary methodology comes in—

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<sup>10</sup>Taylor 69. Taylor interrogates the created archives that are usually verified as “events’ because of the non logocentric nature of the artifact. Her essay is significant for its defining of the “event” in relation to the archive and repertoire. I use her example to the extent that *Norman is That You?* had no precedent as a phenomenon with the black community considering its sexually variant themes.

illuminating that disciplinary blind spot that history cannot reach on its own.”<sup>11</sup> As this is a examination of the play is from a performances studies lens, I would suggest in this case the black community found the performance acceptable enough to assert their agency to ”invade” a Westside location and attend a play that entertained them, spoke to them if you will, at a site they made a part of their community even though it was actually miles away. Thus the incredible sociocultural movement surrounding the play’s existence legitimates its event moniker without the written documentation to accompany it. As the community’s attention waned, the archive of the event remains illustrative of an othered black male performance. As other historic immediacies began to unfold and overtake the black community such as the drug war and increasing incarceration rates amongst young black men, the introduction of the hip hop culture, the transiting community found ways to re-imagine their political space and cultural sensibilities according to their own autonomy.

If the civic leaders were not wholly ready to honor the production and its venue benefactors as heroes of the city, it says a great deal about civic aims in opposition to demographic designs. The play should have been seen to be the pivotal offering as an addition to the community’s tacit conversation around same sex attraction but more importantly in the midst of intense social movements, another perspective of black male performativity. Given its prescribed event status the play builds, reinforce and possibly redefined (even if it was momentary) black masculine images different from the image that emerged out of the 1960s. In addition to being an event, the play also acts as a civic marker of homecoming for marginalized communities of blacks and black gays. In looking at *Norman* I find a layered existence of exiles both in the actual text of the play and for the audience. It is a historic object perhaps invented for the black gay archive but it

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor 71.

inhabits a space of place and time where its temporality is more resonant than might be assumed at the first glance from someone attempting to find a work of measure from time between the Black Power movement and the advent of AIDS as markers having direct effect on the black male image, straight and gay.

### ***Norman is that You?* in Nomadic Stages**

*Norman is that You?* is about Norman Chambers. Norman has moved from his parent's home in Dayton Ohio to New York City, presumably to find other gay men, takes a job as a window dresser, and moves into an apartment in the Village with his boyfriend Garson. One day he receives an unexpected visit from his father, Ben Chambers, a dry cleaning business owner whose wife Beatrice has run off with his brother Julian. In the ensuing action, Ben discovers his son is gay, tries to hire a prostitute to prove his son is straight which offends Norman whereby Norman leaves his apartment. While Norman is away, Garson tries to get to know Ben. Soon Beatrice arrives at the apartment having left the brother-in-law. Ben delights in telling Beatrice their son is gay. She is predictably astonished. Norman returns to tell his parents and Garson that he has joined the Navy to "clear his head." The parents find that acceptable but to show there is no hard feelings, offer to take Garson back to Dayton with them (he accepts) but their true motive is to marry him off to some of the homosexual boys in their Dayton neighborhood and then find Norman (if he is still a homosexual after his stint in the Navy) a more suitable mate like a doctor or a lawyer.

Garson's line, "'I've never been to the Midwest. Do you think I'll like it?'"<sup>12</sup> is asked in earnest of his lover's parents. We are never told where Garson has come from in the play but it's

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<sup>12</sup> Sam Bobick, *Norman is that You?* Samuel French, Inc. (1969): 81.

odd that a gay white man has no idea if he will “like” the Midwest considering the play is set at the time of its writing in 1970 (later revised in 1997). In addition to his ignorance of the mid west and its treatment of homosexuals then and now, Garson’s cluelessness extends to the manipulation of his lover’s parents to remove him from their son’s life. This is supposed to be laughable. Garson doesn’t know he is being duped by his lover’s parents to get him away from their son, Norman. It may seem unbelievable to a contemporary audience the line is supposed to reflect his cluelessness as sissy circa 1970. Of course the answer is also reflective of the play’s acceptance and rejection of homosexuality implying a gradual understanding of the “lifestyle” as a guide to parents experiencing this dilemma. As an artifact representative of theatre with a gay theme, the play is meant to be exploitive and commercial. An insouciant manner adopted by some playwrights post Stonewall relegates the play to the lesser known gay themed plays illustrating its playwrights’ struggle with how to introduce homosexuality into mainstream drama. One solution was to define gay men for a straight audience using humor as a conscious tactic in the politically charged coming out process. Some plays have a way of insinuating themselves into the fabric of a community. How this entity becomes a place of commonalities is the subject of many of many different disciplines. Whether it is through a cultural, sociological, historical lens, the substantiation of the disparate elements that ultimately coagulate to form the “community” is effectively difficult to strictly define. But the performance and performativity of identities within the communal experience can be located in its mediated identifications: art, film and theatre.

The white playwrights took advantage of the American culture’s rapid evolution on sexual mores stemming from the Sexual Revolution and the emerging gay rights movement (not to mention the sudden introduction of gay themes on the off Broadway stage) to bring together a diverse grouping of Los Angeles into a small theatre venue that provided an expanded pedagogy



of what black theatre might be as well as acting as transformative agent in building a community that did not exist before this seeming inconsequential play was produced. Broadening the then known and familiar subjects of Black Power and the black working class to integrate themes of homosexuality and adultery as a counterfactual dramaturgical route to interrogate the shifting attitudes regarding sexual variance within the black community. Transposing a play about a white Jewish gay man and his family to a play about a black gay man and his family offered an obvious perfect vehicle to introduce this new conversation. The subsequent re-inscription of the title character Norman is particularly noteworthy because of the preponderance of representations of heterosexual black men until that time.

The play opened on Broadway in January of 1970. The characters were a white family but more specifically a white Jewish family. I mention this because it is important that the play's humor is derived by many other shows of its kinds with a similar different situation where the family has to accept the sudden change in their traditional living. The play's comedic tone is reminiscent of Neil Simon except unlike Simon, the humor is more situational than character driven. Lou Jacobi, cast as Norman's father, Ben Chambers, was most well known for his Jewish father roles in such plays as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Norman's mother, Beatrice, was played by Maureen Stapleton, another Broadway luminary known for her versatility and for her "Jewish mother" roles at this period of her acting career. So the audience was familiar with their lead actors and I assume comfortable with their acting choices that the play's gay theme didn't matter. Besides this was not *The Boys in the Band* or *Hair* therefore the sensibilities of a middle class theatre subscriber would not be offended to the extent where they would not re-subscribe.

However *Norman* closed after 12 performances. Clive Barnes of the NY Times wrote, "It is strange how tastes and standards change. It seems only yesterday that we had plays such

as *The Green Bay Tree* or even *Tea and Sympathy* which handled the then vexed subject of homosexuality with silk gloves... Here for the first time was a homosexual play aimed at the theater-party set. It is called *Norman, Is That You?* and it seems that it is him".<sup>13</sup> Aside from being the first modern comedy dealing with homosexuality on Broadway, the audience may not have been entirely ready to laugh at a "lifestyle" that was quickly advancing the conversation about same sex rights into their communities.

Still, the play had a nomadic life of its own afterwards. It went to Europe. The play was well received in Spain and France. Because of its farcical nature in dealing with homosexual, particularly the over the top character of Garson, it appears Europeans were more in tune with the stereotypical aspects of the character. The play opened in Paris and ran for five years.

*Norman* is an answer in a sense to what was at the time a rapidly transformative society. The exhausting movements of political identity had indeed brought some of the changes in cultural representation and in legal status for many of those marginalized groups who struggled for years to affect these differences. At the close of the 1960s, the LGBT movement had suddenly come into its own. As the society adjusted to this new gay visibility, the need to find answers in how to respond to a sudden openness about homosexuality found the discourse on the subject to be expanding at a rapid pace. First *The Boys in the Band* interjected gay men into the American mainstream theatre. It was evident by the play's popularity there was an audience ready to support this kind of theatre. *Norman* is a response to the first intimations of gay "lifestyle." But the play would be amongst the first coming out plays where the play's facile treatment had its advantages and disadvantages.

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<sup>13</sup> Clive Barnes, rev. of "Norman is That You?" New York Times Jan, 1970

It is important to recall that the changing the ethnicity of a cast particularly exchanging blacks for whites had been a common practice by the end of the 1960s. The trend had to do with maintaining a specific theatrical commodity such as the multiple Dolly Levis in *Hello Dolly* and finally an entire black production of the musical in 1967 starring Pearl Bailey. The idea continued into television with the Neil Simon play *Barefoot in the Park* played on stage with a white cast but adapted as a situation comedy with black actors playing the leads.<sup>14</sup> So cross casting was used to re-invigorate a familiar product. That the black audience now had the money to spend on theatre tickets was added incentive to mount these productions. The novel casting coupled with the right script could prolong the life of a play. *Norman's* artistic collaborators saw the opportunity and gave the consent to re-cast the play but without any changes to the actual script. The gamble of course proved successful. Consequently, it is the black version of *Norman* that is remembered.

As I researched the play's journey I discovered the event it represented was due in part to the place where it was presented. *Norman's* history is wrapped up in the history of the Ebony Showcase Theatre. The theatre was probably one of the first black-owned theatres in Los Angeles that produced plays that were not solely restricted to black issues. *Norman* was the most successful production during its 50 year operation. It is the story of what happens to the theatre after the "Norman" closed that provides further insight into the significance of what was thought to be an insignificant play's popularity. The theatre's demise along with the nefarious dealings of a city agency in tandem with a city elected official lends the narrative history of this less than outstanding comedy more weight than it could have ever dreamed.

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<sup>14</sup> The television version of Simon's play with black actors Scoey Mitchell and Tracy Reed ran for one season, 1970-1971. 10 April 2012 [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065276/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_3](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065276/?ref=fn_al_tt_3)

The play uses the idea of the “marriage” solution for Garson quite earnestly thereby being quite prescient in its innocent plot ploy; utilizing a heterosexual tradition to basically break up his relationship with their son. Further irony attests to Norman joining the Navy, probably the gayest of all of the American military branches. Of course, this is from hindsight and it cannot be confirmed if the audience caught on to any of this nuance. But if there were gay members of the audience the irony would not be lost on them.

The play’s authors, Ron Clark and Sam Brobrick, began their writing careers on television sitcoms like “That Girl” and “The Paul Lynde Show.” From the simplicity of the writing it is clear f the playwrights intended to capitalize on the shifting societal views on homosexuality yet the play really belongs to the father and his adjustment to the sexual revolution. I have no idea what the playwrights know about gay men but the gay men in the play resemble the prevailing stereotype typical of the era. The gay men are out but not particularly activist in their approach to the father’s unapologetic homophobia. It is from this point forward his acceptance of the reality of his son’s life becomes the central conflict in the play. The playwrights wants to have it several ways which weakens the actual moment of his parents’ acceptance because the acceptance is not seen as a true understanding rather it’s a manipulation by the parents who merely want to get him away from his swishy boyfriend. So the play’s underlying outcome is a word of caution to parents. Coming on the heels of the Stonewall Rebellion and the *Boys in the Band*, *Norman is that You?* only smirked at gays, which is probably why the New York audiences rejected it.

The play might have gone the way of many a bad New York play but it was revived in Paris, Spain and Scandinavia. If the play suffered in translation, it is not known but its political stumbling apparently was not as offensive to a European audience. The play’s resilience brought it to the attention of Nick Stewart. Stewart was given permission by the playwrights to produce

the play, only if it was never advertised in a mainstream newspaper. The only change the playwrights permitted was the casting of the Chambers family as black. The play opened on Los Angeles on August 17, 1971. It would run for seven years.

*Norman is that You?* received new life in its new skin. The idea to change a casts color in order to revive a play that had limited appeal at its debut was a gambit the theatre and film would utilize. The 1954 all black version of Otto Preminger's re-imagining of Bizet's opera of *Carmen* would become *Carmen Jones*, a starring vehicle for black singer Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte. The all black version of *Hello Dolly* with Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway would prove a tremendous success spawning a Dolly franchise. Thus the idea to stage a play with a homosexual as the main character and then to have the character played by a black actor was part inspiration and part gimmick. What is unique in the case of *Norman* is that the family was cast as black while the lover remained white. This was probably intentional on Stewart's part because of the way Norman's lover, Garson, is written. Norman could remain closeted and butch while Garson would be openly gay and effete. The black audience would come only if Norman was seen as masculine and not seen as having a true relationship with an equal. Besides, the effeminate queen was better for comedy. The play's earnest underlying message of tolerance but not acceptance could be marginalized by the production because the potential for a successful farce remained very high.

During its extensive stay at the Ebony, the mainstream critics came to see what all of the fuss was about. Los Angeles Times reviewed the play twice. Dan Sullivan thought the black cast gave the play "special charm." (Sullivan) Critic John Mahoney found the black cast gave the show a "warmth and fullness it probably doesn't deserve." (Mahoney) Oddly, not much was mentioned about the play's homosexual themes. Both critics referred to Norman and Garson as "the boys."

As with the New York Times review of the play, the editorial policy of the early 70s was not to linger on homosexual themes if the play didn't warrant that kind of criticism. The consensus of the New York and Los Angeles Times critics was the play was not worth delving too deeply into Norman's predicament.

What was the play's appeal then to a black Los Angeles audience in contrast to the New York audience? In 1971, the theatre culture of Los Angeles was not a well established. The number of small theatres existed to showcase actors for film work. The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion which would become the flagship theatre symbol for a post Watts Rebellion city was just beginning to build its reputation. In contrast, the Ebony Showcase theatre had been around since the 1950s serving a mostly black but diverse Los Angeles community. I cannot find reviews of its early productions but the respect of Nick and Edna Stewart gave them creditability with the black and white theatre goers. The idea of a comedy about homosexuality was a brilliant moment of timing. The emerging gay and lesbian movement met the new sophistication of the black middle class.

More importantly, it gave the black community a look at a "lifestyle" they knew little about. The subject of black homosexuality remains a taboo in the black family. The devastating impact of blackface minstrelsy on black manhood was countered with a hyper-masculinity. The celebrity of Mohammed Ali and the Black Panther Party reinforced the performativity of masculinity. Of course there had always been gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender in the black family but the generally it was an assumption that was not discussed. Unlike the closet paradigm was not an option in the black community because of a pervasive religious influence. A dis-identification with one's true identify, was strategy for survival in a hostile public sphere.

Even though the Ebony Showcase did not recognize it, every time “Norman” performed, the space became a counter public space, a space out of the normative.

Thus the audience saw a masculine gay black man with a nelly white boyfriend. The juxtaposition did not act a pedagogy for a better understanding of homosexuality but reified some of the prejudices against white homosexuals; white homosexuals seduced black men into their lifestyle, and could not be trusted. The play offered a good role model for a strong black father and just enough of a feminist statement for the independent spirit of the mother. Beatrice on learning of her son being gay says, “I accept it but I don’t like it.” Unfortunately this might have been the sentiment the black audience took home.

There would be plenty of effete black gay men Post Stonewall in theater, television and film but at this juncture, black men even gay black men had to be seen as masculine, the top. Why? The end of the 60s saw the accomplishment of blacks through their strenuous efforts in civil rights activism. Blacks changed their vernacular. It was about power. To be seen as ineffectual meant you were weak, an Uncle Tom and therefore useless. E Patrick Johnson, writes “For to be ineffectual is the most damaging that one can be in the fight against oppression.” Black men had to be masculine. The performativity of black masculinity was epitomized by the image of the members of the Black Panther Party. If there was any experimenting it was kept very discreet.

Being on the “down low” is a safe place for black men because of the legacy of societal attacks on their masculinity. Norman is representative of the down low lifestyle. Once the play’s white characters become black, even though not originally written as such, they assume an aura of hyper-masculinity recognized by the black community. However, this does not mean the inevitable confrontation between the homophobic black community (Norman’s father) and an

emergent homosexual movement (Norman and his white lover Garson) can be avoided. Norman is not only gay but in a live-in relationship with a white queen. The play steps around any soul searching for Norman and transfers the anguish to his father. It is not made clear if this inversion is the playwright's way of distancing himself from an understanding of what makes homosexuals or if the father's inner struggles just made for better comedy in that the entire tension around the coming out process could be defused by exchanging one interior examination for another. The decision to write Norman and the father this way though, does ask the parents in the audience to identify with one or the other. Instead of the father just leaving, he chooses to stay to confront his son's gayness.

Being a closeted black gay men is the central tension in the relationship between Norman and his father. Metaphorically the uneasy relationship is extended into the black audience as the "teachable moment" even as they laugh at the antics that manifest; the more Norman pretends he is straight, the more absurd the situations become and the more relaxed the black audience feels. In his essay on coming out as a universal strategy for the LGBT movement, Marlon Ross troubles the idea that the the closeted black gay man is somehow inherently self-hating. Ross<sup>15</sup> argues for black gays and lesbians, the coming out process does not necessarily provide the agency theorized by white queer activists. The process can be more complicated. Sometimes within the black family, gay identity is assumed but not discussed. Announcing one is gay would not necessarily change one's identity from closeted to liberated. Ross writes, "the dominance of the closet paradigm normalizes one mode of same-sexual identity by marginalizing other experiences and representation." The question that comes to mind then is "What's to become of the gay lovers?" Norman and Garson are set adrift at the play's end. Their home obliterated by

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<sup>15</sup> Marlon Ross, "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 161.



an intrusive heteronormativity. Norman's self-imposed exile promises a rootlessness' he has come to...accept? His rather flip decision to join the military will have drastic consequences for the window dresser within him. Garson is being taken away from the safe gay friendly environment of New York City. When Garson wonders aloud, "What will I do in Dayton?" The Mid-West gays in the audience must have shuddered. Indeed what will he do in Dayton? Unwittingly, the playwrights' "happy ending" imposes a circularity that actually returns the play to the its opening scenes of homeless themes but this time it is not the parents who must adjust, it is the gay men. The two gay men have not won a sense of identity and pride but have been duped into leaving "home"; Norman to the army and Garson to Ohio. As a result they remain in exile. Una Chaudhuri says exile contrasts with home as "both the *condition for* and *obstacle to* psychological coherence."<sup>16</sup> In other words, this means a further distancing from their gay identity, then which was their relationship with each other was built on. Norman's identity as a gay man will be erased by the military. Ironically his black identity will be re-enforced by the racism within the military establishment. Norman's parents think Garson will find commonality and companionship with the gay boys in the neighborhood. There is no evidence that the playwright's ever considered those "boys" are probably doing their damndest to get out of Dayton. Garson will find himself alone, isolated and away from an established gay community.

Since the play ran for so long, it can be assumed word of mouth was exceptionally positive. There must have been many spectators who came back again and again. The play ran congruently with a popular black situation comedy. "Good Times" a spinoff of the even more popular and at times controversial, "All in the Family". "Good Times" dealt with problems living in the black ghetto. The father was played by John Amos who also originated the role of the

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<sup>16</sup> Una Chaudhuri, Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 8. The italics within the quote are hers.

father in *Norman is that You?* in the re-imagined Los Angeles production. It is perhaps due to Norman's success that producer Norman Lear saw Amos' work and cast him. Given Norman's situation comedy structure, a 1970s Los Angeles audience was comfortable with its unreality. Indeed this enduring format would catapult many situation comedies into ratings paradise because the American audience was somehow entranced with serious issues in their own lives being lampooned with mediated images. However, the reality check was already occurring about them.

### **The Ebony Showcase Theatre**

There is a video on YouTube profiling a Los Angeles cultural landmark where black theatre history was made. The founder of the Ebony Showcase Theatre, Nick Stewart, looks out at the camera in 1997 America as the interviewer questions him about a space that meant so much to so many theater practitioners but in particular, black theatre artists, in a weary voice as if recalling glory days that seem to be dreamlike and yet very real.<sup>17</sup> The city's disregard and disrespect insinuates itself into his short monologue on the theatre as a place of where black actors could work but also a school of acting training for young people of color as well as a venue for live musical performances.

Part of the success of the 1960s Black Arts Movement was in securing funding for black theatre. Though this would be a two edged sword in that the funding would be generous only for a period of a few years. Establishing these theatres in black communities was inspired by black cultural activists. Writing in the early 1970s about the number of black theatres in California, Margaret Wilkerson tells us, "W.E.B. DuBois' insistence that a black theatre must be "near us"

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<sup>17</sup> "Ebony Showcase theatre was the shape of things to come..." [You Tube](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgAnRIGCy7A) 10 Apr 2013 <  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgAnRIGCy7A>>

has become an important tenet of these groups. The transformation of the drab, deteriorating buildings of the inner cities into functional and attractive theatres is basic to the theatre experience and is part of its magic. The building itself becomes a symbol of resourcefulness, ingenuity, a place of contact, of reinforcement and hope-in themselves, significant images to project.”<sup>18</sup> Many black arts groups took advantage of federal funding and were able to secure space for their ambitions. Sometimes there were dance academies, art studios or acting workshops where theatre pieces were put together. It is out of this atmosphere of change and solidarity within the black arts community that the Ebony theatre was able to thrive. Outside of the immediate black community where the Watts Theatre project flourished, the Ebony became the outlying space dedicated to black theatre practitioners. The major element that defined the play as an event derives from its longevity in active production. This means that the play excited enough of an enthusiastic response to support the theatre space monetarily. This is not as insignificant as it might seem as the funding for small venues that had seen federal funding in the late 1960s saw that funding evaporate by the mid 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Nick and Edna Stewart were able to buy the property that became the Ebony Showcase Theatre, most likely due to Nick Stewart’s celebrity and money, in 1950.

Nick Stewart was one of the few African American actors who worked steadily throughout the 1940s. His career began in earnest as a comedian where he performed at the legendary Apollo Theatre. Being entrepreneurial, Stewart was amongst the most dedicated and visionary of the black theater/film artists of the period. As work for blacks in the industry was sporadic, the income could hardly be sustained to buy real estate for the express purpose of

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Wilkerson, “Black Theatre in California.” *TDR* 16.4 (Dec 1972):28

<sup>19</sup> Mike Sell, “The Black Arts movement” *African American Performance and Theater History* (Oxford University Press, 2001).63.

building a theatre company let alone sustain the company with the required equity pay. However, Stewart's film career provided enough of a salary for his securing a space in West Los Angeles to realize his dreams. His business acumen provided the foundation for a focused effort to start a black performance venue. When his film career seemed that it had ebbed, he pursued work in television where he hit his stride in a controversial radio show adapted for television called *Amos and Andy*.

Stewart was part of the cast of *Amos and Andy* which ran from 1951-1953. Originally the show's title characters who were supposed to be black were played by white actors in black voice. Once aired the show was roundly denounced by members of the black community and NAACP as racist. Yet, Stewart was able to earn more money than he had ever made in his movie roles. He began to look for property where he could start a theater in the black community. At that time, the few black theaters in Los Angeles produced strictly black dramas and comedies. Black theater producers could not always secure the rights to plays outside of the "Negro" category. Stewart opened the Ebony Showcase Theater with the aim of breaking through that barrier to bring a wide array of nontraditional drama and comedy to the black community. In an online letter lauding her husband's serious intent to bring "humanitarian" plays to the black community, Edna Stewart says:

In the early days they had difficulty with play leasing houses in securing rights to produce plays that were not listed under the category "Negro plays." They would go directly to the authors or to their agents -- In this way they were able to present Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," "The Seven Year Itch", by George Axelrod, "The Moon Is Blue" (Otto Preminger for F Hugh Herbert), "The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd," (Anthony Newley/Leslie

Bricuse) and "Lost of the Stars," the author, Maxwell Anderson, visited their production in 1955.<sup>20</sup>

Stewart was able to get the rights to these diverse plays by going directly to the playwright for their permission. Interesting in their winter season of 1955, *Tea and Sympathy* was included with *A Streetcar Named Desire* so the Stewarts were not hesitant to produce plays with a homosexual subtext. Despite the ecumenical repertoire the playhouse became a staple in the black community adding jazz evenings featuring prominent music artists of the day. With the help of his wife, Edna, Stewart started a dramatic academy for black youngsters. The success of the academy received national attention. The academy's grant money kept the theatre a vibrant center for the black community during turbulent times of the Civil Rights Movement.

Of course, *Norman's* success has to be partially credited to the changing demographics and property buying laws for minorities in Los Angeles after World War II. The city was notoriously red lined in the 1930s and 1940s, subject to powerful white homeowner's groups, thus every ethnic group had their own neighborhood which they confined. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis writes, "Until the Supreme Court finally ruled against restrictive covenants in 1948, white homeowners groups had ample sanction in the law"<sup>21</sup>. Demographically the neighborhood surrounding the theater was the perfect blend of liberal Jewish white and black bourgeoisie. Washington Boulevard is one of those long stretches of street that runs east and west, from the ocean through downtown Los Angeles and beyond to the oldest part of the city. As one travels from the east to the west, the neighborhoods become increasingly affluent. To the south is Addams Boulevard which had been the home of many famous black Angelinos who owned

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<sup>20</sup> Stewart, Edna. "Memories of the Nick Stewart's Incredible Life." [AmosAndy.com](http://www.amosandy.com) 10 Mar 2013  
<<http://www.amosandy.com/Review%20Articles/Letter%20by%20Edna%20Stewart.htm>>

<sup>21</sup> Davis 182.

Craftsman homes. The theatre sat amidst a number of ‘black businesses in the 4700 block of Washington Boulevard. The neighborhood might have been called Crenshaw adjacent which would ultimately become the locus of the upper and middle class black community. Set in the vortex of the city’s most curious and safe populations, the Ebony attracted a demographic that was had been heal at arms length from each other by cultural and social and racist politics so that their fraternization would ultimately form allies. A black policeman who ran for mayor in the early 1970s Tom Bradley would use this coalition to his advantage and would re-elected mayor over the next twenty years. Such was the significance of the Nick and Edna Stewart’s ambition.

Fragmentation of the narrative marking boundaries becomes more important in the evolution of the environs that facilitated a racial and cultural mixing at the theatrical venue is what De Certeau would refer to as “a narrative activity, even if it is multiform and no longer unitary, thus continues to develop where frontiers and relations with space abroad are concerned.”<sup>22</sup> From this diversity of ethnicities, a disguised seemingly heterogeneous space allowed for a number of new narrations to emerge. Unlike the Watts space which held strictly to the guidelines of the Black Arts Movement, one of the tenets being their art was strictly for the black audience, location put the exiles in a collective space where the reality check could play itself out to a polyvalent outcome. The Ebony provided a space for blacks with a new freedom of mobility. It was tantamount to going uptown. The possibilities of expanding culturally were now available to some members of the black community. The neighborhood was in a comfortable location for blacks and whites to mix. So if there were gays in the mix so much the better.

Once transferred to a black family the implications of universality become much more fraught. Cited as a specific location of politics inside of the Post Black Power establishment, the

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<sup>22</sup> De Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life. (Berkeley: University of California, 1984) 125.

play's reductive aspects situate it outside of the black community because of the self-contradictory nature of the black community embrace and rejection of the homosexual subject. Even though the play's setting acts as home for Norman, in reality he is displaced within and without of his own identified community. There is a resemblance that extrapolates in a post colonial reading of blacks in the diaspora. Fanon writes, "The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little sustenance. At last I had been recognized, I was no longer a zero."<sup>23</sup> Fanon's vexed interrogation of ontology of black existence in their marginalized positionality is an apt analogy to Norman's sudden visibility. Though it may be reductive in its approach, the double casting creates a hybrid of heterosexual representation. His blackness, homosexuality and I would venture to say a conservative attachment to his upbringing which decides more in favor of commonality with his black audience than the play originally intended.

Furthermore, as the audience had to travel outside of their designated Los Angeles cityscape boundaries to participate in yet another show of solidarity while sitting in a Westside theatre albeit a small theatre. The idea of movement beyond their borders is an exhilarating and terrifying venture for any marginalized group. So the power of oneness and the poetic idea of the exile's ambient understanding of the colonial's that have the legal power to send them back into the ghetto is a momentary escape. The theatre becomes their theatre, their home away from home. It doesn't matter the distance or in this case the subject matter, what I am suggesting is that the play becomes the *raison d'etre* that undergirds a liberatory gesture. It is a phenomenological movement of emotion, timing and aesthetic ideal.

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<sup>23</sup> Fanon, Frantz. Black

Besides the fact that Norman is gay, his conformist representation would have been acceptable to the black audience. It would allow them to feel comfortable in his presence and to relate to the closeted situation as the pragmatic choice for black men who were not effeminate. That his partner whom he seems to “like” is as much an oddity to him as he is to the black audience would have been as equally comfortable. There had been some engagement with the homosexual “life style” in writings by Eldridge Cleaver and then playwright LeRoi Jones. The sissy was a familiar trope in the black community. The likes of James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin and their effete mannerisms had been cause for homophobic alarm and warranted straight black meant to comment. Their commentary was more than not often to disapprove to disparage the black homosexual as being seduced by white western decadence. Among their arguments was that there was no word in the African language for “homosexual”<sup>24</sup> and this was a white man’s disease. So the idea of Norman being with an obvious fairy was both humorous and something to avoid. As long as the white homosexual remained the source of the joke, the black audience could relax.

Lastly, but maybe most important was the element of humor that made the play an enjoyable respite from the tense quotidian existence of ghetto life. That might seem to be facile but the laughter elicited by a simple play that asked for the black family to remain together even in the face of homosexual choices was again a new experience for the black audience. As the urban drams had reached satiation, the lightness that Norman proffered was welcomed. The play’s humor though it may not seem to be “black” humor has much in common with its originary Jewish family. The humor comes out of marginalization and despair. But it is also

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<sup>24</sup> The authenticity of black gayness was vigorously debated amongst many black intellectuals in the 1970s including Dr. Frances Cress Welsing in *The Isis Papers* (Third World Press, 1991).. [Spunk.org](http://www.spunk.org) 15 May 2013 <  
<http://www.spunk.org/texts/pubs/lr/sp001715/isispap.html>>



forthright in its approach, telling like it is—a catchphrase in the black community in the 1960s. So the the seemingly absurd décor, Garson’s queeny mannerisms, a frustrated and closeted black man who is discovered by his parents (particularly his father) sets in motion a theatrical experience for black people that they obviously reveled in.

### **Los Angeles Black/Gay**

Neighborhoods around the location of the Ebony theatre on Washington Boulevard had a nascent black gay community. Within a 5 mile radius of the theatre the black gay disco Jewels Catch One would become a major black gay community center on Pico Boulevard and almost around the corner from the Ebony on Jefferson Boulevard, the Minority AIDS Project<sup>25</sup> would be established a block away on Jefferson Boulevard to answer the needs of the black and Latino communities and the AIDS epidemic. It was at the height of the disco era where gay men and particularly black gay men found a unique opening into a reality check of their own. Proximity becomes vital in the comfort zone of the marginalized. As with the more formal boundaries of the ghetto in South Los Angeles, the black gay community removing itself from these strict red lining realities and additionally from the white gay community of West Hollywood where the discrimination against them was more pronounced than in the black community, Norman unique placement would find itself within a few years of its popularity, a black constituency in its midst.

Whereas there had been a vibrant albeit underground gay scene in Los Angeles particularly associated with the entertainment industry since the film community became

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<sup>25</sup> In 1977 Motown Records would release a song by Carl Bean called “I was Born this Way.” The song would become a gay anthem. Later Carl Bean would be ordained a bishop in the Episcopal Church and founded the Minority AIDS Project in 1985.

prominent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> It is on the backdrop of shifting neighborhoods at the intersection of feminist and LGBT movements on the heels of racialized boundaries that a black couple from the edges of the entertainment business took a chance and debuts a work with the first black gay male character in the city's history. In the years after World War II a discrete but concerted effort was initiated to organize against LAPD harassment. The crusade was mostly organized around white gays. Gays of color were present but the city's historic segregation of communities discouraged traversing community boundaries. The common problem for all gays would be in the area of meeting other members of their persuasion outside of their homes.

Consequently Los Angeles had an established an organized white gay community by the time *Norman is that You?* was staged at the Ebony in 1971. The black gay community was also beginning to establish itself in the black middle class Crenshaw neighborhood. The Crenshaw district had become over time the area of Los Angeles where black doctors, lawyers and business people built huge homes. The community itself was not the poorer blacks of what was known then as South Central Los Angeles. So the blacks in the Crenshaw area could access the Ebony Showcase theatre by car whereas the poor blacks would have had to take public transportation,

Crossing borders that have suddenly become porous for those who have been walled in is the image of black mobility in post Black Power America. It is an image that requires those in exile an expected welcome that is soon realized will not be forthcoming therefore the surveillance on them and their movements are going to be intensified as was the case for blacks traveling toward the affluent areas of the city. This goes for black gays as well. Their existence/non existence had

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<sup>26</sup> In their *Gay L. A.* (2006), Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons cite black Hollywood historian Donald Bogles' references to parties given by black gay entertainment agents as early as early as the 1930s.pp 45-46

been confined to the places in the black community that were shelters for their identifications with what blacks saw as embarrassing at best and dangerous at worse.

The black community chose not to participate in the Gay Civil Rights movement. In fact, many blacks saw no correlation between their Civil Rights Movement and the gay struggle for rights. In this regard blacks held to a belief that most Americans agreed to when a discussion of injustice and freedoms became the topic of conversation. As a recently liberated people in the broadest sense of the term, blacks were just becoming accustomed to a new visibility and along with that visibility a sense of responsibility to guard their hard fought for progress. While other movements of political identity borrowed liberally from the strategies and tactics of the civil rights movement there was little cross over as far as the black community was concerned.

However, in 1972, when Jewel Thais-Williams opened the city's first black gay and lesbian disco, Jewel's Catch One. The subaltern black gay and lesbian community now had their own place to congregate. The Catch One is located on Pico Boulevard to the east of Crenshaw Boulevard; the dividing line between eastside and Westside. So while a play about a closeted black gay man plays to sell out audiences to the west of Crenshaw, a black gay disco thrives to the east.

In staging the play at this particular intersection, Norman's anomalous marker is reflective of the home and exile dichotomy placement of black identity politics at the end of the Black Power Era. It might be assumed the radicalized approach to living in America was the paradigm guide left as the legacy of that movement but I would differ in that the theatre of black America became more black identified as it sought answers to questions of a home as derived from "homeland". In conflict with this desire was a real outside knowledge of American history (a history that would

cherry pick amongst its more outstanding events to emphasize a growing homogenization) while the theatre retained much of its African American cultural identity from the Black Arts Movement. The subsequent rise of the play has much in common with its demise of the Black Power movement. A different lens on the black community offering empowerment but in the course of events the power is stripped away and the displacement or exile provides an intersecting commonality. Una Chaudhuri reflects on exile in the poeticized 19<sup>th</sup> century sense as the plays of Chekhov and Strindberg provide. Norman offers a contemporized illustration of exile as the place of further knowledge and knowingness that the characters in those playwrights' canon were unable to access. Chaudhuri quotes Edward Said's writings on exile.

Just as the title suggests a question of incredulity and at the same times a grudging recognition, it is not meant rhetorically. The questioner wants an answer but fears the answer will only confirm their worst suspicions.

### **Nomad Norman and Exiles as Audience**

I weigh the “nomadic” Norman against the inertia of heteronormative black male image and even the very few black gay male characters on stage during this period. There are some important differences that stand out. For sure the play is stereotypical in its portrayals of gay men but unlike another black gay character of the same era, namely Bernard from Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, Norman is in a relationship with a white gay man. Sam Bobick's *Norman is That You?*<sup>27</sup> sought to capitalize on a lifestyle that was suddenly in conversation. The play he wrote though failed in one venue and for one demographic oddly found renewed vitality and resilience in another, once it was transformed to a black “situation.” Ironically, Norman found

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<sup>27</sup> *Norman is That You?* opened on Broadway in 1970. It closed after 13 performances. However it ran simultaneously with *The Boys in the Band* which was still running off Broadway.

resonance with a community that had been redlined into a ghetto that was for all intent and purposes viewed as hostile territory by most white Angelenos. However, with the playhouse where Norman was produced was the space between and betwixt ethnic and cultural and sexual orientation differences. In fact this area of Los Angeles was on the verge of becoming an extended black neighborhood where black gays would find a place to call “home” because of the proximity of the play and the disco Catch One.

But this Norman has to be seen in as play that invites travel metaphors; traveling from east to west coast, audiences that travel beyond their delineated borders and an event where the reality check of raciality and sexuality travels across normativity and a momentary transgressive place acts as a pedagogical experience opening to possibilities of transformation. Thus Norman becomes about changing the minds of an emerging middle class generation of black men and women from their rigid concepts in relation to a fluid state of masculinities. As the black men coming of age in the Civil Rights movement and then the Black Power Movement and the decline of these movements find themselves betwixt and between the escalating tensions between black and white Los Angeles. Why this seemingly innocuous play found an audience that kept the event in motion by word of mouth saw for the first time perhaps a black and gay motif which would move the topic of conversation toward something more inclusive.

Furthermore, why were there were no copycat plays to follow a comedic structure that proved bankable? Certainly, a commodified entity that generated its own audience must have been appealing to the industry practitioners for a play produced within view of the Hollywood sign? Why neither black nor white playwrights would attempt another Norman is intriguing. These hermeneutics prompt my curiosity focused on the absence of a spate of Normans informs the discourse centered on an emerging historicity within the black population of Los Angeles as well

as new strategies of assimilation from the black and black gay communities, This chapter on hyper masculine performativity and black gay performance asks if the past notions of black masculinities was altered by this communal theatre experience and if so how was this newfound idea even though not collectively embraced in toto was able to permeate the black community's understanding of Afro queerness as reality check.<sup>28</sup>

*Norman is that You?* is as an example of the nomad never finding the home it is seeking. It is responsible for galvanizing a community into an altered awareness of other possibilities of black male responses. But the nomad as defined as the “wanderer” may be a catalyst for other ideas once it has entered the alien community and allowed to set down stakes if only for a fleeting moment. Once inside the borders, the narration begins a change. It is clearly seen in two ways: adaption of the play to a black cast without changing a word of the play and also the newly introduced themes of a humor and homosexuality suddenly introducing a community's taboo subject into this new openness treatment. The play acting as itinerant comedy is verified by its history of traveling productions from New York to Europe and then to Los Angeles. Taking with it a transmobility of identity and identifications, we can see from a contemporary perspective the range of change and the ultimately the limitations of the nomadic form. Once the novelty wears off the community tends to revert back to the familiar and the comfortable. The transitory modalities of being swept away particularly by the comedic approach does make one reflect on what is missing. Norman's humor was only effective as the black and LGBT movements collided. Once both sides seem to achieve some progress there paths diverged and the old

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<sup>28</sup> Harry Elam, “Reality Check.” Critical Theory and Performance. (University of Michigan Press, 2007) 173.

prejudices and suspicions crept back into their separate identification. Why are we laughing at this situation becomes the question?

As black humor became more popular during the 1970s, the entire oeuvre of identification transformed the black audience, too. They wanted to see more of themselves and less of whites. In fact with the humor of Richard Pryor and Redd Foxx (he would play the father in the filmed adaptation of the play) their direct confrontation and engagement with American racism acted as alchemy for the pervasive discrimination that lingered after the 1960s power movements.

Norman's gentile humor seemed non-black after a while. This phenomenon did manifest as black comedy took hold in the popular imagination. Pryor's concerts and films made him a celebrity beyond what could be accomplished by a black comedian in the 1960s. His brand of comedy became the envy and epitome of what every comedian, regardless of ethnicity wanted to achieve.

From this perspective taboo themes were now discussed openly. Subjects such as sex, religion and politics challenged the audience to question what they were being forced to accept. Black audience had become used to being spoon fed the black drama with its urban themes and now the black comedy with its urban themes. Norman did not fit either category. The appeal had been its strange setting and the opportunity for the audience to laugh at homosexuals without being threatened by them. What became obvious after a while was the perceived class difference between the white gay community and the black and gay communities.

Black comedians tended to emphasize this discrepancy. Following this blunt assertion of difference, the real anger and virulent homophobia became themes in black humor. Increasingly the emphasis on black masculinity took precedence in comedic dialogue. Black comedians found an audience from within the black comedy that had lost some of the memento from the Black

Power movements as the nation-state manipulated its way back into the control of black people's live. As their exiled existence re-established itself, the black comedian found material in the waywardness and acted as the wayfarer during this pivotal ear. Boundaries were redrawn. In a sense the absolute rejection of the Western aesthetic manifested by the Black Arts movement which sought to liberate black artists for the black community had opened a debate amongst black men about authenticity. Philip Brian Harper writes, "debates over and claims to 'authentic' African American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African American masculinity."<sup>29</sup> So the discourse surrounding black masculine performativity gained a distinct examination and judgment of homosexuality from black humor that was strictly at odds with the humor of deception from Norman is That You?

The producers of Norman were not allowed to make changes to the script. The black cast was merely substituted as surrogates for the originals. But in doing so the play's gradual acquiescence of Norman was not diluted but adopted a new meaning as Norman's words left the mouth of the black actor. The play could not celebrate being gay as many of the gay comedies of the early 70s such as Terrance McNally's "The Ritz" but instead illustrated a hypothetical for the black audience that transported them into an atmosphere of the forbidden where they could laugh at the unimagined reality the play actually did purport.

*Norman* is not an extraordinary play by any means. In the canon of contemporary queer theatre, Norman does not register. The play is a farce written with characters that are broadly drawn where the nuances of sexual variance is not so much explored as exploited to the degree that the gay characters assume clichés the gay community began to object to. Yet even though

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<sup>29</sup> This quote is taken from E Patrick Johnson's chapter "Appropriating Blackness" from his examination of black gayness, *Manifest Faggotry*. He cites Harper in an interrogation of black homophobia particularly as black subjectivity becomes more and more mediatized. (p. 50)



the narrative is over the top and not to be seen as realistic, the premise asserts a plausible scenario given the play's limited objectives and skewed perspective. Though it is farcical, it is a coming out play representative of the period that focuses not on the closeted gay man coming out but his parents. Norman concerns itself with the destruction of the family through homosexual relationship and the introduction of adultery as counterpart. In creating a once Jewish son, now played as a black gay son, the play is a response to the only other high profile gay play namely *The Boys in the Band*. The angst of the homosexual "life style was still very new to the theatre scene in 1971, Norman becoming a black family makes for a combination of sexualized themes and audience akin to the definition of the "reality check."

### **Reality Check and the Black Community**

What elements would could there be in a relation to the event and the reality check? The idea of a "reality check" as proposed by African American theatre theorist Harry Elam finds a continuity in African American experience through pivotal historic events that galvanized the black community into a confrontation with its past, a confrontation that leads to an active transformation in social and civic status. These events were so shocking in nature that the response though initially resonated with the black community cause a chain reaction amongst other populations. Elam describes a reality check as "a moment that traumatically ruptures the balance between the real and the representational."<sup>30</sup> Elam's examples are in specific eras in the electronic age roughly beginning in the 1950s with the widespread use of television as images became repeatable at a much more accelerated rate than the culture was accustomed to. Addressing the enduring injustice for blacks in America, he begins his thesis on reality check with the murder of fourteen year old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955. Till was kidnapped by

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<sup>30</sup> Elam 173.

white men while visiting relatives in Mississippi. A northern boy who knew nothing of the strict white/black social codes of the South, he was made to answer to the naively uttered endearment to a white woman at a local store. His horrendous torture and death prompt his mother to leave his casket open at his funeral so those who wished to pay their respects could see the unimaginable violence of his murder. A black magazine published a picture of Till's face that shocked and horrified those who saw it. This kind of electronic accessibility undergirds Elam's premise. It was the reality check for black people in the moment where the racial conversation was on the brink of becoming much more expanded beyond the bounds of decorum and formality in its traditional strategy for a more assertive activism in the black community.

It is the break from a traditional way of thinking that causes a re-thinking of strategies and more significantly the projection of an image that relied too heavily on the passive. Ironically passive resistance would become the centrifugal force of the Civil Rights movement where a forward push would be the link to other movements in the 1960s. The black community would be galvanized by this outrage where a very real threat to their survival would act as the guidepost for an active participation against such inhumane treatment.

An act of senseless violence, this reality check was seen as the final straw in a lawless treatment of black men, leading to a heightened sense of the erosive societal bombardment against black maleness which in turn found a prescriptive antidote in the proliferation of the virtuous black male spearheaded by the Civil Rights movement's accelerated momentum driven by the black church and its leaders. As the 1970s opened upon new possibilities of assimilationism, the black community sought ways to improve their lives as promised by the anew attitude of black pride. As the tactical movement of visibility became more and more embedded in a mainstream American culture, the idea amongst blacks was to take full advantage of this new found

exposure. Supporting black arts where black people were the focus of the artistic undertaking had its advantages and disadvantages.

The question is, what could a play like *Norman is that You?* offer the black community considering its themes of sexual variance were still an unexplored area of early 1970s mainstream black theatre? Elam says, “As reality checks induce a series of performances, they also produce new audiences and audiences within audiences. They function in dichotomous, symbiotic inversions of witnessing and participation, impotence and action.”<sup>31</sup> The first hint of an advantage might be found in the play’s setting. The play is staged in a middle class home, in the case of Norman and Garson, it is an apartment assumed to be furnished by Garson’s stereotypical white gay aesthetic but something the black audience would have found familiar being their homes were either decorated in a subdued manner but decorated with the aesthetic tastes of an emerging middle class sensibility. I mean the overly decorated gay home shared by the two gay men is scripted this way as being comedic but black homes with the money to decorate w shared a common need to be effusive in their new found wealth. The dandyish approach then is something to laugh at but holds a familiar setting for those who thought of themselves as able to have these things too. It would not have escaped a black man gay or straight as their home represented a step up in class even though theatrically the audience can see the tasteless decor as probably white and gay. I cannot emphasize this enough as *Norman* is a play about the middle class whether performed by a white or black cast: middle class status had been so disparaged by black playwrights of the 1960s as being bourgeois that seeing a black man in a setting that represented his progress which surrogated the progress of all blacks was an asset.

### **The 1960s Impact on Black Gay Male Image**

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<sup>31</sup> Elam 179.

The arc of black masculinities from the early 1960s to the late 1960s is a remarkable study in transformation. If the decade began with the s probing but still sanitized portrayals of black men sought more nuanced renderings but were firmly rooted in the normative. Differences in urban settings were generally the interested memes pervasive throughout the period. The confrontation between old and new image was immediate and dominated the dramaturgy of black playwright (mostly black men) until the end of the decade. However, the impression was intense and reverberant. The plays themselves ranging from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) where the black male assertiveness is seen to be corrosive from within the heavily matriarch paradigm to Lonnie Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1965) where again the audience is confronted with generations of black men who are seen to experience their lives circumscribed by a need for solidarity are repetitive themes that teleologically claim this new paradigm.

Interrogating the misrepresentation of the black male image and its impact on any variance of a hyper masculine subjectivity, it is important to contextualize the circumstances and fraught history surrounding black men in stage portrayals. I do not intend this chapter to comb through the entire history of black men in drama but the more contemporary history I feel is the best illustration of an intense scrutiny of the black male image and the concerted effort by black artists (male and heterosexual) to re-image the black male as all powerful and decidedly heterosexual. Because of the shifting consciousness of black people in the mid 1960s where the conciliatory and assimilationist mode of operating the a civil rights movement, the radicalized transformation came through a series of liberation movements in the African diaspora adopted by black intellectuals and a younger generation of black student activists such as Stokely Carmichael. This student movement was responsible for re-claiming and altering the black male

image where the hyper-masculine would be the resulting re-configuration. From the student movement, many emerging black playwrights would fashion a new black theatre that was not beholden to Western doctrines at all. This was the beginning of the Black Arts movement.

Consequently, the Black Arts Movement had a pronounced and resilient effect on the black male image particularly the place of the black sissy in black theatre. It appeared at the time of the convergent Black Civil Right and Black Power movements. Its aim was to found a new black theatre with a consciousness of race pride and a look to the black liberation projects in the African diaspora. However in keeping with the aims of this chapter, there are significant difference between the black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. The main element of the Black Power meant to exploit the white media while the Black Arts Movement meant to disengage with the while media entirely. This is to say, the black Arts movement was to reject European Western aestheticism for black aesthetics<sup>32</sup>. Amongst its aims was to fashion a black theatre dramaturgy for a black audience where the rejection of European ideas was basis by which to deem the new black theatre endeavors as authentic or lacking in its capaciousness. The works of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins are prominent voices in the movements. Their plays such as the *Dutchman* (1964) and *Goin' A Buffalo* (1966) respectively were innovative in that they replaced the “assimilationist Negro” of the 1950s black drama with an assertive black male, sexually confident bordering on the hyper masculine, a hero for the Black Power movement. The plays themselves were urban in setting and delved into the real life experiences of blacks who had been subject to generations of discrimination and racism. These plays were decidedly male orientated and heteropatriarcal in their subjectivity. A performativity of masculinity was the dominant image and anything other than heternormative was either ridiculed or shown to be the

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<sup>32</sup> Sell: 56.

weaker choice with devastating results such Baraka's *The Toilet* (1964). Baraka's play confronts homosexual behavior amongst young black men even more homophobic than his play *The Baptism* which features a character simply called "Homosexual."

Threatened by a misrepresented past, and an uncertain future even with the progress made by both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, the developing hyper masculine black male came with the new visibility condoned by the hip establishment. The virtuous Negro is considered bourgeois in the parlance of the an energized and radicalized black student movement where the religious underpinnings of the image of Martin Luther King's valiant crusader for equal rights gave way to the more insistent and resistant militancy of Malcolm X. It is also important to note when there is a generational change in thinking and seeing the world through historic events such as the Civil Rights movement, the black artist of the 60s were in rebellion against what their parents had endured. The plays of Leroi Jones (later Baraka) point to the intellectual and African diasporic movements that sought a liberationist ideology that should be applied to the cultural arts as well as the political awakenings.

This kind of politically identified and intrapersonal plays focused on the black experience was applicable to comedies as well. In the early 1970s the black comedian was just beginning to find exposure on television. But as with the relatively small number of black actors working in any frequency or high visibility, the recognizable black comedians were as limited. However in the early 1970s there were popular black comedies in the theatre such as Charlie L Russell's *Five on the Black Hand Side*<sup>33</sup>. Russell's play is focused on the black father saw a change in the black family dynamic where the wife is outspoken and the teen age children are rebelling against

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<sup>33</sup> Russell's play was made into a film in 1973 acquiring somewhat of a cult status because of its straight forward humor in depicting a dysfunctional black family.

tradition. Though the play was not a huge success outside of the black community, the black audience found themselves in the changing structure of their family where the old tropes of the “family” being the virtuous domain for the black male and female was seen to be complicated and problematic but presented with humor could be the conduit through which their community could thrive. Again the idea of seeing oneself on stage, speaking one’s own vernacular and understanding the irony and absurdity in transgressive behavior within the black family structure was new and vital at this juncture.

But in the theatre of color, patronage is responsible for a production’s box office. The black community overwhelmingly supported “Norman is That You? For seven years. In their obvious fascination with the subject matter, the black audience found no aversion to promoting the new ideas espoused by this simplistic comedy. In the case of a mediated performance what becomes acceptable might depend on the community as a whole to absorb and then adapt to the change thus making the experience transformational or the community can accept a faction of the change and slowly allow it to seep into its DNA. With theatrical performance and the black community the situation becomes much more representative of the latter than the former.

There is an artifact held at the Los Angeles Library in downtown Los Angeles that is evidence of a play that was the longest running play in the history of the city. Norman is that you came to Los Angeles. The artifact is a program from the play. It is light blue in color, probably printed at a local printing shop in different colors over its seven year run. It is nothing detailed, not withering with age as might benefit an ancient portfolio that requires gloves for handling. No, the program is functional, theatre name, play title, cast (no biographies) and the director’s name. The completely non ornamental approach is adopted so as not to call attention to the play’s subject of a Norman being a black gay male. The play’s durability attests to a certain

curiosity circa the early 1970s with theater that cast black actors in conjunction with a new awareness of gay “lifestyle.”

### **Norman on Film**

If Norman’s realistic stage rendering of what was then considered the homosexual lifestyle, then its film version solidified and reified the in inauthenticity. Norman’s film history should be put into historic context. The early 1970s was a bleak time for Hollywood. Television had taken brought a devastating end to eh studio’s monopolization of America’s entertainment life. But with the end of the 1960s and a black audience entering the middle class, there was now another demographic that could provide the wealth the studios were lacking. Thus, the studios found that black themed films could fill the lacunae in their profits, So with the first black film that revolved around urban life, the super black cop was born with the film *Superfly*. The film was a unqualified success with blacks and white. There followed a stream of blaxpitations films that featured black men winning in a white society. If drama did so well at the box office, why not comedies? In 1976 the black comedy *Car Wash* featured a black gay man as one of the characters. *Norman is that You?* was produced in the same year. Judging from the a openly black sissy in the *Car Wash* as a character that brought no backlash, the white sissy in a relationship with a closeted black man would be twice as funny.

Hollywood lean years of the 70s was supplemented by two kinds of films attracting two different audiences. The first was the blaxploitation films and the second was the gay film, generally a comedy. 1976 saw the distribution of *Car Wash* with Antoino Fargas playing a black sissy working along side other blue color workers, *The Ritz*, a Terrance McNally play featuring gay mobsters and *Norman is that You?* What these films have in common is the perpetuation of



black and gay stereotypes (the black men are hyper masculine whereas the gay characters are effeminate men or drag queens).

The film is directed by television comedy veteran George Schlatter of “Laugh In” fame. “Laugh In” would change television comedy as would Saturday Night live a few years later. Norman’s script was always thin but the importance of the film is that it is one of the post Stonewall films representing gay men albeit a stereotypical depiction. However, like the play, the film retains its homophobic stance. There is no hint of sex between Norman and his lover, not even a kiss. At one point they put their arms around each other like buddies. Critics found the movie unfunny and lacking, leering in its knowingness. In his 1976 review of the film, New York Times film critic Richard Eder said: “The movie version, produced and directed by George Schlatter, substitutes a black family for a Jewish family. It helps matters not at all. It is a series of bad jokes about homosexuality, strung upon trite situation comedy and collapsing into what is meant to be an uplifting message about people being allowed to do their own thing.” (Eder) The New York Times feels it has to further editorialize about the film’s content with this postscript: “Norman is rated PG (“Parental Guidance Suggested”). It is all talk and no action, but the film's message is that if your children grow up to be homosexuals, don't worry; and presumably this is what the guidance is suggested for.” The warning seems particularly unconscionable for a supposedly liberal newspaper. The reviews tend to mention the production and the play’s shortcomings rather than a film which treats homosexuals fairly.

This begs the question is any kind of visibility even to the point of misrepresentation is more desirable than invisibility? Tactical decisions such as visibility at any cost leading to agency have been adopted by minoritarian groups in their struggle for recognition and equality. De Certeau says a tactic”... has no power to keep to itself, at a distance in a position of foresight and self-

collection.”<sup>34</sup> Gays could protest the lack of authenticity but at the sacrifice of no representation at all. Incremental victories in the struggle to attain freedom are sometimes the necessary tactical move in the battle between the dominant and the marginalized. However, for all of its well intentions, *Norman* moves along the same exploitative tropes. The gay black man is the top in the relation. Michael Warren as Norman has an alluring physicality. His performance is so steady and frantic that I could not help thinking of minstrel performances, when the black actor put on black face. They were admired yet their art could not be seen as equal to their white counterparts. Warren is not required to seek any depth in his Norman (true, not much is written) and there is little resemblance to any thing real in the movie. He is even given a friendship with a black “girlfriend” who at first meeting seems to understand and support him as a gay man. Their appearance is the same: Afros give them a unisex look. It is interesting to note that the Afro hairstyle was meant to Africanize American blacks but would perform its own gender blurring by making male and female appear very much alike. It is when the girlfriend tries to seduce him and fails, that her feelings for him turn to anger and dismissal revealing an unexpected homophobia in an otherwise innocuous Los Angeles as Pleasantville setting.

*Norman* on film is a curious hybrid of blaxploitation and gay exploitation. Blaxploitation films of the early 70s are said to have saved the studios by tapping into a new market (middle class blacks bought tickets to films that showed them winning). The films themselves were made inexpensively but reaped huge profits at the box office. In these movies, the blacks were the heroes and the whites were the villains, generally. Interestingly, in several of these films sometimes the whites could be perceived as homosexual usually by an effete mannerism. In “*Norman*”, the blacks are the heroes and Norman’s white lover, Garson is the enemy with a

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<sup>34</sup> De Certeau. 37

repertoire of effete mannerisms. So the film is progressive and retrogressive at the same time. But its transgressive nature cannot be shunted aside. Through the medium of film comedy, gays are definitely seen as Other in contrast to the film's heterosexuals but their otherness makes them a curiosity. The film even includes Tamara Dobson, the star of a very popular blaxploitation film series called "Cleopatra Jones." She plays the prostitute hired by Norman's father to probe Norman and Garson's latent heterosexuality. It's a funny cameo and one of the best performances in the movie. Dobson is made to look like a pre- RuPaul drag queen. She is never condescending to either Norman or Garson. As a prostitute, the ultimate outsider, she seems to understand the complications. Ironically, she is the moral center of the movie, telling each of the characters implicitly in order to be happy one must be true to oneself. But it is to Wayland and Madam that the film belongs.

Wayland Flowers plays an upstairs neighbor who is in "show business." Norman has retained some of the prejudices of his Midwestern upbringing. By objecting to Garson staying with Flowers while he bides his time in telling his father that he is gay. Here show business is equated with "those people" which is read as "gay." Wayland Flowers was a puppeteer who through his main puppet/alter ego Madame, a forerunner of Dame Edna, a grand old girl in the tradition of larger than life movie divas such as Bette Davis but with a raucous sense of humor and the temerity to say what many others will not. The two steal the picture. Why? It is there refreshing ability for the artifice of puppetry to appear as the most stable "couple" in the movie. Garson takes Ben Chambers to see their nightclub act and he thoroughly enjoys it. It is important to note Redd Foxx came from the Chitlin Circuit, the string of available clubs for blacks during the segregated nightclubs days of the 40s and 50s. His act was never the lovable curmudgeon Fred Sanford of television's Sanford and Son but he bawdy, sex laden humor honed

by many black comics during this period. So to see his genuine amusement at Flower's and Madam routine is a filmic moment of black humor meeting gay humor. The movie says the two are compatible. Without these scenes the film would have very little real humor at all. It is this universal laughter that gave blacks a way in into the American society, gays would utilize the same strategy.

Despite the humor, "Norman" retains a clear adherence to the significations of masculinity. The film collaborators use the military as the sign of masculine stability to return the world to normalcy has Norman enlisting in the Navy (in the play's 1970 incarnation, he is drafted, presuming on his way to Vietnam) to "clear" his head. His parents make some mention of the military not accepting homosexuals but Norman says "I don't have to tell them everything." Is this the first mention of a future military policy? Young black men who may or not have felt unsure about their orientation could have taken that message to mean they could expunge that feeling by military duty. Norman remains the "un-gay" and he himself further distances himself from any gay life by joining an organization that will never let him forget who he really is if he steps outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity. Homosexuality was just becoming a subject that could be discussed openly. The film under the rubric of "feel good" leaves very little discussion for anything approaching agency for either black gay men or the gay community as a whole.

It is never quite clear if the film is merely a vehicle for Redd Foxx or has any other deeper social issues on its mind. The real and the representational are more pronounced on screen because of the proximity. As we look at the film, the comfortable ambiguity of it all seduces us. "Like theatre, memory is constructed," writes Sandra Richards," through processes

of selecting, repeating, forgetting—willfully as well as unconsciously—and reassembling narratives.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, we don’t ask and we don’t tell. What is problematic about Norman the film is that it is testament to a society ambivalent about homosexuals and the gay movement. *Norman is that You?* archives a moment in pre-AIDS gay history. In writing the historic narrative of the play, the film defines a specific place gays occupied in pop culture in 1976. It is as if in the trajectory, some things must happen first in order to have other things happen. Therefore it is not a stretch to say *Norman is that you?* anticipates *Brokeback Mountain*. As the profile of the GLBT movement rose, so did the art that represented them

### **Decline of the Ebony**

The 1976 unsuccessful film version of “Norman” also saw its slow decline on stage, even though the play would last another two years. But it would be the last profitable play for Nick and Edna Stewart. While researching “Norman’s trajectory,” I found an online letter written by Edna Stewart describing her husband’s career and his involvement with the Ebony Showcase Theatre. The letter was written a month after Nick Stewart’s death. The theater’s distance from the epicenter of the Watt’s Riot of 1966 kept it from being harmed. Much of the Watt’s community was burned down in the rage of the rebellion and thus property was confiscated by the city’s Redevelopment Agency. Lyndon Johnson’s administration provided funding to the community to rebuild the area. Stewart could not partake of the money that flowed into the community at this time yet he could procure funds for the youth academy. The Ebony Showcase building is thus one of the cultural touchstones of Los Angeles that where the landscape was rapidly changing.

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<sup>35</sup> Richards, Sandra. What is to be Remebered ?: Tourism to Ghana’s Slave Castle-Dungeons,” Critical Theory and Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 85.

By the early 1980s the proliferation of small theatres replaced the uniqueness of the Ebony Showcase. The City Redevelopment Agency (CRA), the city government department responsible for providing funding for properties damaged from a city emergency began to play a game of cat and mouse with the Stewarts. With the further machinations from the area's city council member Nate Holden, the Stewarts were unable to make payment deadlines for the renovation of theatre and thus were subject to eminent domain. Despite some help from celebrities like Bill Cosby, the situation reached a crises point where the theatre was green tagged (the building was deemed unsafe) in 1995.

In 1996, as part of the eminent domain proceedings, the CRA got restraining orders barring the Stewart from coming within 100 feet of the property. Later it was amended because the theatre's mail was delivered to a barbershop across the street, Stewart was allowed as far as the barber shop. From this viewpoint, Stewart watched the dismantling of his dream; the theatre was demolished to make way for a Performing Arts Center to be named after the councilmember Nate Holden who had taken part in wresting the property from the Stewart family.

I visited the location on a Saturday morning to see if there were any traces of the Ebony anywhere to be found. There is honorarium on the outside of the building. As I looked through the window I saw a post modern Los Angeles structure probably designed by a company approved by the city's Cultural Affairs office. I looked around the streets. The barbershop was still there. The neighborhood is quiet; this section of Washington Boulevard is poised between the black community of South Los Angles and the mostly white Westside. Typical of Los Angeles, it seemed as if nothing had changed but everything was different.

Los Angeles is home to many equity houses. All of the theatres scramble for city funding. It is clear what happened to the Stewarts is not unique. There is precedence for sweeping away the old. The city has a reputation for a concerted absorption of property if there is not a great deal of funding to keep the property maintained and intact. The Stewarts had the renown but not the money. The city removed the “bad” building in spite of its history for a “good” building that could boast a former council member’s name. It is a tale then told by materialist historians, noted by Benjamin as a “...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”.<sup>36</sup> Those in power control the narrative from that point on. It is why the Stewarts have been erased from the city’s memory banks.

### **In Praise of Exiles**

If *Norman is that You?* had not been an event, I doubt I would writing about it. In researching the play as a Los Angeles theatre milestone, I found very little written down to verify its uniqueness. But I found many people who saw it but remembered the play only in connection with the Ebony Showcase Theatre. The passing of the theatre into the black hole of Los Angeles history did not concern them. As Angelenos we are used to erasure. Characteristically, we celebrate the shiny and new in this city.

Not incidentally but the next high profile black gay character I became aware of occurred in the 1988 production of George Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum*.<sup>37</sup> The character was Miss Rog, a sissy black man who was the more in line with Norman’s effete white lover than Norman’s iconographic butch gay man. The play is a series of sketches that parody black theatre tropes

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. (Schocken, 1969) 255.

<sup>37</sup> There were underground performance art being presented by black gay men such as Vaginal Davis from the mid 1970s. However Davis was part of an esoteric art scene that did not attract a substantial black audience.

such as the “Mama-on-the-Couch –Play” an hilarious and insightful of “A Raisin in the Sun” where the black matriarchy is seen as the foundation of the black family. “The Gospel According to Miss Roj” is Wolfe giving voice to the black gay man in a mainstream play who does not apologize for being black and queer. I recall the audience reaction (mostly black audience members) rustling their programs and tampering down their jovial responses to Miss Roj while they are confronted with the reality check in a very different way than Norman. This is a real black gay man who is telling secrets about being his experiences in the black community and the white gay community. To give some context to the performance, the AIDS epidemic was well into its fifth year. The devastation was a daily encounter with very little to be done medically or financially. The toll on the black gay community was just being acknowledged by the white press. As the number of infected and dying black men exposed the number of black men who had been on the down low or not identifying as homosexual, AIDS now confronted the black family’s denials with uncomfortable truths. Perhaps this is what I felt as I sat in the audience. I recall the “event” because it was my first encounter with someone like me on stage speaking back to power and the internalized open secret of my own sexuality exposed. I was also fearful that I had contracted the virus and was suddenly faced with many internalized emotions even while Wolfe eased me through the lengthy monologue with humor and pathos. The audible sigh of relief (or maybe it was just my imagination) as Miss Roj ended her gospel in retrospect was the black audience wrestling with what would become a pivotal event in our collective reaction to our homosexual family members whose death from the AIDS transformed our preferred tacit acknowledgement to an open secret.

As for black gay men on stage, the next event was *Angels in America* at Los Angeles’ Mark Taper Forum in 1992. The black gay man in this play was Belize who was fiercely out,



and proud to be a sissy. He was also written by a white male playwright. Like Norman, his lover was also white. The point is that the archive of black gay man is expanding albeit at a snail's pace. Diana Taylor reminds me, "History-as-discipline presents itself in part, as an archival project; if the object of analysis is indeed out there, separate from the knower (a characteristic that I maintain defines the archive), then other historians might return to a past event or figure and offer a different interpretation or representation of it."<sup>38</sup> With "Norman." I have provided the analysis of a marginal work in the context of its impact on a city's migratory history. Though the play did not offer much in the way of black gay history, its existence, brought a diverse audience together that might have seen each other in later years in a AIDS Project LA walk-a-thon to raise funds for those suffering with AIDS. The Catch One is just on the other side of Crenshaw Boulevard, not far from where the Ebony Showcase Theatre once stood. This is the place where the black LGBT community congregates to this day. The significance of one inconsequential theatre work might have been responsible for mobilizing hundreds of gay people of color to act. It is in this utopian sentiment I choose to see exile's end.

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<sup>38</sup> Taylor 69.

## Chapter 2 Postmodern African Homosexuals in Revue

“Beyond sentimental fixing and grounding of agitated and alienated selves, the figure of homecoming survives and allows playwrights to dramatize a postnostalgic condition, enforced by those retheorizations of social and psychological experience.”--Una Chaudhuri from *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*

“Black men loving black men is the true revolutionary act.”-- Marlon Riggs from *Tongues Untied*

“We are numerous and varied, flamboyant and dull, pious and perverse ...” --Pomo Afro Homo’s *Fierce Love*

“But do you believe brotherhood is possible here?” --Bayard Rustin from *Civil Sex*

In 1991, three black gay men calling themselves Postmodern African American Homosexuals (“Pomos”) performed a play called *Fierce Love* in Josie’s Cabaret and Juice Joint in the Castro, the heart of San Francisco’s gay community. *Fierce Love* was the beginning of a collaborative theatre for the group utilizing their lives as the basis for an experimental performance style de rigueur in this early period of gay theatre. Before the group disbanded (in the late 1990s) they would produce several more works including, *Dark Fruit*, which put the politics of black gay identity and identification into conversation with prevailing attitudes circulating in the black and white community (gay and straight) and *Civil Sex*, a work about the life of black openly gay 60s black civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, a culmination of themes the troupe had explored since their San Francisco debut.<sup>39</sup>

The Pomos’ work was unique in its emerging representation of black homosexuality in an American performance space for its time even though as early as the 1970s the rapidly changing dimensions of American culture and politics had resulted in the politically progressive

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Freeman, personal interview, 9 June 2011.

environment of San Francisco generating a number of theatres representing diverse cultures, ethnicities and sexual orientation.<sup>40</sup> For example, in 1977 Theatre Rhinoceros established itself as the primary theatre for the gay community. In addition, because of newly federal redevelopment funding for black community projects, a number of small black theatres sprang up in the Bay area structured solely around black themed productions meant to address the anxieties and frustrations in the black community albeit the “normative” black community. However, similar to the larger American society, the two communities rarely converged, separated by lingering racial tensions within the gay community toward people of color on the one hand and homophobia in the black community on the other hand. Therefore bringing together black and gay sensibilities into a performance mode took a much longer and circuitous route. However, it cannot be overdetermined that the permissive political atmosphere of San Francisco allowed for the possible; the timing and space were crucial in tracing the trajectory of black gay men onto the contemporary stage from relative obscurity. In this productive era of experimental theatre mirroring experimental politics, a discourse on black masculinities was played out.

It is within this historic zeitgeist where the substantive contribution of the Pomos’ work can be seen. Their ability to sustain a body of work that could circulate outside of the San Francisco left-leaning constituencies extrapolates and re-interprets the established theatrical representations of black men as recuperative and agency. In this chapter I would have us consider the significance of the first formalized staging of the black gay experience performed by

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<sup>40</sup> My 2011 interview with Pomo founder, Brian Freeman, makes clear the number of politically and culturally diverse theatrical efforts at play in San Francisco from the mid 1970s to the debut of the Pomos in 1991.

openly black gay men performed in a major American city as a crucial intervention into and against a prevailing hyper-masculine black image. Created out of an era of race, gender and sexual liberation movements what emerges is a new voice that had long been absent from the conversation in the black community. Offering an alternative to the normative space, the queered counter public space became the arena where opposing opinions about the subjectivity of black homosexuals could be interrogated. It is precisely the Pomos' *raison d'être* writing against their near exclusion from black theatre as well as providing a revelation of shared tactics of visibility developed by the black civil rights movement and later the radicalized Black Power movement which saw performance as still another approach of resistance to gain recognition with the black and the majoritarian white gay community as the black homosexual sought to assert his existence outside of the closet.

Comparatively, these performances by openly black gay men uncovered the tensions between a pervasive and resilient “normative” lens of black life and particularly black masculinity which until this time had been the championed and acceptable portrayal of black men on stage. What the Pomos dramaturgy introduced into the equation of racial and gender authenticity was complexity. The idea of the black gay performers was not to provide an either/or binary but to include the word “and.” So blacks could be black *and* gay or black *and* gay *and* “down” with the revolution. If we examine a close reading of black gay performance, we would find thematically there is commonality with the so called traditional black dramatic themes: family, class and cultural unity. To be clear there were reasons why contested authenticity from the heteronormative black artists was at issue. Due to an historic political and cultural erasure, the homophobic reaction within the black community was first to dismiss and then ridicule significant contributions to the community welfare of black gays and lesbians.

However, intense social changes during this period would modify the situation. As blacks began to re-evaluate their position in American society and gay liberation sought to alter the position of homosexuals, added to this volatile mix the trauma of AIDS particularly among black gay men, these events propel black gays and lesbian into organizing a movement of their own where they seek to establish their own identity. Toward this aim, the Pomos stage performances for a neglected black gay and lesbian community acts as a gathering space and a place of celebration. Amongst their performances discussed in this chapter are *Fierce Love*, *Dark Fruit* (1994) and *Civil Sex* (1998). These plays illustrate the lived experience of black gay men as well as their complicated and contentious relationship to the black community. Familiar to interior conflict of black gays and lesbians, their participation in the black community is tolerated as long as they remained closeted is explored in these works where the underlying message transmits the need to stand together as the pathway to liberation.

In my view the Pomo plays are sites of intervention utilizing the revue genre as spectacular storytelling. The three plays are contextually similar yet their individual reasons for being are very different. The celebratory *Fierce Love* and *Dark Fruit* stay close to performance art in their revue structure prevalent in queer performance of the late 80s where an exploration of the sexually variant promoted a rawness in the overtly sexual and political sutured together sometimes to startling results. *Civil Sex*'s formal biography-play structure is a bio/performance of openly black and gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. All of the plays seek to understand and in that understanding reveal the complicated lives of black gay men as well as to take control of their besmirched and misrepresented images.

The Pomos' emergent repertoire describes an aesthetic informed by black gay sensibilities and thus the visibility of black homosexuality is at last apparent in the mainstream. More importantly perhaps, the discussion of black masculinities as performed in popular culture in this case the cultural medium of theatre, describes a rupture between the hyper masculine depictions of black males in the 60s black theatre and the re-imagined portrayal of the masculine possibilities extrapolated from the Pomo's work. Furthermore, this chapter provides an historical survey tracing the beginning of an openly black gay representation beginning with the genre of performance art (an experimental performance style emerging from the 70s era of identity politics) to group performances such as the Pomos where the theme of collective action is introduced as a tactile unifying strategy for the black gay community.

Since it is difficult to identify specific roles within the entire canon of black drama where a "gay" character might be evidenced, my research focuses on the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century as it offers the most in the way of dramaturgical material focused singularly on life in the black gay community. Black gay dramaturgy emerges that is distinctly dualistic; homosexual and black. Due to a new sexual openness in the American culture, themes of sexual variance are suddenly visible on the mainstream stage. Like white dramas and comedies that featured a homosexual character, the portrayal of black gay men had been stereotypical, circumscribed by the familiar trope of the homosexual as effeminate and amusing. Black and gay performance began to initiate a new orality asking questions and making protestations heretofore unvoiced. This is where the Pomo's work becomes vital as progenitor of black homosexual themes and characters on a mainstream American stage. It is through their work that a dialogue begins, laying the ground work for the debate in the black community as to whether or not black gays and lesbians should even be thought of as part of the historic struggle of the black community.

Nevertheless, even with little evidence of a history of black homosexuals in black drama, the Pomos' acted as accelerant to the number of solo performances and gay black portrayals which would begin to establish some precedent for a black gay aesthetic throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rupturing the resilient hyper masculine image allowed homo sensibilities to permeate the performance of black male subjectivity. As among the firsts for this particular genre, a wide range of the black gay experience (in this case focusing on men) would present itself to the dominant white gay community in an effort to pioneer a black gay presence and more importantly to create a black gay discourse that other black gay theatre practitioners could draw from and apply to their own creative work centered on the lived experience of black gay men.

Work that articulates a range of black masculinities possible within the black community is central to the conflict constructed for the interjection of the black gay perspective on their erroneously perceived docile bodies. The dynamics of two groups of marginalized males, both of the same skin color, need to be considered radical and revolutionary in their own right and within the context of their historic marginalization and demonization. The theatre space is where the drama of these opposing subjects find a level playing field. In other words an intertextual relationship is attempted. Black gay men's aesthetic re-imagining of the theatrical representation of black men saw the similarities without the ideology of heteronormativity as its guiding philosophy. If straight black dramatists had allowed this perception to filter into their understanding of the other in their midst, they would have realized they were both advocates for the radical re-thinking of their image. The effeminate black male or sissy would not appear as the threat to their self-identified fixed heteronormativity. In fact, as Marlon Riggs, black gay filmmaker and activist would state, "Black men loving black men is the true revolutionary act"

might have been the lens through which a black male liberation might have found a discussion topic. The Pomos' work would reveal the performance of the sissy has equal validity with the performativity of the hyper masculine.

What is the distinction between the performativity of masculinity and the performance of the sissy in relation to specific black gay theatre work of the 1980s through the 1990s? The Pomos' *Fierce Love*, *Dark Fruit* and *Civil Sex* are plays that exemplify aspects of this question through the performance of lived experience where the narrative of the sometimes seen but never heard . Agency is meant to replace the sense of shame projected onto black homosexuals by a collective happening. The dramaturgical tactic employed by the Pomos' work to provide a "talk back" to power using the majoritarian defined grotesque body or the black gay in the spirit of Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque. While watching the Pomos in performance, the world's conformity is inverted and those on the bottom become those on top, pun intended. Their discursive plays mixture of race and sexuality illustrate the transformative where the rhetoric of black masculinities raises questions as to urgency, pedagogy, performativity and possibility.

### **Black Masculinities**

In historical terms, blacks in America, no matter their sexual orientation, have had dual realities to contend with: being a minority and for many years not being considered American. As with any marginalized group, their survival depends on multitudinous strategies culled from a shared sense of self preservation. Having their African tribal identifications severed by slavery and post slavery, an enduring second class citizenship compounded by Jim Crow laws, their living in a hostile atmosphere was cause for all manner of complex identification and identity. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon writes:



Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself. His metaphysics or less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.<sup>41</sup>

Imposition might not be the exact word for the complicated living blacks endured post Civil War. Still it explains the psychological stresses of living in a society that repeatedly makes clear their suspicion and at times, hatred. Their lives were to a great extent still outside of mainstream America, where their economic and civic well being was determined by a legal system that offered them no protection. The idea that the black community had to present itself as monolithic and homogeneous was merely obvious because the law itself saw no difference among black people; therefore the criminal and the school teacher were afforded the same indignities and suspicions. Consequently, the strategies of assimilation and separate but equal became the main avenues blacks utilized to gain cultural and legal restitution. Yet in the pursuit of assimilation, diversity within the community could be tacitly acknowledged but it was not to be given the same attention as the normative which became the guiding force in the subsequent movement to rectify injustice.

Invoking Fanon is my way of expressing a deepening cognitive dissonance amongst American black men who sought on the one hand to make the best out of an untenable situation and to resist the projection of inferiority and imperfection from the majoritarian, diminishing their worth and thus their sense of the masculine. If assimilation was to be their abiding strategy anything other than heteronormative could not be tolerated. It is the collapse of the stringent black masculinities during the 1960s that begin to recognize the interstices of black masculinities and it is in these spaces where the Pomos found their audience. So of course, a homosexual lens

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<sup>41</sup> Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," Black Skin, White Masks. Markmann, Charles Lam, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1952) 110.

would threaten the perceived ontology of black masculinity, setting up an argument or dialectic that societal constraints merely helped to obfuscate. “The dialectic that brings necessity, “writes Fanon,’ into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself.”<sup>42</sup> Where Fanon’s intense treatise of self-examination is the consequence of much anguish and frustration, being black and subjected to the immense injustice by whites, so does the black gay male share the anguish, only the injustice is magnified by rejection within one’s own community. Fanon’s anecdotal description of the white encounter with blacks uttering, “Look, a Negro!”<sup>43</sup> could be re-inscribed in a completely different social context as, “Look, a Negro Homosexual!” Black men who identify as gay invite a close reading where before there was an elaborate visceral response to dismiss them as ineffective and therefore inconsequential in service to the heteropatriarcal paradigm.

It is in their straddling of two worlds, black and gay, in the midst of political and cultural transformations that define the performativity of black masculinity as strategy for both the hetero and homo black male. The idea of resistance against an historic distortion of image and projection onto both groups an unworthiness of humanity should have been the cause for reconciliation between the two. However, the black gay male was seen as a threat (causing wonder and terror) and their attempts to insinuate themselves into the discourse of black civil rights through performance aroused an inordinate amount of tension as black gay men asserted their right to be seen and heard.

## **Pomos and Home**

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<sup>42</sup> Fanon 135

<sup>43</sup> Fanon 112.

Timing and space are crucial elements in staging performance. How the performance is seen, where and when, and more importantly what effect does the performer's body provoke, delivers a specific audience response to their work. In the Pomos case, the relative closeness of the stage (as described by Freeman) and the direct proximity of performer and spectator made for a blurring of lines representative of this type of experimental theatre. Borrowing from his participation with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Freeman's staging in collaboration with the Pomos' other two members (Eric Gupton and Dijola Bernard Branner) saw the intimate setting as the example of the site specific project that put the politics of black gayness into the laps of the spectator. In such a setting, the acting space and audience space could be experienced as coterminous, a circular narrative where each aspect of the performance would be sensed on the body and the mind.

In considering the political implication of the plays, the methodology and ideology of the San Francisco Mime Troupe provided a preliminary structural frame for the Pomos theatrical trajectory. In fact, Freeman had been part of the troupe but left when the Mime Troupe preferred to refrain from including explicit gay content in their productions. However, the structure and philosophy of the Mime Troupe was adapted to the interests and passions of Freeman and his fellow Pomos. The Pomos drew their performances from this genre of populist theatre.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded in 1967. The company sought to explore themes of class and politics in an atmosphere of comic inversion using Bakhtin's framing narrative. Bakhtin saw the festival period in medieval Europe as the period of time when the political pyramid was inverted and for the length of the carnival; those on the bottom were recognized as the top of the social order. Claudia Orenstein, writing about the Mime Troupe, explicates:

A class division is played out within a cultural form, and the imagery of the lower-class culture, representing rebirth and death and the triumph of the lower class as a community facing grave obstacles, puts the very essence of the popular in a revolutionary, adversarial stance vis-à-vis the status quo.<sup>44</sup>

The Pomo plays are drawn from race and class division. Their characters testify in the manner of a traditional black oratory. But what they express is the interior dialogue of the missing black gay voice. Their control of the narrative, of their own story is cause enough for celebration. The Pomos can be seen as harbingers of what is possible, dying to the old way of thinking, in preparation for the new.

Freeman clarifies though there were some elements of the Mime Troupe's aesthetic methodology that was absorbed into the Pomos such as parody and progressive themes however where the Pomos differed was their de-emphasis of the political over the personal. Freeman and the other founding members of the troupe were given the opportunity to tell the stories of black gay men as a collective happening rather than a determined effort to pull the black gay male out of obscurity and into the spotlight of political theatre. Freeman says it was just the opposite; they were given the opportunity to stage the lived experience of black gay men, an anomaly in the theatre at that time for sure, and the resulting success came from the support of black lesbians at first, then black gay men and then the white gay community followed.

Where would the audience response toward this new performance troupe be the most affective? If we look at the three plays, we will find that each play is set in the American urban landscape. I will detail later in the chapter specific examples for each play but for now, thinking of the plays collectively as a "homecoming." To be clear, the work intends to bring the closeted

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<sup>44</sup> Claudia Orenstein, *Festive Revolution: The Politics of Popular Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1992) 21.

relative out into the public sphere. This metaphysical affirmation of “homecoming” offers insight into a commonality experienced between the Pomos and their audience.

Writing about the scenography that recapitulates the utopian image of “home,” Una Chauduri says, “Although the act of returning home is an archetypically regressive act...it is used in the later modern drama not to recuperate identity but rather to stage the difficulties, even impossibility, of such recuperation.”<sup>45</sup> As the Pomos’ dramaturgy in their early revue like plays are autobiographical in structure where the characters voice the exact sentiments and longings of the actors, illustrate the complicated notion of recuperability. Chaudhuri elaborates:

Beyond sentimental fixing and grounding of agitated and alienated selves, the figure of homecoming survives and allows playwrights to dramatize a postnostalgic condition, enforced by those retheorizations of social and psychological experience...<sup>46</sup>

Homecoming is a time of exultant feelings generally used to re-bond characters in the most sentimentalized plots, and this was certainly the celebratory atmosphere meant for Pomo performer and their audience. But, as Chauduri points out, the modern versus the traditional understanding of social experience, allowed for a multi-interpretation, the audience response was allowed and encouraged to be deeply personal where the playwrights’ asked open questions precisely knowing the closed “universal” experience was a dehumanizing trap for the marginalized. In essence, the Pomos declared, “It may appear I am returning home but in reality, I never left.” Here is where the long overdue conversation finds its dramaturgical and political power; the Pomos prepare a literal and figurative queered space for their audience to participate in their own liberatory experience.

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<sup>45</sup> Chauduri, Una. Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) 92.

Essentially, adapting to a temporal space, the Pomos work was generative of an atmosphere of reciprocity. In that their audience would find the performances familiar, relating their experience growing up black and gay. Narrations of their hidden life suddenly exposed would be cause for celebration and caution. To be sure, Josie's was in the heart of the predominantly white Castro so to the white gay population the sense that something exotic and Otherly was appearing in their neighborhood but white gays were, according to Freeman, the last group of gays to attend their performance. He elaborates on the cause saying, "There were still tensions in the gay community between black and white, even in 1991." Still, what the two communities had in common emanated from a sense of queer displacement. More pointedly, the Pomos' work was not explicitly performed for a transformative experience in the theatre but it had inscribed within its varied sketches of black gay life the revolutionary pedagogy it hoped to disseminate to ill-informed spectators.

A specific use of the revue genre is the framing structure for the "homecoming" themes. A "revue" is described" as "an episodic program of songs, comedy, sketches, mime, dance and instrumental music, ostensibly organized around topical and satirical subject matter."<sup>47</sup> The Pomos' work was driven by their lived experience as black gay men. It does appear that much of their work is satirical but only in the sense of using humor as a conduit to understanding their marginalization. Their idea of the revue as an accessible form of theatre for a mainly gay audience was meant to be exclusive and inclusive at the same time. Utilizing the comedic aspects saw humor as a coping mechanism in the midst of traumatic events such as coming out and AIDS. Injecting seriousness into the revue definition forged a pathway toward the unstable "home" so closely connected with their exile status. In this way, the episodes became short

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<sup>47</sup> Ian Steadman, "Revue," The Cambridge Guide to Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 823.

sociological studies of liminality in their temporal modality. What emerges from the revue? It is a sense of home amongst the black gay men in the audience and their allies

What is most significant in the imbrications of revue and home into the Pomos' early projects is the performance/performativity of black gay men. Having been pushed into the far reaches of t acknowledgment within the normative realm of the black community or dismissed as being of no consequence to the political activism of civil injustice, the genre of revue is used to build identification. If the Pomos' efforts reveal a subaltern political activism, it is intended to substantiate their presence as well as celebrate a same sex brotherhood that avow, "Black men loving black men is the true revolutionary act."<sup>48</sup> The Pomos' radical reinterpretation of traditional black dramaturgy implicitly averred what was missing but what was possible in portraying black life in contemporary theatre.

### **Fierce Love**

I viewed only a videotaped performance of *Fierce Love*.<sup>49</sup> It appears the play was presented on a bare stage in a small theatre (judging from the clearly audible audience responses) in San Francisco, in what is referred to in theatre parlance, a "black box." The black box is the smallest of enclosed theatre spaces where all of the walls have been black to make the space appear as a void to be filled in by illuminated by lighting and the imagination of the spectator. Therefore the empty space paradoxically adds dimension to the witnessing of an event, where total visibility secures the symbiotic relationship between the performers and the spectator, allowing for the consideration of the black/ gay body. In a sense the lines of the space move in

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<sup>48</sup>E Patrick Johnson, *Manifest Faggotry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 54. The quote is by Marlon Riggs from his 1989 documentary on black gay men, *Tongues Untied*.

<sup>49</sup>*Fierce Love*, Pomo Afro Homos, videotape, Sue Ellen Case collection, 2010.

an endless continuum. Or is this just illusion? Does the confined space also remind one of prison? The idea of male queers in the carceral harkens back to the writings of Jean Genet. Even if it is a stretch to conflate the *mise en scene* staged with that of a prison cell, the statistics of black men in prison is conjured. The confined homosexual thus spectacularizes the play's seeming historicity of black gay men (a postcolonialist reading) and adumbrates within its vexed dramaturgy a deeper sense of struggle, complexity, resilience and survival. The spectator is close enough to survey the queer black body without fear of being politically incorrect. In a 1994 interview, Gupton said, "We were playing to a mostly black gay audience at first. Now we have families and little old ladies from established parts of town coming to see us, which is a wonderful surprise."<sup>50</sup> They are on display and we are obliged to look and are free to inspect. Details according to Foucault "had long been a category of theology and aestheticism..."<sup>51</sup> The Pomos are aware of all of the racialized and sexualized images of black men. The confined space is metaphor for a closet paradigm that is gradually giving way to syncretism. Except the urgency here is the context of an epidemic where the gay black body is being destroyed by silence. If the pout of the closet paradigm was to be the tactical move for the black queer then it had to begin with a sudden and dramatic visibility. In a 1994 interview, Freeman says:

It was about the gay and lesbian community entering its third decade (of having a high public profile) . . . and people feeling frustrated that there was no space for black gay and lesbians, People were working for AIDS organizations and trying to bring it back home, wanting to be 'out' in the context of the black community. It was time for there to be an 'out' black gay and lesbian community.<sup>52</sup>

If Foucault saw it as further proof of his argument about the nature of power, Pomo Afro Homos' will use details of the black church and black art, not as recognition to inform agency, as well as

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<sup>50</sup> Jan Breslauer, "As Pomos As They Can Be," Los Angeles Times. Aug 13 1994 [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035\\_1\\_black-gay-life](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035_1_black-gay-life)

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, (New York: Vantage Books, 1977) 139-140.

<sup>52</sup> Breslauer, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035\\_1\\_black-gay-life](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035_1_black-gay-life)



the freedom from a history of invisibility. Therefore colliding images of the black body smashing into the queer body

Comingling the personal and political, *Fierce Love* lends itself to the revue as a signature theatrical formatting. Revues have been utilized as starting place to build a performance piece that usually does not involve a great deal of backing and brings to the fore a message of activism combined with theatre conventions that allows a seeming unfettered roundelay of song, dance and mostly comedy but a celebratory insistence on a marginalized community sudden vocal declaration of being. Moreover, the play is episodic in structure. Webster's dictionary defines "episode" as an incident in a course of events. The eventful nature cannot be overdetermined. Having black gay characters on stage played by self-identified black gay men was an event in 1994. The play is really a series of installations portraying black gay life in the 1970s and 1980s.

*Fierce Love* begins with the three men in a semi circle harmonizing with what sounds like a gospel choir on tape in the background. They are youngish looking men, of different shades of brown to beige. Their contemporary dress signifies the ordinariness of their presence yet they represent the black/gay body. The very name of the group frames the narrative. They are postmodern therefore the play will concern itself with postmodern identification, fragmented, polyvocal and fluid, the opening grounds the men in black tradition as if to say we have always been in the black community. We cannot separate out from the black community nor out of out black bodies because this is what is to be visible. The referents to a racialized body and the historicization of the racialized bodies assumes something on sight, although it is misrecognition, the gay black man knows he is represents a double vision. In her essay, *Reading Racialized Bodies*, Suki Ali tells us, "Despite (or it may be because of) the idea that all visualizations of

racialized bodies have to be learned and discursively reproduced, it is in the so called ruptures and disjuncture's between the dominant and counter-readings of embodied raciality that space for change can be created."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it is the visibility of their black bodies as they aver their queerness that the Pomo Afro Homos' transgressive acts have the power of transformation. Their recitation includes lines such as "We are the who's who and the who's not." We are centuries of silence and millisecond of sound. We are young, gifted, black and gay. Our love must be as strong as our ancestors and twice as fierce" The incantation ends abruptly, as if the shock of affirming the black homo within the black heteronormative paradigm is shock enough to the sensibilities, Hallelujah is never said but it resonates around the small space.

In fact, the episode following the open directly addresses the black sissy and the black drag queen. The QVC (Queer Value Channel), introduces two obvious sissies, Bernard and Louis, who are parodies of another parody, Men on Film from the then popular *In Living Color* television comedy series. In *Men on Film*, Antoine and Blaine are movie reviewers, played by two straight actors, who re-introduced the "snap" the quintessential gesture of the black gay sissy as response to their viability. The sketch itself, though not entirely without humor, accentuates the unmanliness of Antoine and Blaine as jokes. In contrast, the Pomos' Jamal and Roland are costumed in flower-print shirts. They are most comfortable with their identity and sexuality. David Roman writes, "Black gay men, these Pomos show, will no longer allow the uniformed pilferage of black gay codes by heterosexual performers for the amusement of their equally ignorant heterosexual audiences"<sup>54</sup> In fact the Pomos introduce the "Alice Walker" kit in their boldness to politicize the inferred homophobia of the Men on Film sketch and then the "Fierce

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<sup>53</sup> Suki Ali, "Reading Racialized Bodies: Learning to See Difference" Cultural Bodies: Ethnography and Theory (Blackwell Publishers, 2008) 24..

<sup>54</sup> David Roman, Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS (Indiana University Press, 1998)166.

Black Drag Queen “kit so as to reify the image of the black sissy, in honor of gay liberation onto the stage enters a six foot black body on roller skates, with a huge Afro, sequined bra and short shorts. She declares, “If this is liberation, where is the music?” The audience erupts in laughter and applause.

Brian Freeman takes on the next character, a black man on the DL. The character says I don’t go gay, I don’t know gay...Do I look like somebody’s gay to you? Yeah I like to catch a little taste of the other side now and then. That don’t make me nobody’s punk” The *mise en scene* is reminiscent of the melancholic constructed by internalized homophobia. E Patrick Johnson points out, “black authenticity has become linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations.”<sup>55</sup> Brian delivers the soliloquy in deep tones of constructed masculinity as he relates the story of his marriage where him and his wife have an “understanding.” The character says he goes out to “take care of a man’s business.” The contrast of acceptance and rejection with the opening episodes seeks to show the mediatized image of both the black sissy and the black man on the down low. The Pomos link the two episodes with the liminal black queer body. Freeman’s portrayal is that of a man on the threshold of new freedom. “Part of the vexing of black macho has had to do with the absence caused by AIDS, shifting gender identities and strategic silences.”<sup>56</sup> Freeman offers the piece as both critique and empathetic response to the resistant struggle to one’s sexuality imposed by generations of racism and homophobia. The hyper-masculinity of the black male will rub up against the effeminate black male throughout the play.

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<sup>55</sup> E Patrick Johnson, *Manifest Faggotry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 48.

<sup>56</sup> Cheryl Clark 7

Freeman performs the middle class gay black man caught betwixt and between movements as he struggles with his sexuality. The piece is entitled, “All the Sad Young Men.” In this episode, Freeman’s family is chosen as the “Model Negro Family” who has their picture printed on the cover of *ebony* magazine. To his surprise, Freeman finds he has been erased from the picture. Why? He believes because he is not “black” enough. His journey throughout the scene is a journey of self-discovery as he experiments with women and then men but comes to rest in his gay identity. He is trying to find himself amidst the confusion of the 70s, settling on running away with Johnny Mathis. The story is one that a middle class audience can understand. *Fierce Love* is at times a lesson to be learned, when a gay black speaks thereby a discourse begins and discourse can be disruptive. It is in this episode that we find the issue of class debated. The confused young man who must be “sad” expresses the melancholic where he cannot find his black rage or his gay rage for that matter. In Judith Butler’s theory of the melancholic, “the subject literally swallows the object of their love.”<sup>57</sup> (Butler) Those in the audience who are not black or gay are brought into the conversation, but it asks the spectators to witness what it is like to grow up gay in a black family. David Roman writes, “...Sad Young Men, like Paul’s narrative in *Six Degrees of Separation*, pulls liberal heartstrings but goes further in holding its audience complicit in such well meaning politics.”<sup>58</sup> In the rush of identity politics, the liberal advocates for freedom without really knowing the subject of their advocacy.

The obligatory rap song is called the “Red Bandana Song.” In the urban communities before liberation when homosexuals wanted to identify each without asking, a colorful bandana was placed in an appropriate back pocket of one’s levis to indicate if one were top or bottom (red), water sports (yellow) and anything goes (orange). The three men become rappers in the

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<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler

<sup>58</sup> Román 168.

scene but the lyrics are but the lyrics “I wear mine around my neck to show the sweat of my ancestors.” So the fucking takes on the fucking of all oppressed by hegemony. It is also more personal in that it indicates a racial history of debasement and racism. But even then the conversation is two-sided. The resonance around rap as commodified music for a generation in relation to the legacy of exploitation of American blacks is a moment of pedagogy.

The characters have names like Peaches, Popcorn and Pepper are part of the “Just Us Club.” Here we have the excluded from mainstream gay life, black or white. The trio is effeminate and ugly. This group finds no support among the more established black gay community. ‘Since no one else will have them they’ll join forces to survive their neglected position in the underclass.’<sup>59</sup> The structure of the episode is a clear metaphor for a neglected narrative of gay black life. Spectaculaized, their life has to be seen as metonym for the larger black community’s struggle to break from the consumerist paradigm of normative gay life. Judith Butler says that gender performance outside of the theatrical context is political. She says, “in the theatre one can say this is just an act. (Butler 14) As an act of political theatre, the trio moves in synchronicity. These are not gay men in their twenties who have lived through the taunts of their own community and the prejudices of the wider white gay community. So the talking back and calling out is essential to agency. Yet the Pomos don’t single out black gays and lesbian or non black gays and lesbians Instead, the Pomos “seem to indicate that the spectatorial process—for all audiences—involves a certain self-positioning. “*Fierce Love* forces viewers to locate their own positionality with the material staged.”<sup>60</sup> The thrust of the calling is to open the conversation to no one particular group yet each spectator must decide for himself/herself what their position is for each new episode.

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<sup>59</sup> Román 168.

<sup>60</sup> Roman 169.

There is one scene where positionality is most evident. Eric Gupton is the actor in this piece. In it two men are having sex in a backroom. At first, Gupton is the only black man in the room. Not being a snow queen (gay black vernacular for a black man who will only have sex with white men: the opposite is a “dinge queen” such is the limiting role of language), when suddenly a beautiful black man enters the space. Gupton delivers a lengthy description of the man’s body, lingering on details. Yet it is the act of penetration that drives the men to ecstasy but it is a good “hand job” that satisfies both partners. After they simultaneously achieve orgasm, the man tells Gupton:

You know the white boys get real nervous when they see the two of us in the same room together, some of the brothers do too but I like you.<sup>61</sup>

The stranger in the backroom is nothing less than yet another Pomo Afro Homo—defined at least in the scene, gay black man who cares about the brothers, eroticizes men of color, and recognized the necessity of AIDS awareness. The number of black gay men dying of AIDS in 1994 was all but ignored by the media. The black gay community took it upon themselves to educate black men about safe sex practices. Including the scene within the performance is further illustration of “disidentification” where a community’s local and day to day struggles of resistance manifest.

David Román’s essay on the play is useful because he actually saw the play performed. He sees this as the pivotal moment in the play because the scene directly addresses the sexuality of black men. He says this scene drew the most response from the black gay men in the audience. Shouts of “Go ahead, girl!” and “Git at that!” clearly asks the non gay spectator as well as the

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<sup>61</sup> Fierce Love. Pomo Afro Homos, videotape, 1997.

white spectator an inversion of power, which is clearly the intention. It is helpful to quote

Roman at length:

Oddly many whites sometimes respond by applauding the gay men of color in the audience who are engaging in the performance. In this regard, the spectacle on the stage is expanded to include gay men of color in the audience who are participating in the shared fantasy. The risk, hers as in *Six Degrees*, is that the realities of gay men of color may be experienced by some whites as anecdotal fodder. Liberal white spectators, in this sense, get two shows for their money; an entertaining performance on stage and equally entreaty side show from the gay men of color in the audience. And yet this risk of appropriation is worth taking since the gay men of color—regardless of the potential for white voyeurism—have shared in a powerful transaction of support.”<sup>62</sup>

Therefore *Fierce Love* is an attempt to bring disparate communities together in a shared experience of loss and grief. The play breaks new ground in the mid 90s, pushing the envelope in its themes, bold in its intentionality and positionality.

The next episode, “Silently into the Night” is the opposite of the positive AIDS story. Aman, a young man dies of AIDS and his funeral arranged by his relatives is used to spew homophobia. This is where the black church is taken to task because of its silence on the epidemic. Aman’s friends organize their own memorial (as many were wont to do during this devastating period), to honor the life of their friend. A gospel song that I know well from my childhood plays in the background *Take My Hand Precious Lord*. The scene is dignified and sobering. Actor Banner asks, “Why do so many of our brothers bundle up their pain, walk silently into the night?”

The final scene is in a disco, apparently the heaven on earth for 80s black gay men. But here the music is opportunity for another shout out but this time specifically to those who have died from AIDS as well as James Baldwin, the episode is a celebration and tribute to those who have made the space somewhat easier for those left behind. “Much of the power of this scene is

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<sup>62</sup> Roman 170.

in its evocation of a black gay male history signaled by Sylvester, Kelly Smith, and Baldwin.”<sup>63</sup> (Román 172) “If this is liberation where is the music?” So speaks Peaches, the fierce drag queen from the opening of the show. Her exclamation echoes that of a real life incident when 80s drag-performer Sylvester went into a DJ booth at one of San Francisco’s most popular discos and took over. Sylvester is invoked more than once in the play.

Sylvester began life as a child gospel star. He was born in Los Angeles and began singing in the choir of a South Los Angeles church. He moved to San Francisco in the early 70s and became involved with the performance troupe called the Cockettes. He dressed in drag and sang Bessie Smith songs. He is even seen in the Cockettes short film, *Tricia’s Wedding* spoofing President Nixon’s daughter, Tricia’s real wedding. Cheryl Clark writes:

Sylvester helped us negotiate that third and or “in-between” space of ambiguous difference; which disrupted our longing for a grounded racial and sharply gendered sexuality. Sylvester was the first—and so far the only—black gay singer to “cross-over” and be “out.” Not only was Sylvester gay, he was a queen.”<sup>64</sup>

Sylvester was a gay black celebrity who performed in drag. His distinctive falsetto got him a recording contract where he had a few hits such as “You Make me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “Do You Wanna Funk?” a defiant disco salvo fired into the crowded field of heteronormative signifiers. The gender bending Sylvester is a specter in the play. She glides in like a deusa ex machine to rescue gay black liberation from the normative assimilationism of 80s mainstream gay politics. Thus, a universal language of drag is formulated where the performer’s orientation is understood by the spectator to be at the creative center of the performance. It is no longer the artifice that is masks a survival strategy only to be experienced in the safe environment of the

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<sup>63</sup> Roman 172.

<sup>64</sup> Clark 6.



proscenium stage or for this matter on television. As drag queens became the visible face of the Gay right's movement in the late 1960s, the drag queen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers the same revolutionary approach to the continual performativity of liberation. The language can be adopted as a transnational tactic for use in speaking back to power. In solidarity the black and gay projects move with to their own rhythms on the queer sonic landscape.

What does "fierce" mean? It has its etymological start as violently hostile or aggressive in temperament." In black vernacular the word has changed to mean an indisputable uniqueness. In describing the performance of Pomo Afro Homos " , the fierceness of these gay black men writes a narrative of sudden visibility where up to that point lagged behind the majority gay rights movement. *Fierce Love* is then orature. It is testimony. It is a confessional. It is the talking cure. In black vernacular the men "testify." Moreover these performances were essentially a "talk back" to the assimilationist politics of early gay liberation. The carnivalesque atmosphere of drag as display of the grotesque body was an acknowledgement of a deliberate transgression against the normative. Sylvester, a drag celebrity in the gay culture of San Francisco in the 70s embodied the transgendered, the gay and the black body in total.

The black male body has come to be ridiculed, scrutinized, exploited, minstrelised. The black male body has been sexualized, demonized, marginalized and animalized. The slave auction put the best of black bodies on display as worker, breeder and figure of fantasy for men white men and women. The corporeal determining of the black male body had been closely associated with its ability to endure. It seemed as if this body out of all bodies could take the abuse of the whip or the chains of slavery or the tacit humiliation of the Jim Crow laws, the hegemonic control of the body and particularly the black body was a signifier of a social standing that could be readily identified.

The storytelling is the curative here. A larger narrative of post colonial struggle and identity politics converge into micro narratives of black gay experience. Interjected into these narratives are identities of black gay life. The play ends on the same line as it began, “Our love must be as strong as our ancestors and twice as fierce.” In the postmodern, the micro narrative has replaced the grand narrative. It is clear that *Fierce Love* is a postmodern piece that looks backward and forward as it illustrates the number of identities within the black community and the contradictions within the black gay and lesbian community. The larger black community has been instrumental in the use of disidentification to weather the abuses of discriminatory practices. Subversively the black gay man, lesbian, transgender and bisexual have used the same to strategy to survive the homophobia of the black community. In performance as part elaboration of the differences among gay black men and a curative calling out, speaking the name that has gone unspoken, in their visibility and agency. Still, it is a worrisome revelation to concede the visibility was due to horrific epidemic. I say this because of the space number of gay black chatters in dramaturgy post Stonewall.

### **Dark Fruit**

If *Fierce Love* is an introduction to the lived experience of black gay men, then *Dark Fruit* is an exploration of the exploitation and complications of being an openly black gay man. The stereotypical black gay character i.e. the black sissy became de rigueur amongst certain white gay playwrights in the 1990s. This character is featured in prominent gay plays of the 80s and 90s namely *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Angels in America*. The piece is titled “Aunties in America” because the three black gay characters exhibit characteristics similar to the iconic black mammy from black face minstrelsy. “With ‘Aunties in America,’ the Pomos expose the operations of whiteness by talking back to the rules scripted for gay black men

by Kushner, Guare and Fierstein.”<sup>65</sup> In that black gay men are in service to the white gay men in the respective dramas; in *Six Degrees* the subservience is figurative and in *Angels* and *La Cage* the connection is literal.

*La Cage aux Folles* was adapted from the French film of the same name. Fierstein had made a name for himself as the author of an earlier gay play, *Torch Song Trilogy*. *Torch Song* might share with *La Cage* the same gender crossing themes in that the central characters of both plays are drag performance. It is interesting to understand Fierstein’s referents as men who dress like women in a long held tradition of the theatre. That the maid of the “husband and wife” (a gay couple where one of the partners pretends to be a woman in the zany complications of the plot) in is a very sissified black male (also pretending to be a woman) is at once homage and a reification of the comical and absurd and therefore dismissive black homosexual on stage.

The *mise en scene* begins with the three “aunties” having tea. The characters of Belize (*Angels*), Paul (*Six Degrees*) and Jacob (*La Cage*) begin a girl talk session as the last act of *Angels in America* concludes with the lightening flashing. The sudden earthbound characters, a representation of 80s black gay homosexuals on the American stage, reveal a discontent and disapproval of the way they are written by their perspective playwrights. As the dish gets going, the three men are able through airing their grievances with each other, a round table discussion of their dramaturgical treatment, claiming the playwrights “find their epiphanies thru us.”<sup>66</sup> If the intellect belongs to the white characters, the soul of these plays is disseminated through its black gay men. When accepting the Pulitzer for *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Kushner

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<sup>65</sup> Jay Plum, “Attending Walt Whitman High: The Lessons of Pomo Afro Homos’ *Dark Fruit*.” *African American Performance and Theater History* (Oxford University Press, 2001) 238.

<sup>66</sup> Plum 324.

said, “This play is about being gay, and I think it’s a great thing that the [Pulitzer] jury decided to recognize it in this way.” In his essay on *Dark Fruit*, Jay Plum writes:

...the image of gay culture in *Angels in America* comes at the expense of the Other. Kushner may be correct in claiming *Millennium Approaches* is a “play about being gay.” But the Pomos suggest that it is more accurately a play about *white* and gay.<sup>67</sup>

In an effort not to impugn the integrity of the plays themselves, but what needs to be clearly identified is the sameness of the black characters in relation to the white characters, where the historic imprint of submissiveness and comfortable blackness circumscribe the black gay characters. The “aunties” protestations and disavowal is simply the reaction of the narrative once again being written by those in power.

Moreover, the plays were written in the historic context of the AIDS crises even though *La Cage* does not specifically address the disease, the specter of AIDS haunts gay drama of the period. It is the historical absence and sudden appearance of black gay characters that elicit a reaction of curiosity and familiarity from the spectator as the visibility of these black gay body is on display as the named subject comes before us for our scrutiny. If the historical concept of blacks on stage is bothersome to an authentic discernment of the diversity within the black community, a competing image of the emerging threatening black rapper is there to place beside the black sissy. It appears the assimilationist model is at odds with the Pomo’s cri de coeur that the black gay voice be heard as luxuriantly polyvocal resonance rather than a tinny echo from the past. The politics of identity whether black or gay, to the extreme deemed its very existence was evidence of an inclusionary politics. However, “*Dark Fruit*...challenges an essentialism in black cultural polices found in authenticating claims of masculinity that deny differences within the

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<sup>67</sup> Plum 236.

race.”<sup>68</sup> Kushner, Guare and Fierstein cannot be excused because they themselves are gay. Their portraiture of black gay men perpetuates and preserves the same misguided argument used against black gay men prevalent in the black community.

A behavior developed around the closet builds upon itself as its aim is to codify silence and as a consequence shame. The examined gay life in *Dark Fruit* gives the spectator a privileged advantage to look into the lives of the other through constructed scenarios of the black gay man functioning in mainstream society. Their cultural performance is based on a sliding scale of imitation and real, not because of these stereotypes of the sissy but because the internalized conflict of being black and gay sets up a lightning speed and velocity of performativity of masculinity and femininity at frightening intervals.

The psycho sex therapist appears to give some structure to the fragmented and confusing image of the black gay post Stonewall. It is as if the demons warned about in their upbringing, the demons of exposure have made the freed from to be themselves has made black gay men more anxious and more representative of the sexual variance more often ascribed to the white homosexual community. The piece is called “Black and Gay: A Psycho Sex Study.” The parody of the sex therapist where the prevailing notion of the black gay man is notionless, in that there has been few studies that anyone could cite about the black gayness other than survey of their behavior in prison, the Pomos turn their attention to the psychological analysis of the black gay male beginning with a subject who is urban and lower class who seems to prefer white men sexually over black men. The “psycho therapist” uses this case study to offer some statistics about black men who prefer white men as well as the invert. But the psychologist adds there is discrimination within the homosexual community, concluding, “in view of the fact society

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<sup>68</sup> Plum 239.

frowns upon homosexuality and discriminates against the Negro one might assume the Negro homosexual labors under a double handicap.”<sup>69</sup> Even modern psychology struggles with the definition and categorization of black homosexual. The language they adopt is antiquated by the mere referent to “Negro.” The reference implies an entire approach to an othered sexuality is based in a past where homosexuality was considered a mental illness. So like rats in a laboratory, the probing and prodding of the subject to be studied generates scenarios that are at once instructive to those unfamiliar with the subject and absurd to those who are black and gay. The therapist does bring a certain understanding of homosexuality in the black community to some historical context, telling the spectator that homosexuality existed in Africa where male-male rituals were honored. Therefore the promise of the “study” will find because it is predetermined to find the black gay male as neurotic and self-hating.

The young black man, Cliff, in the short case study turned into a short playlet is working towards med school with all of the support of his high school teach. Once she sees him intimately entangled with another classmate (a white boy named Paul) her support is withdrawn. She expresses dismay, shame and disappointment. Cliff (as on the edge of) cannot find the support within himself to continue to pursue his dream. He cannot trust Paul’s sincerity either. It is the beginning of the syndrome within the black gay homosexual where an intimate connection becomes a very complicated, tortuous and yes, self-sabotaging scenario. Paul leaves his home town after high school and purportedly heads for “the homosexual jungle of New York City”<sup>70</sup>, where utopia (of a kind) awaits. In this episode, the spectator is introduced to the notion of pedagogy in the migratory experience which positions the black gay man as a “nomad.”

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<sup>69</sup> Dark Fruit 327.

<sup>70</sup> Pomo Afro Homos, “Dark Fruit,” Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater (Westview Press, 1996) 332.

Intimacy and the black gay experience are seen as confusing and complicated. A simple psychoanalysis of the issues might point to a neurotic affliction nurtured over several generations of slavery and a persistent discrimination. The idea of trust and whom to trust would be cause for all manner of suspicion and caution. Cliff is the middle class assimilationist who has yet to discover the support group that is slowly in the making. His self-destruction might be attributed to market forces where cheap labor is the domain of lower class blacks. The upward mobility through education is the means tested route out of the lower class. It is a re-thinking of the Eurocentrism in which blacks are educated that will emerge out of the later 60s movement of identity politics where there was indeed a more open discussion of market forces and the devastation of capitalism on the lower classes.

The pan African movement saw the liberation mostly through violent means of most of African from their colonial overlords. The African American Black Power movement adopted the radicalized approach to black liberation and at the same time, the embedded religious fealty of the black community and the decadent (white culture = homosexual) brought into the open a critique stemming from the homophobic of the sometime refuge of the black homosexuals namely the black church. At the same time other social intensities descended on the black community: AIDS, a rise in urban interracial violence and the incarceration rate of young black gay males brought another wave of homophobia into the community where the sudden freedom to experiment sexually set up the cognitive dissonance that needed black intellectuals with their own brand of homophobia as pedagogy for new generation of black youth.

“Chocolate City” sets the action at the time of the 1993 National Gay and Lesbian March for equality in Washington DC. Here the Pomos search for their own space within the dominant white gay march. The narrator searches for the black gay contingent as his thoughts wander over

the historic and the psychological wounds of his lived experience as a black gay man in America in 1993. The crowd of 650,000 is metaphor for the number of adverse voices against the rights of gay people at the time of the march. Whoopie Goldberg is seen as the megaphone for the voiceless, challenging the crowd, “I want to hear what it’s going to sound like when you scream, “How long...?”<sup>71</sup> How long will the abuse and humiliation and degradation and violence persist? It is the question the narrator internally debates with a host of street thugs, churchmen and black intellectuals who taunt with the retort, “How long is it before you go back to where you came from?”<sup>72</sup>” The shame, guilt and disgust inherent in the line suggests a black community divided amongst itself as how to approach the reality of black homosexuality. Obviously, with the larger gay movement now embedded in the public consciousness, the silent treatment was no longer as workable as in the past. But the idea to push the gay subject back into the closet was preferable.

“How many organists will you go through before you do more than light a candle?” asks the narrator in “Chocolate City, USA.”<sup>73</sup> This is a direct reference of the obfuscation of the black church its homosexual congregants. It may be stereotypical to think of gay men as having an affinity for musicals but in the black church where one was raised and if one had that particular ability to lead the choir, it became a good job and a place of familiarity even though the messages sent from the pulpit was in keeping the fundamentalist Christian view of sin i.e. homosexuality as well as a host of other vices prevalent in any American urban setting. Chocolate city is America’s neoliberal politics. It is a politics of market driven economics which determines cultural practice.

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<sup>71</sup> Pomos 340.

<sup>72</sup> Pomos 340.

<sup>73</sup> Pomos 342.



A praxis established by black intellectuals such as Dr. Leonard Jeffries theorize that homosexuality is unheard of in Africa and moreover, homosexuality is consciously imposed on the black male by the white male in order to destroy the black family, results from a concerted homophobic Afro-centrism rising out of the Pan African movements. The Chocolate City narrator says:

Dear Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Dear Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, Dear Minister Farrakhan, Dear CIA Conspiracy Theorists, Dear FBI Conspiracy Theorists, Dear CDC and all Afro-centrics...Kinte cloth makes fabulous drag but lousy bandages. There is no immunity in ignorance, but hey, wear all the crowns you like; it won't raise your T cell counts.<sup>74</sup>

So the black queens in their own polite but assertive manner tell the ass splitting truth for all of those who care to listen. Theories abound and theories are believed. From these theories emerge a misunderstanding that destroys. The Pomos are giving the guide map to navigate this unenlightened road where from many corners of the black community be it religious, academic or neighbor, these deliberate misreadings and mendacities of black homosexuality asserts the idea that the closet is the best place for your kind.

Identity and identification is the tug of war between the forces of tradition and modernity. The tradition of heteronormativity and patriarchy patterns is the praxis in which the black community sees its survival. The pattern is contingent with the strategies of the past but now it must contend with the expansion of others within the community who has found groups of support outside of the mainstream black community. How do you identify? If you are with us (it was the same rallying cry during the Black Power movement) then you are accused of being with them. To the extent that Uncle Tomism has been qualifiedly seen as injustice to the middle class black aspirant, the threat of homosexuality is deemed yet another attack on the black family. To

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<sup>74</sup> Pomos 341.

be seen as authentically black, one had to adhere to the traditional paradigm of heterosexual and capitalist. To be clear, the economics of a black underclass was no longer the issue but sexual variance needed to be controlled.

Black theatre professed to be exemplary of black life. But the black theatre's political slant leaned toward the upwardly mobile and sublimates the unacceptable consequences of the lives of some lower class blacks into what they deem is acceptable as far as outward appearances are concerned. In "Doin' Alright" the Pomos address another issue of black gay life, those black gay men who were estranged from the families and fell into the underclass of American life. The narrator, Brian, speaks of his adolescence where his best friend who was gay also moved away from his working class neighborhood in Boston to a better neighborhood where they were "doing pretty good." He loses contact with his friend until many years later when he is in a bar in Boston. The bar is described as a working class Boston bar but the bar itself is racially and ethnically divided. He sees his boyhood friend who had been Dennis but is now Denise. She is the head of housekeeping at the local Howard Johnson Motor Lodge. She is "doin' alright." A few years later, the narrator hears from his cousin about a funeral she attended for a young man named Dennis who had been the victim of the leading cause of death of young black men namely other black men. The narrator relates, "Minister said he died from being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but when you're poor, black, effeminate, and gay, life is wrong place, wrong time."<sup>75</sup> See the undertaker had dressed the young man in death as he had lived in life which caused his mother extreme discomfort. The narrator doesn't know for certain if it is the same Dennis/Denise but what he does know is that there are many transgender black men who get lost in the shuffle of bureaucracy and family shame. The catch phrase of "doing alright" is miles

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<sup>75</sup> Pomos 327

away in black parlance of “doing pretty good.” The former implies a day to gayness where the particularities are irrelevant whereas the latter connotative of an ability to breathe easier where self reflexivity is utilized to retain control of one’s self. E Patrick Johnson writes:

The performance of self is not a performance of identity for or toward an “out there” or even merely an attachment or ‘taking up’ of a predetermined discursively contingent identity. It is also a performance of self for the self in moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform ones views of self in relation to the world<sup>76</sup>.

Including the transgender in their performance opens up yet another conversation on the silenced within the canon of black theatre. For Dennis/Denise’s mother to feel that there would be lasting condemnation of her and her family because her son turned out to be of another gender raise the question of where is the education of the modern black family and why does it appear to remain mired in the traditional? “These long roots,” according to Kathryn Bond Stockton, “are sunk in a social field of values and are simultaneously lied about, cherished, spurned, held in secret, or sacrificed for public view.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the Pomos are struggling against a tradition that decrees the other must not come out of the closet but must remain secreted where the community will maintain your shameful identification.

For *Dark Fruit* is intended more for the black community as a heterogeneous group than for the homogenous black gay community. The revue’s episodes of contemporary black gay life point to the roots of the problem in that self acceptance and dis-identification cannot be reconciled. If the Pomos are telling the dominant straight black community (who unfortunately will not make up most of their audience) that their adherence to and allegiance with a narrow understanding of sexual variance within their community then the strength of the entire community ebbs.

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<sup>76</sup> E Patrick Johnson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University, 2005) 137-138.

<sup>77</sup> Kathryn Stockton Bond, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* ((Durham: Duke University, 2006) 23.

As we can see the overlap of identity and identification is the conflict between the black drama of the 1960s and what was to follow in the makings of black gay drama. The former saw the struggle to be against a dominant white culture that had devised and manipulated the status of black people (mostly black men) from the time of slavery. The acute elemental destruction of the black community therefore began with identification with anything that white culture might be accepting of. Of course homosexuality was a mystery to whites as well as blacks but the very idea of its “normality” became anathema to the black playwrights connected to the 60s Black Power movement. What they deemed appropriate was to identify with this radical venture rather than the more passive non resistance mode of King’s earlier movement. Anything passive was suspect to expulsion. The black patriarchy then was meant to replace the white patriarchy where the family structure and heteronormativity was the sole priority of black liberation. Working within the system seemed in the language of materialism, bourgeois and decadent.

### ***Civil Sex, Civil Rights and Sex***

After leaving the Pomos in 1997, Freeman began research on a non collaborative piece focused on the life of 50s political activist and openly black gay man, Bayard Rustin. Freeman’s play is interested in the intersection of sex and politics in American mainstream liberation movements. *Civil Sex*<sup>78</sup> negotiates cultural relativism with an emergent ideology of racialized and sexualized identity politics embodied by Rustin. In the canon of black gay theatre, it is a unique study in revealing the interstices where complex strategies of race and queer politics disrupt fixed masculinities and heteronormativity. For the black community a performativity of the hyper masculine is deemed standard as it offers a counter narrative against an historic

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<sup>78</sup> Brian Freeman, “Civil Sex,” *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004)101-141.

misrepresentation of African Americans males fostered and nurtured by racism, sex and class. Consequently “normalcy” and imagined community conspire to confine and control the nonstandard within the community acting as the double edge sword aimed at the throat of the sexually variant within the black community. Rustin’s resistance to the closet in the face of homophobia from blacks and whites in addition to his well known participation and valuable contribution to the black Civil Rights movement is the praxis of identity politics and grassroots organizing. My work investigates a historiographical reading of the complex interrelationships, personal and public, caused by Rustin’s presence as black and gay dramatized in Freeman’s work.

The Oxford English dictionary says the etymology of “civil” derives from late Middle English: via old French from Latin *civilis*, from *civis* meaning ‘citizen,’ while “sex” as a noun has a dual definition; sexual activity as in sexual intercourse and gender specification, “male or female.”<sup>79</sup> Of course gender variations as identificatory markers are not explicitly included in its definition; still I would suggest the spectrum of sexuality is implicit and therefore very much appropriate in discussing societal pressures to conform. Rustin’s life had always been about a legitimate striving toward full citizenship and a freedom to explore his same sex attraction in a society that denied him both privileges.

Freeman’s title “civil sex” forges a companionship exploring the relationship between intimacy and political sites of power. Along with every type of civic engagement in the American community witnessed in the struggles of blacks and gays simultaneously where the strategies and tactics of the former marginalized group would inform those strategies and tactics

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<sup>79</sup> Oxford Dictionary, “Civil,” and “sex” 15 March 2011  
<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/civil?q=civil>

of the latter suggest a teachable moment in causality, prominently wedged into the spaces in between that inform and guide the racial and sexual politics of the period. As we come to understand the discourse emanating from the concept of *civil sex*, we would find a highly complex representation of the main character through the observations of others through which to view the essential dramaturgical direction of the work linking the sociohistorical and geopolitical implications embedded in the narration itself.

Thus the notions of bifurcation situate the play, mapping a recurrent theme as the overarching signifier of Rustin's public/private life. His non masculinity as the nation-state would categorize him would seem to be the primary shaming agent that would seek to control his transgressive behavior. Freeman infuses an antithetical approach by illustrating through *mise en scene* Rustin's "normal" attraction to other men. His activism is not impeded by self-examination to the point of erasing this part of his authentic self. Rustin engages with a panoply of masculine identities throughout his life, sexual and non sexual, the play explores purposefully perplexities of masculinity, traditional to the hyper, finding the complex power relations and constructions of identity in a period of conflicting and confrontational political strategies of civil rights, translocal and transnational.

### **Civil Sex' Masculinist Dramaturgy**

*Civil Sex* opens with a Congressional address given by segregationist Southern Senator Strom Thurmond. Immediately the orality of governments becomes the landscape onto which Freeman casts Rustin and his antagonists; black and white, liberal and conservative, rich and poor, gay and straight, all separate and none equal. Using Thurmond as the mouthpiece for the conservative, homophobic reactionary, Freeman contextualizes his argument of "whose

freedoms represent the transgressive, whose freedoms represent the traditional?” framing them in the generally innocuous setting of Congress where Thurmond’s remarks are written into the record of the US Senate. Thurmond’s job is to discredit Rustin through accusations that expose his intimate personal life, mockingly referring to him as “Mister March on Washington.” Later in the scene, A Philip Randolph, black civil rights leader, socialist and trade unionist responds to the attack on Rustin.”The moral significance of the march—of whites and blacks...church members and labor groups marching together—will be to stress the great struggle for human dignity.”<sup>80</sup> Despite Thurmond’s final salvo aimed at Rustin’s moral character, exposing his “sex perversion” the exchange between conservative and community organizer defines differing political agendas that sound familiar to our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities where similarities and the repetitious political machinations were not lost on the fraught sociopolitical arena of the Civil Rights era. More importantly, it is Rustin’s black gay body that will be sacrificed, used by both sides in the politics of assimilation and separation.

*Civil Sex* uses characters central and peripheral to Rustin’s life. Amongst them is his boss A J Muste, a prominent white civil rights activist who was once Rustin’s boss, Shizu Proctor, an Asian American assistant, his lover Davis Platt, James Baldwin, Malcolm X and assorted acquaintances who encounter Rustin in various locations from gay bars to political protests. It is effectively a meta-narrative which drives this kind of documentary theatre expressing a number of advantages and disadvantages to Freeman’s telling of Rustin’s life. Freeman’s approach is advantageous in theatricalizing biography in that verbatim theatre essentially gives a holistic view of the subject.. Complicating the various biographical and historical narrations where homogeneity is challenged; the anecdotes offered by Rustin’s colleagues and friends describe an

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<sup>80</sup> Brian Freeman, “Civil Sex,” *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004) 102.

early progressive political activist who was not closeted and yet had to walk a fine line between being open and discreet. Government, local and federal contributes their own voice and assessment of Rustin through multiple arrests and public disclosure of his privacy. Power-knowledge and the lives of the citizen is the play's central debate.

As perceived immanence circumscribed around the polyvocal narrations, Freeman plays with a perplexity of identity. Attempts to remain consistent through standard and tradition confound black and gay subjectivity. It is the narration that speaks to modernity much like Obama's birth certificate travesty. M Jacqui Alexander writes, "These different narrations of time, 'these perverse modernities',...unravel that which has been normalized and normativized in modernity's desire to be seen as a single homogenous project."<sup>81</sup> Modernity as a unified project much like the monolithic and indeed homogenous Civil Rights movement (at least where Rustin was most active) directs the spectator to move from place to place, adapting and adjusting as Rustin was wont to do with succumbing to the closeted subject tactically utile to many who identified as homosexual. Perverse modernities are useful as locations of agency. Rustin's acquaintances, co-workers, friends and lovers, support Rustin's embodiment of emergent political inversion in service to the growing number of identity politics projects.

Identity and identification are seen to be fragmentary. Rustin's queerness, James Baldwin's queerness, Shizu's daughter who is part Japanese and part white struggle in what Munoz would characterize as a hostile public sphere, each laying out their own strategy of survival. The play positions the lives of the normative activists (mostly men) with the non-normative activists. As the historic events unfold, the nascent identity politics of other liberation

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<sup>81</sup> M Jacqui Alexander, "Transnationalism, Sexuality and the State: Modernity's Traditions at the Height of Empire," *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminisms, Sexual Politics Memory and the Sacred (Perverse Modernities)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 191.



movements form their own discourse. Freeman uses Rustin to act as conduit for two civil rights project: black and gay. In *Civil Rights and Black Sexuality* Thaddeus Russell writes: “There is [however] a striking way in which the two movements have been strikingly similar: both have demanded that in order to gain acceptance as full citizens, their constituents adopt the cultural norms of what they believe to be the idealized American citizen---productivity, selflessness, responsibility, sexual restraint, and the restraint of homosexuality in particular.”<sup>82</sup> In the world of play, Rustin embodies both movements. As a plot point, Rustin would prefer to remain in the closet. Yet throughout the play, he utters a plaintive and melancholic, “What is to become of us?”<sup>83</sup> indicating a complex reading of ambivalence and interiority. Ultimately his arrest on a morals charge is the moment where the nation-state actually acts for him in determining his status and it will from this point on where his homosexuality becomes the lens through which his life is examined.

Beginning in the 1940s, the play’s medico-historic context occurs during the intense debate in the field of psychiatry where most doctors were advancing the unfounded notion of homosexuality as a mental illness; the volatility of sociality would produce a sustained resistance against transgressive behavior, be it black or gay. It is here where Alexander explores the idea of tradition and barbarism. Alexander says, “...when tradition is paired with barbarism it is doomed to remain tradition, caught in a perennial struggle to beat back the modern in its unbounded desire for fixity and stasis.”<sup>84</sup> So, it is no stretch of the imagination to discover a close guarding of the patriarchy, where” positioning the nonpatriot terrorist with the power to

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<sup>82</sup> Thaddeus Russell, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality” *American Quarterly* 60.1 (Mar 2008) 101.

<sup>83</sup> Freeman 116.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander 220.

undo the secure border of the nation...”<sup>85</sup>, indeed the idea is to keep nation-state intact “rendering heterosexuality, consumerism and citizenship mutually contingent.”<sup>86</sup> The transgressive Rustin was fully aware of the limitations of the movement and yet was not without hope that the endeavor would change the thinking of the majoritarian to the extent where American society would become in time (Alexander would still argue that linear time is a patriarchal trap) women, gays, Latinos would also find their way into the mainstream. It really was a fight to move out of the lower class into the middle class. Alexander writes, “Thinking about these geopolitical histories of colonization, neocolonialism and neo imperialism together is also a way of thinking about the various ways in which racialization and colonization are being constantly written into modernity’s different projects. These different projects are occasioned by the uneven class relations and differentiations produced by neo-liberals capital dispersions.”<sup>87</sup> *Civil Sex* deftly incorporates into its dramaturgy Rustin’s trajectory as black and gay activist as encompassing a number of political identifications that suited the environs of the moment. As a symbol of the rend between the traditional and modernity, Rustin embodied the modern political operative.

Freeman includes another anthem, “The House I Live In” as further examination into Rustin’s patriotism. The lyrics are: What is America to me? /a name, a map, or a flag I see/a certain word, democracy/What is America to me?<sup>88</sup> It is what Homi Bhabha calls “the nation space” and its constructed narration. He says that “...people are neither the beginning nor the end of the national narrative: they represent the cutting edge and the totalizing powers of the ‘social’ as homogeneous, consensual community, and the forces that signify the more specific

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<sup>85</sup> Alexander 195.

<sup>86</sup> Alexander 196.

<sup>87</sup> Alexander 194.

<sup>88</sup> Freeman 129.

address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the populations.” (Bhabha 209)

Blacks attempting to enter into the American middle class had been written into the nation narrative with a specific role to play because the majoritarian would rather not confront the racist policies and actions of the past. In actively putting their movement on the front pages of the daily newspaper and more importantly on the newly invented television evening news, the black civil rights movement forced a dialogue with the prevailing regime, insinuating their voice into the national discourse. The song, *The House I Live In* is no different from the poetry of Langston Hughes; the idea is to question the very nature of the regime and what it purports to represent, democracy for all or democracy for some? It is the eternal question of the transitional.

It is in Rustin’s queerness where a slippage occurs that permeates what had been up to that time been considered normative. It is the linear that is relied on to control what is seen as a transgression against established law and tradition namely Jim Crow. ‘You must help your enemy to see you as a person who wants the same things he wants; love, a family, a job, respect.’<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, “He is human. He can treat you badly because he is afraid of you. If you show him love, you take away the reason for his fear, and make it harder for him to go on hating you.”<sup>90</sup> Rustin expresses an earnest belief in the tenet of non-violence does allow him to play different roles in the organization, masking him even more. It is said King recognized his intelligence and enthusiasm as it reminded him of his own. King and Rustin are seen to be merely two sides of the same coin. Freeman is gesturing toward an ideology that both men had been trained to in, namely Mahatma Gandhi’s “satyagraha” (an insistence on truth), where reconciliation between disputes was founded through teleological means.

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<sup>89</sup> Freeman 130.

<sup>90</sup> Freeman 130.

Brian Freeman's says in his introduction to *Civil Sex*, the play is about a search, a search of identity in a heretofore voiceless community, namely the dual voice of the black gay man. In making the play of Bayard Rustin's life more about the search rather than the definitive identity of either blackness or gayness, making properties of subject formation, the fragmentation of postmodern identity is allowed to creep into the mega narrative of the transitional liberation movement. Even with the black civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s acting as the space and place where we locate Rustin, it is the tacit marginalization of this black gay man and one time political revolutionary that sends him to the metaphorical back of the bus in the overarching narrative of racial and sexual politics of the era.

What were the complexities that prevented Rustin from full acknowledgement of his contribution to the black civil rights movement? Freeman describes his work on Rustin as a "process for looking." Foucault says, "Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective."<sup>91</sup> The practices of activism would seem to differ and change entirely depending on their effectiveness. The black Civil Rights movement had not ceased to strategize since the ending of the Civil War. The rights of blacks were always precarious. The institutionalization of Jim Crow laws in the late 1890s, divided the country into black and white and thus the apartheid system became the prevailing social contract. But the nation-state had always subsisted on cheap labor.

Rustin's leftist sentiments are seen to complicate his employment in leftist organizations while strengthening his resolve to avow the overlap between civil rights activism and other political identity movements. The translocal activism defined by Evelyn Tennant as begun by local activists who would then become national figures could apply to both Rustin and Martin Luther King. However, as King had not been the leader of political boycotts prior to his

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<sup>91</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 94.

appointment as titular leader of bus boycott, Rustin had been a community organizer from the 1940s. ‘It is our belief that without direct action on the part of groups and individuals, the Jim Crow pattern in the south cannot be broken.’<sup>92</sup> Rustin’s aim is to inject his black queer body into the core of King’s strategy. Building on his close relationship with King and their shared ideologies, Rustin exemplifies a phenomenological approach to breaking down racial barriers and in the process confronts the discourse surrounding sexual variance at the same time.

American hegemony’s determination to include and exclude the Other at the same time adhering to a fiercely held nationalistic resistance to ant-racist policies provides a context for Freeman’s play. The interests of the nation-state remain at the foundation of the civil rights movement. American nationalism have always exclude those not in the mainstream of its society i.e. white, Christian and heterosexual. The black movement for equal rights was a move into the middle class; it was a movement rooted in the same elements of nationalism and pan nationalism as many of the emerging liberation movements post WWII. Some of the answer must be found in the displays of power constructed by what M Jacqui Alexander would call heterosexual hegemony. Rustin being an open homosexual signified the complexity of not only black lives in America but American life. Nationalism is built upon the traditional family unit yet this is a recent development, as Benedict Anderson writes: “...if historians, diplomats, politicians, and social scientists are quite at ease with the ideas of ‘national interest,’ for most ordinary people of whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices.”<sup>93</sup> Yet, the nation-state’s continual demand of some of the civic subjects but not of the others indicates a concerted investment in withholding equal rights. Blacks were told

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<sup>92</sup> Freeman 120.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson 144.

not to agitate, change would occur “naturally” but the nation-state’s sense of time would never match the urgency of its interested subjects.

Rustin’s politics were problematic to the King organization because his arrest on morals charges and his past involvement with the communist party (something many Americans black and white were known to participate in during the Depression) the civil rights movement though mediatized by the 1950s, the pact with the federal government had been to reject communism and support American foreign policy. “Tennant says, “This not only put an end to the black left and vibrant black internationalism and Pan African of the Council on African Affairs but also for the most part disarticulated U.S and global struggles for racial equality.”<sup>94</sup> The civil rights movement then was a translocal organization utilizing tactics of boycotts and politics of respectability as its calling card. The overarching strategy of the non violent resistance was its primary tool to interface with white hegemony. Even though Rustin remained an activist his abilities were more and more minimized. Michelle Stephens says, “Any attempts on the part of black subjects to step outside of the national struggle and yoke themselves to the idea of the internationalist revolution has immediately crossed the border into a world where race constitutes a shaping force in the worlds system, in our notion of empire, civilization, and political economic development.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, the transgressive nature of Rustin’s past resonated within and without King’s organization as well as the American government’s surveillance of that organization.

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<sup>94</sup> Evelyn Tennant, “The United States Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Confines of the National.” Deciphering the Global: Its Spaces, Scales and Subjects (Routledge, 2007), 119-138.

<sup>95</sup> Stephens 178.

The heterosexualization of the black civil rights movement saw the upper stratum of the organization dominated by straight men. In fact, even though the movement was indeed launched by the arrest of a black woman, black women remained in the background. M Jacqui Alexander says the, "... heterosexualization is one of the processes through which globalization is aligned..."<sup>96</sup> It is in this atmosphere of post McCarthyism and the witch-hunt for communists and homosexuals that Rustin must negotiate. Political pressure to internally examine one's own organization before the national media performed that task for you was as prevalent then as today. The stories circulated about Rustin's homosexuality but the tactic of dealing with the Other was in keeping with the what Alexander calls the neo imperialist managers.

King came to embody the heteronormative model for the black civil rights project. "The construction of King himself as the masculine symbol of the movement was a deliberate attempt to remove the image of black deviancy and show that African Americans could be good citizens."<sup>97</sup> Still Rustin's inclination was to move ahead despite the roadblocks erected by the hetero-dominated movement. Russell writes:

In his personal life, Martin Luther king Jr. demonstrated no hostility toward homosexuality, nor did he live according to the codes of heterosexual propriety. He allowed the homosexual Bayard Rustin to be one of his closest advisors during the formative years of the civil rights movement, and in 1957, when James Baldwin was one of the most famous gay men in the United States, King warmly welcomed the author to Atlanta. King's extensive extramarital sexual activities, documented by the FBI, are now well known. Yet, in his public life, King launched a comprehensive attack on black queerness and did more than any other black leader of the twentieth century to efface the deviance of African American culture.<sup>98</sup>

Thus, despite King's underpinnings of benevolence, the organization, comprised mostly of black clergy could not contain its homophobic reactions toward homosexuals inside or outside

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<sup>96</sup> Alexander 246.

<sup>97</sup> Russell 118.

<sup>98</sup> Russell 116.

of the movement. One of the characters in the play, Reverend Shuttlesworth says, "... We called people back in those days sissies, we didn't use the word gay as much as you do now."<sup>99</sup> As long as Rustin remained closeted, he was tolerated. Rustin was ostracized and then faded away from King's inner circle of advisors. "Ultimately, however," Alexander goes on to say, "tradition, morality, law, Judea-Christian religion, the natural, and the heterosexual are multi-constitutive, policing various texts through various forms of masculinity and respectability while purporting to signal lesbians, gay men, and marginalized constituencies."<sup>100</sup> Maintaining a strict code of silence surrounding black gayness was seen as upholding a religious conviction that the act was against religious and heteropatriarchal dogma, thus a protective shell was formed to resist variance as part of the overarching civil injustice projects.

Freeman does not avoid the question of the splintered black community. There is an elaborate burlesque of the "Interracial Primer" which puts forth the absurd lights to which the nation-state, eager to entertain as itself as well as control, explicates a number of rules of etiquette to help ease the white population into the coming new racial attitude. Such "new" rules include:

- Explode racial misconceptions there is no difference between Negro and white blood. Anthropologists have found no basis for the notion that one race is innately superior to another.
- Work with Negroes to become intelligent consumers.
- Be diligent to treat Negroes with kindness and respect never use the term boy when speaking to a Negro man. Stand in the presence of Negro women.<sup>101</sup>

The primer is an actual artifact of the civil rights movement manner in which this section of the production is projected onto a screen with drawn figures standing in for "Negroes" and

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<sup>99</sup> Freeman 134.

<sup>100</sup> Alexander 207.

<sup>101</sup> Freeman 111-112.



whites. Theatricalizing tenets of the civil rights era as pedagogy of interracial relations, illustrates the very absurdist nature of the racialization in American culture. The nation-state's obsession with ordered behavior played out in commonsensical notions of mutual respect displays a gay man understanding of the power of negotiated respect. Rustin's seeming unflappable belief in the "kindness of strangers" may seem utopian to the academic yet it was strategy that proved teachable to the movement he was most intimately connected to and to the looming movement of gay liberation.

Although he is mentioned frequently, Martin Luther King does not appear in the play. Yet his normative representation is spectral. Thaddeus Russell writes: "The construction of King himself as the masculine symbol of the movement was a deliberate attempt to remove the image of black deviancy and show that African Americans could be good citizens."<sup>102</sup> Still Rustin's expertise at organizing is useful, allowing him momentary entry to the King's inner circle, despite the roadblocks erected by the hetero-dominated movement. Russell goes on to say:

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Thus, despite King's underpinnings of benevolence, the organization, comprised mostly of clergy could not contain its homophobic reactions toward homosexuals inside or outside of the movement. One of the characters in the play, Reverend Shuttlesworth says, "...We called people back in those days sissies, we didn't use the word gay as much as you do now." (Freeman 134)

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<sup>102</sup> Russell 118

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In another scene, the language of the closet is seen to be mediated through pop culture guardians of the black middle class such as "Our World," an African American "lifestyle" magazine whose 1954 issue addresses the subject of black homosexuality. The scene opens with a black Ozzie and Harriet at the breakfast table discussing homosexuality over their morning coffee: She says, "What causes homosexuality? Do the seeds lie in the environment or the emotional make up of the family?" The answers to both questions is: "Yes!" He: Low standards of housing, broken homes and "street corner" sex education are contributing factors." She: "What is the mother's attitude toward toilet training? Is the father a weak, ineffectual person?" Him: In simpler language---homosexuals are made not born."<sup>104</sup> The exchange is an example of the unsubstantiated discourse of 1950s American psychiatry filtered through a pop culture lens dramatized by Freeman. These are not strictly black American views but a middle class American consensus that the black middle class wish not to alienate. Freeman introduces what now might be seen as a camp moment but underpins the prevailing homophobic reaction against homosexual identification.

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<sup>103</sup> Alexander 207.

<sup>104</sup> Freeman 123.

Mapping the number of historic social, cultural and political conflagrations against the country's sudden interest in homosexual behavior, beginning in the 1940s, the play's use of a standard medico-historic diagnosis in the field of psychiatry where the prevailing wisdom over the notion of homosexuality as a mental illness emphasize the closeted response to cultural taboos against anything that might be seen as nonstandard. M Jacqui Alexander writes, "...when tradition is paired with barbarism it is doomed to remain tradition, caught in a perennial struggle to beat back the modern in its unbounded desire for fixity and stasis."<sup>105</sup> The transgressive Rustin was fully aware of the limitations of the movement and yet was not without hope that the endeavor would change the thinking of the majoritarian to the extent where American society would become in time (Alexander would still argue that linear time is a patriarchal trap) women, gays, Latinos would also find their way into the mainstream. "Thinking about these geopolitical histories of colonization, neocolonialism and neo imperialism together is also a way of thinking about the various ways in which racialization and colonization are being constantly written into modernity's different projects. These different projects are occasioned by the uneven class relations and differentiations produced by neo-liberals capital dispersions"<sup>106</sup>. *Civil Sex*' microcosm of each of the intensities that Alexander develops is shown their effect on the wider community as systematically they are confronted by a new method of resistance that destabilize hegemony, at least momentarily.

As the play moves back and forth in time, the spectator sees performative masculinities struggle to adopt non resistance. Pacifism is a literal political strategy, phenomenological representation and allusion to gay male role playing. Rustin's embrace of the strategy of non violence is vital to his relationship to the overarching narrative of the movement. 'You must help

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<sup>105</sup> Alexander 220.

<sup>106</sup> Alexander 194.

your enemy to see you as a person who wants the same things he wants; love, a family, a job, respect...He is human. He can treat you badly because he is afraid of you. If you show him love, you take away the reason for his fear, and make it harder for him to go on hating you.”

<sup>107</sup>Ironically, the top/bottom themes derived from gay parlance, passive resistance connotes a skewed perspective on masculinities where the “top” and “bottom” have become important signifiers in gay culture. The double push back against the notion of sexual variance is causality for the performative hyper masculinity to become the predominant image of later generations of young black males. Locating the non violent strategy in the same realm as de-masculinization read effeminacy complicates Rustin’s particular situation even more. In the diasporic liberation movements, bowing to resemblances of passivity was a demarcation of white decadence and therefore a trait to be occluded. I suggest Freeman is not neutral in the debate but nuances the argument again and again as he gestures toward the utopian, a more humaneness if you will.

As Rustin’s sexuality became problematic to the King organization his visibility waned. Michelle Stephens says, “Any attempts on the part of black subjects to step outside of the national struggle and yoke themselves to the idea of the internationalist revolution has immediately crossed the border into a world where race constitutes a shaping force in the worlds system, in our notion of empire, civilization, and political economic development.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, the transgressive nature of Rustin’s past resonated within and without King’s organization as well as the American government’s surveillance of that organization. The translocal then is subject to its own rules of power, generally dictated to it by the nation-state which wants to prohibit sex it deems illicit. Foucault says “to deal with sex, power employs

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<sup>107</sup> Freeman 130.

<sup>108</sup> Stephens 178.

nothing more than a law of prohibition. <sup>109</sup> Thus the civil rights project would adapt itself to the rules of hegemony for the larger purpose of rescinded racist laws. To Rustin credit, after his arrest, had nothing to hide. “Is celibacy the answer?” he asks, “If, so, how can I develop an inner desire for it? <sup>110</sup> The desire is what the power wants to prohibit and the most effective way to prohibit desire is through punishment where “the heterosexualization of morality and the reinvention of a heterosexual-only tradition...”<sup>111</sup> Rustin had already been exposed to this kind of punishment by being caught having sex in a park in Pasadena, California in 1953.

### **Enter Malcolm X**

Malcolm X is introduced late in act two to explore the coming chasm between what would be seen as the assimilationist King movement and a radical re-imagining of racial politics espousing a more aggressive stance against American racist policy. Malcolm X as the performative hyper masculine signifier was to assert his movement’s priorities in the break from King. Freeman takes a verbatim exchange between Rustin and Malcolm X from a radio program debate in 1963. Malcolm X states:

Here in America, the black man is the minority. When you call yourself “sitting down with the white man” all he has to do is let you sit down. He can get someone else to run his factory or whatever else he has to do. Many of these whites who pose as liberals and act as advisors for Negro leaders, such as yourself and Dr. King, tell you, “Be hopeful. Be peaceful. Turn the other cheek.”<sup>112</sup>

Rustin rejoins, “But do you believe brotherhood is possible here?”<sup>113</sup> Malcolm X clearly does not. In his response to Rustin, he says, “Integration is hypocrisy...”<sup>114</sup> Like the opening with Thurmond and Randolph, the choice to include Malcolm X as the ultimate counterpoint to

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<sup>109</sup> Foucault 84.

<sup>110</sup> Freeman 110.

<sup>111</sup> Alexander 206.

<sup>112</sup> Freeman 137.

<sup>113</sup> Freeman 137

<sup>114</sup> Freeman 137.

Rustin returns the play to distinct political thinkers. The neo colonial subject was no longer according to Malcolm X to be seen as docile performers in re-claiming their right to be full citizens in the nation-state but under their own terms. Malcolm X responds to Rustin saying: “If anytime, sir, you have to pass a law that will make the white man accept you into his society, that’s not brotherhood, that’s hypocrisy...” Malcolm X is operating from a Pan Africanist lens where the liberation of blacks from a postcolonial strategy of assimilation is to be rejected. The nation’s narration, in this case Pan African solidarity, depends on blacks reclaiming their own history/destiny in reaction against hegemonic histories. “Most activists were embedded, at least temporarily, in places as well as in relational contexts that connected them to, rather than separating them from other places and activists.”<sup>115</sup> Clearly, Malcolm X was in line with the transnational human rights projects where the theory of the nation-state’s narrative being the repository of those in power can be seen in the writings of Homi Bhabha.

Malcolm X’s move away from the Judeo-Christianity of King and Rustin’s black civil rights movement would effectively give birth to a number of black organizations with their own agendas such as SNCC which spawned student protests to help South African blacks in their struggle against their own apartheid regime. Like Rustin, utilizing the power of theatricality in creating images of black power rather than acquiescence, Malcolm X’s articulate hyper masculine image was concomitant to that of King. Yet this is where the comparison ends. He explains his transnational activism: “If any time, sir, you have to pass a law that will make the white man accept you into his society, that’s not brotherhood, that’s hypocrisy. If a man holds a gun on you to make you put your arm around me and pretend you love me, that’s not

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<sup>115</sup> Tennant 132.

brotherhood, that's hypocrisy."<sup>116</sup> To Malcolm then it is hypocrisy to force the "different" together through laws of tolerance. He goes on to say, "Now, if the white man would accept the black man into his school, neighborhood, social, economic and political system without laws having to be passed, then we would go for that. We would say that that's brotherhood."<sup>117</sup> So where King would see the usefulness of a strategy to distribute power "enacted through laws constructed from a knowledge-base" the more radical Malcolm X would say this kind of legislated morality is a temporality therefore merely trading one kind of slavery for a happier slavery.

Furthermore, Marxist economic theory, elemental in the cosmology of a Pan African movement puts an emphasis on community as economic, social and cultural collective which played a significant role in how shapers of a post Civil Rights and Malcolm X generation of young black intellectuals saw the importance of the heteronormative paradigm as prescriptive. Subsequent hegemonic policy saw an overreach of capitalism whereupon neo liberal polices stepped in to upend the scale of the burgeoning pan ethnic movements. The expanding solidarity among groups within Islamic theocracies against the state of Israel and the formation of groups grounded in Islamic Fundamentalism thwarted an evolutionary process of inclusiveness seized in the last years of his life by Malcolm X. Rustin would cling to assimilation and integration seeing it's advantages for the black and gay movements and as a consequence the most efficacious strategy for the for younger generation of black men and black gay men. However, post 9/11 saw a complication in nation-state policies involving young black men including an influx of drugs into the black community, draconian drug laws and an increase in the incarceration rate and thus disenfranchisement of many black men.

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<sup>116</sup> Freeman 137.

<sup>117</sup> Freeman 137.

Still, Rustin's meeting and exchange with Malcolm X signaled a new era in mediated negotiation where dialogue would act as the main conduit through which opposing views could be aired and examined. In a sense the black gay man was now center stage, straddling the old and the new. Ironically, it is Malcolm X's militant urgency that would inform the protests surrounding the coming AIDS crisis. Gay groups such as ACT UP would not wait passively for governments to decide to be tolerant in acknowledging their community's losses and in demanding an accelerated process for releasing new drugs to soothe the afflicted. In effect, it is the radicalism of Malcolm X that has informed liberation movements since King's murder in 1968. Rustin's open homosexuality associated with the middle class ethic King saw as the conduit to a better life for millions of the underclass, black and white, collides with Malcolm X's separatist ideas of liberation. Rustin's gay sensibilities saw solidarity in "oneness" and perhaps, the universality of human experience whereas Malcolm X saw the passive channeling of a disenfranchised group fighting for a place at the table as deleterious to that process. Both of these men had as their goal empowerment, their strategies were axiomatically different but the end game for Rustin and Malcolm X was the rejection of the status quo. Citizenship and sex remains in the interstices of the activist subject crossing borders of race, ethnicity and orientation.

### **Civil/ Sex**

The final moments of the play return to Rustin and Baldwin. The ideas of citizenry and sexuality have been batted back and forth between the two during the course of the play. Baldwin sees the compromises of Rustin's politics as outmoded. Indeed he is correct because of the intense legal challenges faced by the LGBT community as "culture wars" becomes the cornerstone of a wave of conservative policies to come. The polity is never a place where one strategy fits all; the black community is well aware of the number of infringements on their civil



rights and thus citizenry since what was called the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. Adjusting to the real politics of the moment is always advisable. In response to Rustin's affirming intergrationist ideology in the face of series of reforms for labor, black students demand for black studies programs, Baldwin offers:

But Bayard it's nation time. The righteousness of youth trumps the discourse of reason. The faux British accent becomes an anachronism. Eclipsed. Ignored. Irrelevant? The old lion, wounded, retreats.<sup>118</sup>

Baldwin's nation time sets in motion a different conversation between the traditional and the modern strategies of political activism. In using Rustin's biography to point out the differences and the similarities in the activism on the transnational as opposed to the translocal identify politics plays out in the very local matrices of power Foucault would be more inclined to find the most efficacious. Rustin's cosmopolitan nature was very necessary to his effectiveness within the black civil rights movement and later making adjustments to what was seen as the radical black politics of the late 1960s. In the global liberation projects, the scale of negotiation with the nation-state is no less one-sided and sacrificial as the liberation movement in the United States. No movement can ever be constructed exactly the same as the movement before it, the state adapts to the transgressions and the citizen subject must adapt also. It is the reason why Rustin's example of the translocal activist is something to be studied. Freeman's play does not pretend to be an experimental theatre piece but it is experiential theatre where the struggles of a marginalized group are prescribed to utilize the progressive political markings directing the spectator to resist passivity.

Yet in its non-experimental dramaturgical structure, Rustin's story becomes absorbed into American mythology where the individual's stance against injustice is meant to resonant

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<sup>118</sup> Freeman 141.

across a generation of theatre-goers but in actuality may have more substantial appeal to a certain audience from a certain era. As assimilationist strategies have taken over black and LGBT politics in America, where even the most radical of activists seem to acquiesce to the traditional and normative. What is useful for the modern activist/spectator is *Civil Sex*' pedagogy. By the play's end, Rustin is literally wrapped in the rainbow flag by his lover. He has not been forgotten but rather what is discovered is his allegiance to an integrationist model has been adopted by several subsequent liberation movements; witness the current gay marriage controversy. We learn what Rustin learned about the advantages and disadvantages of visibility for those who struggle for recognition and full citizenship.

### Chapter 3 Documenting Black Gay Folks in E Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea*

“Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves.”-- Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

“Ironically, it is precisely what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability.”--Carol Martin, *Bodies of Evidence*

“Bearing witness to someone else's story is a gift.”-- E Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea*

In the last twenty-five years, documentary theatre has become increasingly ubiquitous in popular culture. Western theatre practitioners have turned to this genre of theatre again and again to dramatize various themes, amongst them; historic events, famous trials, marginalized groups and social movements. Recent works by Anna Deveare Smith, Moises Kaufman, and Charlayne Woodard (to name just a few) attest to the practitioner's fundamental process of taking oral accounts, transcribing the recollections into dramatic narrative and then performing these individuals in a re-enactment of events. It is through their acting out of oral histories that the spectator is invited to experientially participate, to witness a number of perspectives of the event in the words of those who lived through the event, channeled through the performer's body. Of course this prompts much discussion of intent and authenticity. Janelle Reinelt writes, “Over-determined by anti-theatricalism's distrust of mimesis, it is easy to see why documentary claims are almost always met with both excitement and suspicion.”<sup>119</sup> The excitement stems from a marginalized group's sudden visibility and therefore potentiality whereas the suspicion comes from the performative actor who even at their most sincere aspiration becomes what Mikhail

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<sup>119</sup> Janelle Reinelt, “The Promise of Documentary,” *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 4.

Bakhtin describes as the “author image”<sup>120</sup> meaning in the context of theatre the playwright/performer is the empowered presence who selectively edits their research merely for the sake of its theatricality. It is through an investigation of these performance genealogies, generally producing an archive stemming from ethnographic methodology and the theatricalization of the document that inform this discourse on the ontology of this performance genre in staging the lives of “others.”

In this chapter I explore E Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Oral History*, a documentary theatre piece presented in 2010 adapted from his interviews with black gay Southern men. His documented interviews are structured from oral histories similar to the research of another black ethnographer, Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>121</sup> Like Hurston, Johnson inserts himself into the narratives of those interviewed. Their research shares an overall methodological transgression of self-inscription where their biography bleeds into the interviewee’s recounts acting as connective, explicating narrative. But unlike Hurston, Johnson departs from the traditional content of black folklore narratives by including and emphasizing same sex attraction. By transmitting his narratives into theatre, the heretofore maligned black homosexual in black American dramatic literature is afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves on such topics as education, family relations, homo/sexuality, coming out and religion. Johnson’s performative practice (as interviewer and then performer of the interviewed) and the intentional effect of that performance in his exploration of sexual variance within the confines of Southern culture provide a lens into the complications and potentialities of making

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<sup>120</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin explores the idea of the author image in his essay “Discourse in the Novel.” In the essay, he argues most poetic genres are monologic. In the case of *Sweet Tea* I would suggest, the heteroglossia Bakhtin espouses is indeed to be found in the dramatization of the lives of the interviewees thereby making this “poetic” genre dialogic. 14 Jan 2012 [http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3304/2008-2009/07BakhtinDiscourseintheNovel\(Overview\).pdf](http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3304/2008-2009/07BakhtinDiscourseintheNovel(Overview).pdf)

<sup>121</sup> Hurston’s ethnography of rural Southern blacks, *Mules and Men* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008) was first published in 1935.

visible black gay lived experience. What interests me most is an interrogation of *Sweet Tea* as it travels from document to theatre, archive to repertoire. Does documentary theatre serve in understanding this particular marginalized group or given the dearth of distinguished black gay performance simply muddy the waters further? Or does the performance's subversive phenomenological engagement portend<sup>122</sup> less visibility? What about spectator response? Certainly, the play adds to the discourse on black gay aesthetics and in doing so disrupts the traditional masculinist focused drama pervasive in the black family narrative. At the same time, in adapting the archive to drama, the language of the closet as described by Sedgwick and evidenced in their liminal identity prepare a space for re-interpretation when performed by Johnson. Individual stories attest to strategies and tactics employed that may act as pedagogy for a subset of an already marginalized group and to that end, their own cultural agency. Keeping this in mind, I explore the constraints and opportunities that emerge out of this performance. What is significant about this type of theatrical gesture is that it enhances the black queer aesthetic.

### *Sweet Tea and New Orality*

In the introduction to *Sweet Tea* (the document) Johnson's ethnographic research method is carefully explicated. "Rather than approach this project by employing a traditional text-based historiography," Johnson explains, "I felt it was important to employ oral histories as the key methodology."<sup>123</sup> Johnson working approach is that of a performance studies scholar and ethnographer. His ethnographic methods are drawn from the work of D. Soyini Madison<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> In her essay "The Promise of Documentary" Janelle Reinelt describes the documentary as taken from a document. One of the descriptions she provides says, "The value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement." p7

<sup>123</sup> E Patrick Johnson. *Sweet Tea* (Chapel Hill: University of Northj Carolina, 2008) 7.

<sup>124</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics and Performance*. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc, 2012).

whose treatise on critical ethnography dispenses a modern understanding of the processes and methodologies of research outside of one's culture. In Johnson's case, the gay, black southern culture can be claimed as his biography but his approach remains consistent with Madison's suggested guidelines. I will list two which I think are germane to Johnson's work:

- Your positionality as an advocate must be acknowledged through self-reflexive reporting.
- In instances where your advocacy position or the position of your consultants places them or others in a questionable or negative light, you must consider the context of their lives in relation to structures of power that constitute their actions, culture and history.<sup>125</sup>

Madison's emphasizes to the author a clear ethical intent, admonishing them to understand their own motivation for undertaking the project. Since ethnography is more qualitative than quantitative, when approaching this kind of research through the lens of the performance studies scholar she asserts the methodologies be rooted in analytical observances of cultural practice without the conclusions of the historical cause and effect. Johnson concurs stating since his biography is the same as his subjects a certain sensitivity is inherent. Consequently he allows the subjects to define the perimeters of the conversation, revealing and self-editing how they managed to survive in a sometimes hostile environment yet able to explore their particular sexual identity in a community that desires their silence.

The use of oral history as the method of gathering the stories has a dual purpose for Johnson: one is the storytelling practice so closely associated with southern culture and "moreover, oral histories...in some ways provide an easier route into the lives of sexual dissidents, especially in the face of archivists, families of deceased queers, and other holders of queer history who are reluctant or unwilling to allow access to materials."<sup>126</sup> The use of the one

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<sup>125</sup> Madison 151-154.

<sup>126</sup> Johnson 7. Johnson cites as his source John Howard's work, Men Like That: A Southern Queer History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), about gay life in the south after WWII to the present day.

on one interview is central to the documentation of the lives of black gay men and yet problematizes the performance of those same stories on the stage. Furthermore, Johnson's positionality precludes a negative portraiture of black gay men that is in keeping with the rupture between what was considered formalist ethnography and a modern reading of the context of marginalized peoples' lives. *Sweet Tea* indexes oral tradition as used in the archival method of documentary theatre and critical ethnography. Having utilized the oral tradition, the exposed tensions between the traditional and the contemporary as it travels from document to stage invites a closer scrutiny of that tradition in African American narrativity.

If we refer to Carol Martin's descriptions of documentary theatre, we will find one of the tenets being "To elaborate the oral culture of theatre."<sup>127</sup> The African tradition of the griot, storyteller, would seem to preserve the link between African folklore and African American folklore where the oral tradition has long been considered by anthropologists and ethnographers as the main tool of communication by which African/American heritage is remembered and preserved<sup>128</sup>. In the past, an overdetermined notion of oral tradition promulgated by formalists sought to structure definite distinctions in oral tradition thus binding oral societies into rigid thinking about their pasts. The oral history" is in my estimation problematic as being the reliable source for ethnographers or historians in recording remembrances of events from their black subjects. I say overdetermined because of the lack of nuance missed by the recorder as well as related as a self-editing for the purposes of tradition or safety by those being interviewed. In this way the oral history becomes a part truth, part performance, depending on who is telling or

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<sup>127</sup> Carol Martin, "Bodies of Evidence" *TDR*. 50.3 (Autumn 2006) 11.

<sup>128</sup> David William Cohen, "The Undefining of Oral Tradition" *Ethnohistory* 56.1 (Winter 1989). In his essay, Cohen argues against a formalist definition of oral tradition by citing Anthropologist David Henige's work *Oral Historiography*. Henige says of oral tradition, "Strictly speaking, oral traditions are those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture. Versions that are not widely known should rightfully be considered 'testimony' and if they relate to recent events they belong to the realm of oral history." Cohen argues the definitions are not as distinct as Henige professes.

retelling the story. I include this Eurocentric reading of oral history because it was widely thought this was the sole method in which the Africans communicated their history; many early white ethnographers relied on this bit of deduction in their embrace of the oral history as representing a way of relating passed onto the generations of African Americans as true way of recording their experience. As Cohen's essay on African oral tradition attests, there have always been regional aspects of oral tradition where those who have access to the knowledge of the community were asked to give witness as well as other complexities that tended to be overlooked. The complexities would include the area of sexual variance where the black community would certainly know about it but never have admitted to the behavior and perhaps issues of divided within the community that were present i.e. religious and spiritual differences, education etc that would be cause for the critical ethnographer to seek the groups within the groups like peeling back the layers of an artichoke to get a fuller description of the stories being related. In this regard, Johnson's performance ethnography is to be categorized.

Johnson cites an affinity to Hurston by patterning his research into the marginalized lives of the other alongside hers. Comparatively, Hurston interviewed her subjects at a time when their ability to read and write was limited by their race and class. The argument could be made the commonality with Johnson's subject is their blackness. Both share the same political position in a severely restricted legal system. But like Hurston's subjects whose characterizations were written into her novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Johnson's subjects move onto the theatrical stage. Hurston's archive based on primary orality defined as a culture with no access to reading and writing as opposed to Johnson's research based on secondary orality where a culture with some access to reading and writing. The distinction is not as rigid as it may appear at first glance because even though there is a lack of access to formal reading and written skills,



cultures tend to adapt and develop communication practices that suit their needs and give meaning to the shared history of the community. To illustrate this point, both Hurston and Johnson include the vernacular readings of their subjects; their language is recorded as they uttered it. Still there is room for critique. The departure from a formal anthropological structure caused Hurston's works to be dismissed and marginalized to the extent where Hurston's biography reflected her disputed and research and consequently impugned her reputation as a serious ethnographer.<sup>129</sup>

Like Hurston, Johnson's re-imagined interpretation of formal ethnography allows for his self-inscription as he lays out his "arrival story."<sup>130</sup> His use of personal observation as he narrates the chapters in a foreword is meant to give context and an objective, full sounding to the men interviewed. Instead of the classical ethnography condoned by a strict code of anthropological methodology, the performance ethnography combines the concepts in performance studies with that of the ethnographer resulting in a hybrid intended to give a fuller account of the lived experience of the marginalized subject. Johnson's deliberate and serious minded approach is to step back and let these men have their say on a number of topics and at the same permit the reader to ruminate. On an author's interpretation, Madison writes: "Analysis invites the reader to enter more layers."<sup>131</sup> As a study in performance ethnography, the men were engaged in conversations about their experiences in different areas of social interaction; sexual and political. For instance, their approach and experimentation in sexual situations would seem to be no

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<sup>129</sup> Hurston's impugned reputation is interrogated in an essay by D.A. Boxwell in "Sis Cat' as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*. *African American Review*. 26.4 (1992)

<sup>130</sup> "Arrival story" is a poetic description used in ethnography as the familiar trope where the ethnographer enters into the native community. Boxwell writes, "This trope establishes the fieldworker's presence, authorizes her account, and then allows her to recede from the description that follows, subsequently suppressing 'the writer's genuine participation throughout the remainder of the text in order to establish the 'scientific' authority of the 'observation.'" p.611

<sup>131</sup> D. Soyini Madison, Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics and Performance (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc, 2012) 243.

different from the experimentation of a hetero oriented adolescent; the demystification of sexuality is as much their aim as their straight counterparts. However, once the realization is made of same sex attraction, a community power asserts a restrictive influence to their exposing the revelation. Johnson in his intent to be a co-producer with these men allows each to divulge his experience, recording the conversations verbatim. When reading these narrations several factors surrounding southern regionalism and the closet become clear.

Still, the question of who is in control of the mediated narrative, author or subject, lingers. The axiomatic response would be the men interviewed become the primary source, the archive, of any subsequent re-imagined mediatization of the oral histories. Diana Taylor defines the archive as "...the beginning."<sup>132</sup> Described as the place where knowledge is stored, power is invested in the entity. The written /oral divide as Taylor attests does not necessitate that one has predominance over the other. Meaning there is not a struggle between the two as both act as mnemonic transmitters and animator for the repertoire. Moreover the argument can be extended to the repertoire as a place to transmit knowledge<sup>133</sup> therefore performance can live in both the moment and the reproduction. Tampering with the document as it is transmitted into stage performance cannot help but produce mediation. Johnson writes, "Thus, it was also important to me that I conduct an oral history project that would take advantage of my training in performance studies and ethnography, for the sensuousness of performance ethnography—the smell, taste, touch, sight, and sounds of the cultural space of the other—is also part of the southern way."<sup>134</sup> Writing and performing against this strict boundary of the South as a place of racial and class tensions, the spaces between the elongated oppression of blacks is where

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<sup>132</sup> Diana Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 19.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor 16

<sup>134</sup> E Patrick Johnson, Sweet Tea (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 8.

Johnson's men assert their very real contribution to the community they helped to form and furthermore their presence stands as a signifier for the marginalized in communities black and white outside of the South.

Departing from the masculinist narrative traditionally preferred by the black community, Johnson's subjects are not only asked to give testimony to preserve an unwritten account of their experiences as black and gay but they also provide ethical commentary on a variety of societal issues that address their political and social acculturation. For example, when C.C. is asked to describe growing up gay and black in Mississippi in the 1970s, he answers:

[...] When I was growing up, and this goes back to really what I know I can thank God for. Back in junior high, I was going like to parties. I was going to grown folks' parties. Because there were gay men in the community that were very sophisticated. And this is something I tell everybody. I grew up around very sophisticated black gay men, and in some ways I didn't know of any other thing. So that's why when I kind of started traveling and I would always think, Well why are these rich men..." be it Jewish, white or whatever, European, would be all over me. And I got it. I had the best education in terms of being well read, how to eat, how to have a wide palate. So when you're traveling, a young black man, and then meeting these people and going, "Oh this is different from even where I come from." So I think that was still that old school, where people were just not allowing you to be anything. They had a vested interest in your well-being<sup>135</sup>.

Such testimony gives the reader/spectator a glimpse into contemporary American social culture refuting the misrepresented notion that there was no "sophisticated" gay life in the black community and the "old school" strategy of educating our own was indeed prevalent and in C.C.'s case prescriptive. Using the voices of these men in conjunction with his own black gay voice, Johnson opens a space where their "talk back" establishes a dialogic tactic of negotiation between opposing forces. Writing about reflexivity, Victor Turner offers:

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<sup>135</sup> Johnson 101

...performance reflexivity is a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves.<sup>136</sup>

Through their self-reflexivity, black gay men as a marginalized group with their own set of sociocultural expressions are uncovered in a public space once deemed illegitimate by the larger community. Thus the divide begins to narrow where discursive impediment existed.

*Sweet Tea*'s overall liminality gestures toward pedagogy as fluid peripatetic. When the question of sexual identity is examined, these men from wide ranging communities within the Southern states offer anecdotes of commonality, while elucidating varying perspectives based on their individual circumstances their comfortability with all or partial degrees of the contemporarily held notion of being openly gay. When asked how he felt about being a black gay man, R. Dioneaux, one of the pre-op transgender, says, "I am a human being who is gay. Who is black? I am a human being who is black. I am a human being who, at the moment, is male. At least the shell says that. The vessel says that. The driver's license says that. I put I put the emphasis on, "I am a human being who is..." The noun is more important than the adjective for me..."<sup>137</sup> Revealed in her answer is the conscious/unconscious strategies of survival, maneuvering in the quotidian in a search for identity and identification. It also speaks to the fragmentation of the noun and imposed adjectives. Here the conversation accomplishes a dual process in the methodology of oral history where the ignored voice of black gay man is amplified by one black gay man who in turn represents a project that incorporates "multitudinous story-

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<sup>136</sup> Johnson, E Patrick, ed.. Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 24.

<sup>137</sup> Johnson Sweet Tea 390.

telling voices.”<sup>138</sup> Their homogenized language is their place of immanence while a range of black gay performativity is actualized in staging.

To trouble this point of objectivity just a bit further, it might be argued the black and gay community upon seeing the production rather than reading about its origins would seem to accept at once Johnson’s portrayals because of a familiarity with “reality” as the mode most politically galvanizing for the community. In an earlier chapter (“Norman in Exile”), I have spoken of Harry Elam’s theory of the “reality check” as the traumatic moment that is pivotal to a collective black activism, citing the repetitive circulation of a mediated captured violence directed against black people namely the beating and murder of Emmett Till and later the beating of Rodney King. Using theatre as metaphor for identity politics, this “reality” is the cathartic moment made several times larger on a scale of intensity by a history of compounded atrocities. Digestion of this realness moved the black community to take action against the oppressive and dismissive nature of the nation-state. Thus the documentary approach is a moment of pedagogy for the black community as well as for the nation-state. But what if queer resists realism?

Of course, manner and mode of representation do have their repercussions in *Sweet Tea*’s conversion to a play. Summarily, the way the black gay men are read and then “read” as they are performed discloses the danger of what Reinelt described as the anti-theatrical “suspicion” of mimesis. Portraying these lives on stage exposes them to the constraints of the newly visible where their presence complicates the traditional structure of black narrativity. The intermittent black gay character (generally the sissy) that had been seen in black drama since the 1960s became a trope of sexual variance used by black playwrights to assert the hyper masculine and a denunciation of the black homosexual as being the de-masculinization perpetuated by white

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<sup>138</sup> Johnson 606.

hegemony. Of course, this homophobic response is reaction to the historic injustice and misrepresentation of black men traced back to the minstrel image and to the sudden emergence of black competition with working class white males as a result of the black civil rights gains in the 1960s. *Sweet Tea*'s circumscribing of the black gay experience is sutured to the heteronormative black experience and consequently reifies an image of shame and prejudice, threatening the traditional values of the black community. This threat re-enforces the language of the closet and suddenly the "down low" becomes the legitimized discourse surrounding black sexual variance.

The manner in which these men speak of their lives gives a clue as to the strategic movements of a subculture that devised its own coded gestures and language in an effort to keep themselves safe within their community. Unlike much of the larger white gay community, the ability for these men to move away from their homes was not possible because of a variety of reasons. The communication within the small towns of the South amongst black and white gays was not a strict possibility because of racial segregation and a strict observance of Jim Crow culture. Consequently, the places for Southern black gay men and white gay men to exchange information as to any nascent political activity were hardly doable.

For whatever is lost in translation as the archive is adapted into the repertoire, the actuality of performance of the archive must imbricate the entire range of possibility and a realization of constraints. Johnson's performance ethnography is useful and essential on the level of its uniqueness and by the exposure of the black gay lens on a variety of subject. What the research reveals is the history of the black homosexual and heterosexual communities is connected by way of their mutual modes of survival. Their histories cannot be rendered into a dyad where the perspective of each respective group is seen to contradict or differ mightily from

one another as their histories are intertwined. It is in the performance though where theatre comes into contact with historic (mis) representations of black male and the archive is adapted into Western theatre practices like documentary theatre where the cunning aspect of misrepresentation invites conscientious inquiry and serious intent.

### ***Sweet Tea's Transformation into Documentary Theatre***

The point of *Sweet Tea's* performance ethnography methodology is to provide an archive of black gay southern men. At first this may seem axiomatic but as Madison describes the many ways the ethnographer can become the conduit through which the subject is accessed and experienced, it may be the marginalized's *unchosen* way to record their story. This is to say that the avenues of communication where the explicit aim is to reveal a subculture little exposed to the public will search for a variety of outlets to gain visibility. Madison convincingly argues it is a method for expanding American historical memory. The act of remembering as a recuperative is a pivotal tactic for those wishing to forge a connection between the performance ethnography and documentary theatre. Carol Martin writes "Contemporary documentary theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history—the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscape of their lives."<sup>139</sup> Martin's assessment gives a good definition for this genre of theatre but I would emphasize the complexities she speaks about as it applies to the very different experiences of men and women in the same social setting. Although this theatre's objective is to help contextualize some past event that resonates and at best parallels something in the present, it does necessarily plot an understanding of past events in an egalitarian manner. Diana Taylor tells us, "Performance

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<sup>139</sup> Martin 9.

genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves.”<sup>140</sup> Thus, the authors of these productions are then responsible to the facts of the stories that are trying to re-tell. Particularly when the subject of the performance crosses sexuality and race, a potentiality of alterity is at play in revealing what had been secreted or invisible or even misconstrued.

Considering Bakhtin, Johnson as *author image* embodies his characters’ active interrogation of sexual exploration. Speaking about the manner in which they use their bodies is the performative gesture most discomfiting to their relatives and subsequently the black community. Moving his body suggestively in some of the narratives is a deliberate pedagogical exercise where Johnson invokes a freedom of black gay physical desire and sensuality inherent in their identity. “If boundaries, prohibitions and taboos are to be tested,” writes Chris Jenks,” in a transgressive manner then the relationship between the perpetrator and the act must be willful and intended, not accidental or unconscious.”<sup>141</sup> Perpetrator is a term of criminality term not used by Jenks to describe the transgressor but evokes a racialized lens of overwhelming criminal behaviors ascribed to black men. In Johnson’s case and thereby his characters, the performance is a willful act targeting a taboo. The effect is that the transgressive acquire a voice and a platform to explore the interstices between appropriation and assimilation where the identifying cultural markers are no longer denied the ability for a “talk-back” to the majoritarian. It is the absence of the marginalized in history that make the telling of their stories so vital. In fact, the talk back becomes recuperative for the actor and the spectator. The genre is particularly useful to LGBT and people of color because it allows for the transitory history Martin writes about to finally have a hearing. As an example, *Sweet Tea*’s black gay men tell us what we could not know about a sexual agency practiced by black gay men in the American South.

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<sup>140</sup> Taylor 5.

<sup>141</sup> Chris Jenks, *Transgression*, (London: Routledge, 2003) 177



As dramaturgy documentary theatre is pastiche borrowing from theatre conventions, testimonials, and oral interpretation in service to remembering the past, determined by the most sophisticated technology i.e. the tape recorder, video camera etc. The methodology surrounding the gathering of these narratives relays to the audience that the story performed is based on a verbatim conversation. Since the audience was not present at the taped interview, there is understandably no way they can extrapolate from the interviews the complexities of the described events. The argument that arises from a reliance on these technologies to hold the conversation as “evidence” as it is transmitted in a theatricalized form, would caution that the author of the piece acts as judge and juror where their presence will subversively or covertly seep into the performances’ verisimilitude. Drawing on the document as evidentiary material, Diana Taylor would say the body of evidence does not lie with the written and the oral history as places where authority can be claimed *per se* but instead between the archival material and the repertoire or embodied practice/knowledge.<sup>142</sup> Taylor says it is the interaction of the archive and repertoire as a marker of what is possible to learn and understand about cultures that have been dismissed or erased by the dominant social order. Carol Martin writes, “Ironically, it is precisely what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability.” At first this seems contradictory but in looking at Johnson “performance” it manages to borrow from the archive and still remain a viable albeit mediated mode of re-telling the lives of these men.

In dealing with the past, the documentary theatre re-creates a past with a future in mind. To be clear, the staging of history is meant to find the audience for what will make the past event actually meaningful in the present. This may or may not be successful but what is consequential

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor 19.

is that those individuals are suddenly included. It is the gathering of the information, in many cases; an ethnographical method is utilized to gather the lived experience of those remembering the event as a credible foundation for the type of production elicited by the testimonials. From the *Laramie Project* to *Sweet Tea*, the taped interviews, the compilation of the interviews into book form and the third transmission of their narratives into staged performance are illustrative of the archive transmitted through mediation and consequently, some realization surrounding social behavior is discovered.

Placing the representation of black gay males in the genre of documentary theatre brings the sociohistoric and geopolitical together to project onto the stage an image of black gay men which is intended to provide a frame work for a hermeneutic. Online reviewer Keith Ecker describes the direction: Daniel Alexander Jones' direction is decent, though superfluous at times. Often Johnson will be fumbling with a jar or stringing a strand of beads onto a tree for no apparent reason. Perhaps it's poetic, but it's meaning is lost on me. It's not so much of a distraction as it is a missed opportunity.<sup>143</sup> I would have rather seen action that falls in line more directly with the stories, whether acting out anecdotes or assuming the posture each character possessed while being interviewed by Johnson. The question to be asked would be is the piece an avenue of inclusionary politics? The answers are a hopeful positive that leads to further representation of black gay men in performance. Moreover, the lives of these men happen to be transmitted through the body of another self-identified black gay man. It is a point that cannot be overstated as the question of what one does with one's body becomes the site of contention for the strategy of survival and provides the leitmotif of their wonderings and wanderings. Johnson shares commonality of race, sexual orientation, religion in most cases as well as regional origins.

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<sup>143</sup> Keith Ecker, On line pub. *Chicago Theatre Beat*. May 2011. <http://chicagotheaterbeat.com/2010/05/11/sweet-tea-review/>

Still even if the performer's biography intersects these common traits, where are the stress points in this seemingly seamless transmutable act of representation. Black gay performance presents a set of specific problems. First, black gay life is a subject that is rarely seen in popular culture on a regular basis. Second like the larger black community, the corporeal image of black gay men can be as wide and varied as their masculinist beliefs. To be clear, the sissy or effeminate black male portrayed in sometimes sartorial dandyism or the sassy snap queen is what has become the familiar iconology of the black homosexual in contemporary American drama, black and white. If we add regionalism to the theatrical back story, then we further complicate the representation as Johnson aims to perform their struggles and at the same time testify and bear witness to his own.

The documentary theatre's aim in the case of *Sweet Tea* is to combine autobiography with history and to elaborate the oral culture of theatre. While the aesthetics of black gay performance as a theatrical genre have as yet been a movement that moves contiguously toward a Golden Age of black gay theatre events, in truth, it is mired in inertia. However, this interrupted pattern of visible black gay performance does leave the residue of a performance brand if you will. Its contribution to the canon of American black drama does confine its characteristics to the western aesthetics of theatre meaning black gay performance so far adheres to contemporary performance art styles; the episodic revue and the one person show where they lived experience of black homosexuals is performed. Such a movement is not self-defeating in its efforts because the politics of identity are deeply personal as Judith Butler reminds us. The pedagogy of black gay performance in the context of race and class issues affecting the African American community is the basis for its recuperative qualities and therefore provides the agency sought out by black gay men within their own community as well as the larger community. What

is transmitted from the archive to the performance of embodied practice is education even if the spectator is among the already initiated or merely the curious; it is the public airing of black homosexual grievances and joys no longer hidden in the closeted space that opens the door to a more informed conversation.

### **The Tea on Performing Our Own**

There is revealing monologue on the origins of “tea” as it pertains to the play’s title, its significance to black people and in particular, black gay men spoken by Johnson as Johnson. In it Johnson is holding a jar of sweet tea as he takes the audience on a genealogical journey of the makings of the beverage and metonymically has come to represent much more than just the romantic cultural Southern cultural referent. He says “This preference for sweet tea transcends race and class boundaries, and every family (and even different people within the same family) has its own recipe.”<sup>144</sup> Using language loaded with metaphor, Johnson embodies ingredients of the sweet tea process. At the same time affirming through his body the presence of a constructed subject formation that is part of a subculture where the vernacular is invented by the group much like the variant recipe for sweet tea. The word “tea” takes on several meanings such as gossip in black gay vernacular. As he performs, “tea” is the operative image for all of the men adopts a powerful and forceful support for the freedom to be as visible as one can be.

In its transformation from book to play, the demands of performing the verbatim narratives of his subjects are shaped by several modes of performance technique. However, Johnson’s acting approach to the process is not completely apparent. In his program notes, he says, “I am accountable in a new way now that these stories live inside me.”<sup>145</sup> Having the

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<sup>144</sup> Johnson 19.

<sup>145</sup> E Patrick Johnson. Program Notes from Sweet Tea. Viaduct Theatre, Chicago, May 2010.

primary position of being author and interlocutor is a performative that offers several avenues in the way of performance. Ironically, Johnson as black, gay and Southern, performs his own subjectivity that becomes the basis for his performance technique. According to *Theatre Journal* reviewer Ann Folino White, "...*Sweet Tea*'s aesthetics materialized Johnson's understanding of ethnography's strengths as an embodied co-performance between interviewer and interviewee."<sup>146</sup> Incorporating the tenets of Madison's proposed methodologies in gathering the information and then in the staging, Johnson's performative as sole author is in service to the tenuous authenticity of the documentary theatre performance. Johnson performs as himself between charters, dressed simply in slacks and button down shirt, retaining the auraization of the academic researcher in an effort to strip the spectacularity from the production so the men's narratives could related in a directly without Johnson appearing to usurp the production's aim. Folino White defends hints of tenuousness when she says, "Thus despite nuanced characterizations of each man, Johnson sustained his presence as intermediary between audience and subject/character."<sup>147</sup> This an affective mode of interpretation as well as integrating the non linear storyline as the men and Johnson expound on various topical issues.

Black gay performance/performatvity began in the 1970s emerging out of the nascent performance art genre. Essentially, the politics of identity opened the door to avant-garde performances built on feminist and gay themes. Some of the more renowned examples include Vaginal Davis and Sylvester. These performance artists created pieces that explored racism and classism. The solo performer's "acting" of a variety of individuals brought together by a single traumatic event, the modern theatre sophisticate has become inured and initiated into this performance genre to the extent that it is accepted as a natural method in representing others in

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<sup>146</sup> Ann Folino White, rev. of "Sweet Tea." *Theatre Journal* 62.4 (December 2010) 675.

<sup>147</sup> Folino White 675.

this modern mode of dramatic staging. Carol Martin writes, “Documentary theatre emphasizes certain kinds of memory and buries others. What is outside the archive—glances, gestures, body language, the felt experience of space, and the proximity of bodies—are created by actors and directors according to their own admissibility.”<sup>148</sup> So that the actual performance even in its most obsessive intention to stay true to their subject is porous and opens the door for an interpretative dramaturgy. Johnson is the authorial voice of his *mise en scene* and like those theatre artists that perform this verbatim theatre are subject to the limitations of the genre.

What are the methods and techniques Johnson adopts as a persuasive argument for the solo performance as representative portrayal? Johnson as the solo actor of the piece and therefore the primary interpreter walks a fine line between performance and performativity. Since he has met each of the individuals performed, he alone was present as they “performed” the interview subject, absorbing mannerisms and vocal inflections as they remember and then as he remembers. His acting methods do not need to be discussed in detail because of the nature of the documentary theatre; the actor is not saying the words of a playwright but reciting the verbatim dialogue of an interviewed subject. If Johnson were a trained actor (in an acting method like Stanislavski or Ann Bogart) then my analysis/critique of that method and Johnson’s expertise at incorporating that training into an effective performance. However, the genesis of transferring the document to stage began with a foray into oral interpretation and then the theatre so much of Johnson’s performance is his familiarity with his subject’s words. If we see these corporeal exercises in acting methods resembling what might also be termed assimilation and appropriation, then we can understand Johnson’s method of performance and either accept or reject it on that basis. This is not to say that the documentary theatre format does not retain some

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<sup>148</sup> Carol Martin, “Bodies of Evidence,” *TDR*. 50.3 (Autumn 2006) 11

of its authenticity and pedagogy remains for the audience member ignorant of the experience of black gay men. As with many dramas focused thematically on the marginalized and in this case queers of color, the struggles of certain social groups to rise from their economically and politically imposed position on the social ladder, offers insight into the abilities to maneuver out of these rigid and debilitating societal assignments.

The viability of Johnson's acting ability or rather his ability to act these men is enhanced by the attendance of a sizeable portion of his audience as black gay men. Metaphysically, it is this relational mode of symbiotic transfers between actor and audience that quantifies certain truthfulness in the project. Reinelt writes:

...the idea of multiple relationships to performance based on individual cultural itineraries establishes some of the parameters to how documentaries mean: the meanings are produced relationally. In documentary, some aspects of the lifeworld of the spectators are evoked because they know beforehand or come to recognise the reality-based aspect of the performance. They may therefore take up the labour of learning about and integrating what they are experiencing with their own existential existence. On other occasions, they may view it as a fiction and ignore the reality factor. In some cases, they may become involved with what they see as if it were directly connected to their own lives, stimulating personal memories, identification, recognition.<sup>149</sup>

In the room, the audible gasps of recognition from spectators who relate to each character's story or manner in which Johnson moves his hands, eyes, voice that heighten the kinetic response within the spectator. These men dance with each other figuratively in the corporeal facticity of Johnson's surrogate act. It is to his credit that Johnson is aware of the slippage in this genre of theatre, the lone actor performing his multiple subjects "as if" he were them thus circumventing the theatrical conceit of becoming the character. Johnson's performance is not meant to be a direct outing out of each of his characters. There is not the precision of southern accent that attends each man who represents different region over several Southern States. So Johnson

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<sup>149</sup> Reinelt 7-8

paints with an impressionistic stroke the distinctions between the charters. Technical support adds to the distinction by announcing electronically which character he is portraying at the time.

First, if we look at the work of Anna Deveare Smith, we will find comparable examples to illustrate an adapted structural method of performance Johnson utilizes as his primary performance model. In her search to evolve from the interiority of American Method acting, Deveare Smith sought to challenge the notion of using the self to become the self of another character/subject. In her experimentation and applicability she concentrated on what a character spoke, diving that once the words were absorbed, the body and soul of the character was etched onto the body of the performer. Repeating of the subjects' words as the "manner of speech"<sup>150</sup> serves as their technique of inhabiting the character. It is distinctive from a kind of psychological interiority where the monologue of the individual actor is copacetic with the characters' emotional trajectory. The spectator is allowed into the experience of the subject when there is a certain distancing between actor and subject. It is not clear in either the document or his program notes what mode of acting his characters Johnson adopts but since his play owes much to Smith's work in style and structure, it is easy to assume his acting choices are closer to Smith's "method" than the Method. However, we must also consider Johnson's performance subjects differ from that of Deveare Smith whereas she "inhabits" a variety of characters; male and female, some famously positive and some famously villainous taken from the real event of her plays. Johnson's characters are men and all of them would be considered genteel. This is not to say that are not fierce in their ability to survive but none are famously known as negative characters in their community.

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<sup>150</sup>Anna Deveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* XXVII



*Sweet Tea*'s use of a pastiche of theatrical conventions expands and circumscribes the solo performance genre. If Devere Smith has defined the documentary performance to mean a removed approach where a number of different characters may be performed, Johnson's performance utilizes a partial applicability because his performance includes black gay men from the south albeit from different classes, regions and education. Moreover, Devere Smith's plays are specific in her choice of social events so the documentation comes from mostly recognizable personalities. She employs the same kind of verbatim channeling for each character. Johnson on the other hand, takes unknown people and thus defines them for the spectator. The traumatic events in the lives of the men coincide and overlap in many instances with the overall injustice for black Americans. The window of how this group survives is the window through which we get to experience his men. Their view of black gay history is the true benefit of his performance. Their narratives are presented in some cases as ongoing conversations about spirituality and sexual orientation or ruminations on differences between black gay men and white gay men. This is to say that Johnson's *mise en scene* offers no denouement unlike Devere Smith's plays where the endgame is known to the audience.

There is another performance method for the type of ethnographic research that speaks to restored behavior. Performance Studies maven Richard Schechner defines performance as "restored behavior."<sup>151</sup> He says, "put in personal terms restored behavior is me behaving as if I am someone else." Schechner goes on to substantiate his views of authenticity through the rehearsal process where the strips of behavior extracted from the dramatic setting are pieced together to formulate the performance. Through a series of rehearsal gestures that are actually based upon the research of the actor ritualizes their physical embodiment of their subject. It is

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<sup>151</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985)35-37.

without the aim toward a cathartic response from the audience but is in the effort to be “truthful” to their subject. It is through this restored behavior as performance method that the actor finds the nuances and boundaries of his characters and through which the audience can identify. Identity and identification then becomes a performative mode to express individual identity. Searching for the core of the performance, the idea is that through the repetition of behavior, there will emerge the authentic. Thus the actor becomes “reproducer,” the medium through which the subject presents it. The entire mimetic is elided while an adherence to what has been absorbed by the mind and body of the actor through the rehearsal process is the framing device for performance. Here again, Johnson would say he is not trying to strictly restore the behavior of the men. As the lone actor on the stage, it is his physical and mental commitment each night to give the written performance but his body is subject to that of the athlete who may or may not be able to achieve a certain threshold of peak ability each night so the characters will sometimes be impressionistic or the energy will be calibrated throughout to give Johnson the resilience to sustain an evening of acting eleven different people.

I would offer Johnson’s performance forms a hybrid between Devere Smith and Schechner taking useful aspects of each technique; non interiority and a rehearsal process to structure and distinguish each character. Johnson adds something else though, performing black gay men as a black gay man. His biography intersects with those of his character, making this kind of performance more about the engagement with an empathetic and sympathetic audience. This is to say, *Sweet Tea* as the cliché would have it, preaches to the choir as it weaves together race and sexual orientation but it is the method of performance for that should be considered an autonomous choice as it seeks to find the inclusionary throughway into a setting called a public venue. Having the freedom to be able to perform this black gay event openly allows for

reflexivity that guides the metaphysical perimeters of having several black gay men being acted by a lone black gay man.

Johnson enters through a screen door on the porch as himself. He quickly moves into the audience area, passing down the front row, greeting those whom he knows and does not know. It is a gesture of welcome and the *gestus* of openness from the performer, as if there is nothing to hide. I extend myself to you as a southern gentle man and as a black gay man that prepared to engage you. It is the gesture that will come from his characters, too. The men he performs are not hesitant to share their stories and opinions on a wide range of topics. As his body assumes the idiosyncratic nuances of the characters/signifiers, Johnson propels himself into the story as willing host. In performing his host duties, he manages to put the audience at ease. It is an ease that is meant to invite confidence and to suspend disbelief. To be clear, the spectator is asked to believe that the performance and the stories are true—black gay men exist in the south and have lived amongst those in denial or partial acknowledgement for generations.

In the program notes, Johnson's claims that he is the "I" but also the "eye" of the performance. In framing each character for the audience, he interjects moments and events from his own biography as a black gay southern man to assert his subjectivity and objectivity. His playing arises from his observance of the physicality of each individual. The audience must rely and trust Johnson on that his rendering of these men's bodies is accurate and not exploitative to conform to the entertainment aspect of the theatrical. However, it must be understood at the same time that the number of men interviewed by Johnson, only eleven of them make it into the play. So we must assume some were omitted because of the similarity of their actual accounts of events or perhaps some were less "dramatic" than the other when answering questions or what might be even more relevant is Johnson's affinity for one of the men over the other even though

no slight was intentioned. So it is their bodies that have the power of seeping into the spectator's imagination.

My comments on the performance should include this caveat; I did not have access to the play script so the quotations are from the book *Sweet Tea*. Since the play script was taken verbatim from the interviews, it is most likely some of the answers to his questions (put into several categories of inquiry) from the different men presented in the play are actually performed by Johnson. The men chosen from the book and transported to the stage are: Duncan Teague, Freddie, Larry J, Countess Vivian, Harold, C.C., Chaz/Chastity, R Dioneaux, Stephen, D.C., Gerome, and Tim'm. Acting the men brings up the question of identification and the permeability of boundaries. Johnson's approach as creator and interviewer makes his contribution beyond doctrinaire but rather is the reason an audience comes into contact with these particular men. As Johnson moves from one isolated character to the next, their relationships to each are able to move across boundaries of region or class. It is their complexities and intersubjectivity that actually acts as the binding force for the performance.

Interestingly, the ability to isolate/connect is as much a part of their narratives as their ability to be openly gay. For these men know where to find homosexual contacts if they so desire. We are told over and over again that the isolation was many times self imposed because there was no lack of companionship or sex partners. It is idea of that they are now able to exert some agency in their choices that is communicated through the piece. This idea is played out against the pervasive black male image. As transgressive acts, meaning that black gay men were outside of heteronormative authority structure subscribed to by the black middle class saw the fractured nature of identification is also symptomatic of dis-identification. Duncan offers "There was a moment when my father was trying to butch me up...or get rid of the gayness...it wasn't

about me saying, “I’m gay.” It was about me standing up for myself against everything I’d been taught.”<sup>152</sup> Identification being a political, social and cultural practice is equally problematic for the same sex attracted in the black community. The argument against black gayness by those in the black intelligentsia as well as the Black Arts movement of the 1960s was that homosexuality was a decadent and therefore European perversion. If you identified with that then you could not be identified with the burgeoning black power movement.

Any attempt to unpack the characters motivations as they present their choices reveals what is axiomatic and subtle in a discussion of these black gay “stories.” First, it is frustratingly obvious that the collective material where the central focus is the experience of black gay men is not aggregate to offer a wide-ranging look at the diversity within the black gay community that completely distinguishes a critical analysis from that of the now familiar, well established dramatic narratives drawn from the normative black community. A worthwhile critical review where an argument is attempted in favor or against this type of strong character or weak characters amount to the same subjective discourses applied to the numerous collections of black themed dramaturgy. Therefore, as I take a less than formal critical look at Johnson’s dramaturgy, what approach is partly familiar to performance review but in addition a more free flowing meditation or in black gay vernacular “shade” on the appearance of black gay bodies that differ from many of their counterparts, urban black masculinities predominant in late 20<sup>th</sup> century black drama who reveal to the spectator their orientation.

Fractured identity can be seen as Johnson transmogrifies from character to character and then back to himself. There is a range of experience amongst the homosexual men who are treated perhaps differently even when the situation of their same-sex attraction manifests in the

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<sup>152</sup> Johnson 49

same way because they are southern, black and gay. If the actor (not in the traditional sense but the object through which these lives are re-told) in all sincerity is methodically and deliberately removing themselves from the equation, the lives of these individuals are still being re-told. So aspects of their lives are observed and absorbed by the spectator even when the narrator remains faithful to his subject and their words. It is language that gives meaning to their lives and while the words are able to define their identities, it is difficult not to see them as “othered” in the process. Dis-identification is the process by which the marginalized (in this case people of color) have been able to survive under withering prejudicial laws creating an underclass beholden to the social and cultural boundaries prescribed by those in power (in this case, the white heteropatriarchy). As described by Munoz<sup>153</sup>, the act of dis-identification is a literal self-imposed severing of identity so that one is neither black nor white but a momentary hybrid while in the midst of a hostile public sphere. For black gay men, their participation in the community is obvious in some ways and subversive in others but the same can be said of blacks within the white power structure. Fragmentation has its transcendent qualities lending itself to the subjugated subject a means of agency.

To be sure, Johnson presents a wide gallery of black gay men. Their masculinities move along a flexible scale where the survival is always key to the degree. Sometimes the role playing meant a closeted life was the only sustainable life available to them in their small towns. It is the interweaving of ambivalence and homophobia within their familial and non-familial relations which introduce an autonomy toward the process of acceptance that appears to remain an interior monologue for those who recognize differentness without a sense of shame.. Soft-spoken Freddie

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<sup>153</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications*. pp 15-20. Munoz’ theory is ascribed to people of color and exclusively to queer people of color as a strategy of survival. His ideas are also used by Patrick Johnson in his lengthy essay on black queerness, “Quare Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother: from *Black Queer Studies* (2005) 124-151.

speaks of his childhood where, "...there was always a bigger boy or somebody who would kind of protect me. But the bigger boys, I never had sex with them, but they just kind of felt a sense that I needed protection."<sup>154</sup> Freddie senses the attraction to other boys but does not act on it. I would submit this is one of the freedoms that complicates a total embrace of coming out for many black gay men.

Contrasting the experience of black gay men then and now allows Johnson a historiographical insert illustrating ironically a "freer" movement of same sex relations earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than can be seen contemporarily. From the oldest, George Eagerson to the youngest, Stephen and Tim'm point out the difference between how black men think of their sissy ways then and now. George Eagerson, a transgender nightclub performer known as Countess Vivian is aware of the number of black gay bars in New Orleans beginning in the 1920s where the need to be a masculine homosexual was not the sought after fantasy figure of desire prevalent in contemporary homo society. His experience as chronicler offers a glimpse inside the occupied space of queerness where the sissy is the predominant and pervasive homosexual representation. She is framed as sitting on the porch in a rocker with a fan as she displays the witticisms and wisdom of a *grande dame*. The Countess uses a cane and reminds us of her longevity. Johnson luxuriates in her body and words as he performs her using a fan to punctuate and accentuate her narrative.

The younger men, although they identify as gay, see their "straight acting" as part of their persona and integral part of their identity as a homosexual. Johnson's inclusion of Chaz and Ron are there to give a spectrum of black gay identification with the sissy being a referent for a host of experiences that teaches the young black gay boy that in order to survive, that aspect of his

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<sup>154</sup> Johnson E Patrick. *Sweet Tea*. p.50

character should be toned down or erased all together. To be clear, this is not confined to the black gay homosexual but to the larger western practice of homonormativity and the preference for the “I’m just like everyone else” paradigm I merely am attracted to members of my own sex. As the white gay community gained visibility during the years of identity politics, the image of white homosexuals was determined changed to minimize the image of the effeminate white gay male. After all there had been centuries of the performed dandyism among white homosexuals, at times the performance was acceptable were there was no thought of the individual’s orientation. White male privilege prevailed. There were times in Western societies where male/male relationships were condoned and exalted. But the black sissy has eked out a unique identity within the both the contemporary black and white gay communities. The black sissy was never prone to mask itself in layers of performed masculinity. The black sissy seemed to revel in its spectacularity. The black sissy was recognized member of the black community even though it could be a fraught relationship. The black sissy was the conduit through which the gay black male could maneuver its own subjectivity. The snap queen acted as liberator to the western gay movement.

If there is a discursive discourse presented in the narratives it is the relationship these men have with organized religion. To be sure, most of these men are men of faith, who exhibit for the most part fealty to Western religious tradition namely Christianity. Yet, this is not to say they don’t question the processes of the church where their homosexuality is still looked upon as unnatural and a strict reading of the Bible, sinful. However each man is allowed to argue his case for remaining in the church despite its prejudicial doctrines. Many of these men adhere to these doctrines. Gerome says, “. . .I think that God loves the homosexual—the person—but He hates



what they do.”<sup>155</sup> These men discuss tradition but at the same time implement and practice a heterodoxy that they have creatively erected in service to their own sense of responsibility to their community.

The black church is a place of ambivalence *Sweet Tea*. Even though the black church like the black community is not a monolithic entity, still the impact of the church on the quotidian life of black people is an undeniable and essential place to understand the social movements of black people in the United States and particularly in the Southern United States. Like Hurston, Johnson’s interviews must delve into the overlap of the church and nearly every area of education and discipline as guiding posts for living. That Christianity has such a tremendous hold on black Americans from this period to contemporary time has its foundation in the solidarity fostered by the black church in extending its support to a group basically surrounded by the enemy. When writing about the colonial structure, Ann Pellegrini uses terms like “appropriation” and “assimilation” figure in the history of and the rhetoric of colonialism.”<sup>156</sup> I introduce these terms because they are interwoven in to the historic narrative of blacks in America. It is a means by which their strategy enfolded western Christian beliefs in addition to their African heritage that paved a way toward citizenship. Black gay men have been recipients as well as the purveyors of the same strategy. It is no wonder then that man of the black men in interviewed are seen to accept and retain a fealty to Christian beliefs as they reconcile those beliefs that preach against homosexuality. The act of the colonized is to retain some sense of their identity by simultaneously remembering and forgetting their cultural markers to identify with their colonizers. In many ways a way to join the dominant group was to think and to worship as they did. The performance of religion is not tactical that the Western culture invented

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<sup>155</sup> Johnson 220

<sup>156</sup> Ann Pellegrini, Performance Anxieties (Routledge, 1996) 70.

but it is a strategic move by any conquering force to discipline the conquered in their ways and to erase and write over the conquered laws and mores. Thus palimpsest becomes the rule of law and the place where punishment and discipline begin where the aim is to make the body of the conquered forever conquerable.

*Sweet Tea*'s dialogic structure establishes a patchwork quilt where the different men's stories are woven together and yet their distinctions animate an overlapping conversation. The men performed give the spectator the familiar and the unfamiliar perspective of being both black and gay in the south. The men become characters in the parlance of theatre and their language though their own must acquire a veneer of the dramatic even when applying Brecht's alienation technique to the intentionality of this theatrical exercise. The play's director declares his affinity for the jazz rhythms. Consequently, *Sweet Tea* is not structured in any deliberate manner. The distancing and the theatricality inform one another where narratives intercept, clash and collapse into one another. The play is experienced as much in the metaphysical as the "real." The men talk about their lives and allow Johnson to don an article or prop to distinguish them. As if he were playing in a jazz band where the improvisations are also the strategy by which this musical riff asserts itself, the authenticity of each character lies in their ability to relay their own story. Since black gay men are so seldom given full sway in a theatrical production other than playing the foil for the masculine characters (usually white) their appeal is at once a gesture toward the spectator to lean in closer to hear what is being said. I don't mean this as poetic as it may sound and therefore unreliable but like Artaud's theatre, what these men have to say is less important than how the spectator receives their words. Though the characters do not know each other, it is Johnson who introduces them and provides the connecting tissue by which a commonality of black queerness can be absorbed by the audience.

The complications of men like DC, an explicitly “out” black man in speech and manner offers insight into a sexually fluid environment amongst black men that is seldom discussed in the black community. DC use of language is filled with colloquialisms and the vernacular of the black community but his articulate narration of his personal experiences presents the dichotomy of being black and educated. To be clear, DC crosses the lines of what is imposed from the outside by white hegemony and years of cultural defamation while at the same time he asserts his sexual preference in a unique manner in the context of what has been appropriate for the black drama. Thus, his closet language as defined by Sedgwick as “speech acts.”<sup>157</sup> These speech acts are useful in understanding what Sedgwick calls a way of communicating one’s preference within a context of being discreet and open. It is a problematized practice for sure, for the language of the closet defines the subject’s relation to himself and others. In the case of DC, his language reveals a comprehension of his sexual orientation that contradicts Sedgwick’s more complicated reasoning of the detrimental binarism of hetero/homosexuality that insinuates itself in modern sexual discourse.

DC is fully aware of the contradictions of sexual orientation within the black community. But his is never the strict deterrent or what Foucault would call a structure of power at the local level that maintains a watchful eye over those who step outside the boundaries of what is deemed appropriate. However the strict categorizations of sexuality are seen to be more fluid, experimental. This is not to say that the sexuality wasn’t complicated but DC’s re-telling of what happened to him and what he participated in gives is circumscribed by a frank willingness to try something new. He says, “[And] high school. I had sex with him and his brother mostly, and

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<sup>157</sup> Sedgwick 3.

their cousin. And a few guys in the ‘hood Well in the gang naturally.”<sup>158</sup> He goes on to elaborate on having sex with girls as well as having sex with a woman who babysat for him and later her husband. But there is not a sense of moralizing that he applies to the situation. Whereas the movement to adopt the middle class mores of white hegemony was the aim of the Civil Rights movement, the actual practice was certainly in place visibly but there was a complicated practice of sexuality that was not acknowledged. Returning to Sedgwick, she says that “ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons.”<sup>159</sup> So to Sedgwick a tacit acknowledgement of the experimentation adds to the critique of the practice and to its control. It might seem from a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens exposing these relationships has caused a deleterious effect on the black community since the amount of information and research that has gone into what a traditional society might deem inappropriate. But the definitions are not theirs to make.

Sedgwick would agree that the interrelationships amongst members of the black community and most certainly those within the black community who were inclined to admit to their same sex attraction might see the makings of their language as a way of communicating their desires as an act of intimacy they allowed themselves to experience. To be clear, this is not a prescription or recuperative for all of those who participated but from the telling of these events, the black gay men discovered strategies of survival and the space to create their own community. In the face of traditional ideas surrounding black respectability calls to mind the generations of educating blacks into a practice of accountability. What Sedgwick would point out though is the danger of the “ignorance” of the behavior that is so fundamentally illustrated in mainstream late 20<sup>th</sup> century black drama. Sedgwick writes:

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<sup>158</sup> Johnson 263

<sup>159</sup> Sedgwick 4

Inarguably, there is a satisfaction in dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in the command of knowledge, but in their ignorance. The effect is a real one but it carries dangers with it as well. The chief of these dangers is the scornful, fearful or patheticizing reification of ignorance...<sup>160</sup>

As the black community moved into the middle classes, there was not a sudden introduction to big city ways but a cautionary advance into sexual politics that prohibited admitting to the level of sexual variance that was no more unusual than any other American community but there was an adoption of “ignorance” as a way of confronting and controlling through a newly acquired image of normativity for politics sake. As the community became more and more middle class, the ignorant assumption that homosexuality was not (should not) be practiced on any widespread activity was clearly seen in black cultural practices. So homosexuals could remain in the community but they were not to be openly acknowledged. It is through DC utterances of his sexual encounters that the blockage of “reification” of ignorance is combated.

To be clear, as Johnson performed DC, he moved through the audience passing out lollipops which he seductively and leisurely sucked on as he recounted tales of sexuality seldom seen on the stage using hetero practices let alone homosexual sex. It is the gesture that writes against Sedgwick’s well founded but limited description of the closet language. Johnson as DC may not have had the freedom to identify as homosexual in the midst of the homophobic space of the south but as conveyed by Johnson, the teachable moment is that the black gay body was not always subject to the control from outside or inside, to be clear, the black gay body is a body that can be read and in the historical context of the re-telling of DC’s story, his body was the place of self-gratification as well as political agency before the opening space of the gay rights movement permeated the rigid social mores of the black community.

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<sup>160</sup>Sedgwick 7.

The tacit acknowledgement of their same sex attraction and experiences within their community has to be seen from the perspective of these men and not from the political correctness of late 20<sup>th</sup> century identity politics. Some of the men do not identify as gay because of its association with white male homosexuality. Some of the men see themselves as bisexual. It is their tactical deployment of (in) visibility that has allowed them to in Johnson's words "provide a space for these men to have more freedom to engage one another, for they employ the terms and the codes of the South to co-exist with neighbors and family and still express their sexuality."<sup>161</sup> So the manner in which these men choose to engage their community with candor around their sexual preference can be seen to be a counter argument to the mainstream gay rights movement where the discourse of the closet is seen to be detrimental to the movement as a whole. However, what is categorically applicable to one group of marginalized people may be detrimental to the wellbeing of a subset of the same marginalized group. To further complicate the issue, performing these men who may or may not be "out" yet suddenly opens the door to a conversation in favor of or in opposition to full disclosure of one's sexual escapades.

It is the AIDS epidemic as traumatic event that forces a disclosure that might have been unnecessary if it had not occurred. Summing up a collective response, Duncan says, "Yeah, there are conversations that I would never [have] had with my parents and never been hurt, mortally wounded, by my peers, had we not had AIDS. And some of what we face and that hurt our own community around this whole business about being out and black and gay and lesbian and what have you. It's about people's fear of losing their loved ones. And they don't have a language for it, and they didn't have any way of dealing with it, and they didn't want to know because we had just lost, you know, Big Mama to heart trouble or breast cancer or something else like that we

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<sup>161</sup> Johnson 109.

weren't talking about and now we've got this thing that's killing white fags and you want us to talk about it? No!"<sup>162</sup> The messaging here from these men is pain and loss of continuity in their lives and history that evaporate with each death.

Speaking frankly about their experiences to Johnson gives the reader/spectator the opportunity to compare and contrast the circumstances surrounding and leading to the dramatic moment of intimate relationships. The language of resistance manifest as anagnorisis ("recognition") if you will where the flaw is at last recognized but it is an inversion of what the Greek dramatists intended. Here we would assume the hero to be the black gay men but instead they act as anti-heroes and the recognition is instead placed in mind of the spectator. The flaw is hubris generally defined as pride. In this context hubris is that of privilege where non-acceptance and superiority are in tension with possibility and inclusivity.

The positivity of the men is pervasive in the book and the play. It is to their credit that the gentility displayed and iterated during the interviews is insight into the subject construction of these men. They are open to the interview process and the reader/spectator can make of their reaction to real events in any way they choose. But what might also be considered is the layered approach to which these men expose themselves to Johnson and then to Johnson performance of that action/language. In the play the men move so their bodies are part of our reaction but since we only see Johnson's body, to whom do we identify as a the spectator? The embodied performance as a living installation of the repertoire is also subject to the restored behavior, "authenticated" by the rehearsal process where I presume Johnson acts these characters to a great extent the same at each performance. There is one interesting sidestep though, I saw two successive performances. The character of football player whose sexual adventures are the most

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<sup>162</sup> Johnson 318.

graphic I have seen portrayed on stage for a black gay man, relates to the audience his sexual encounter with his fellow football team members. The scene had been elongated on Saturday night, where Johnson's gyrations along with a graphic description of what was being done to him caused a stir in the audience that I could not tell was in recognition or approving or disapproving. But he next Sunday afternoon performance, Johnson shortened the scene and it did not have the full resonance of sexual freedom that it sustained on the previous night. This is not to say there was hindrance on the actor's part but in keeping with truth of the narrative, I wondered if it was simple fatigue or perhaps an actor's mindfulness of who was in this audience on a Sunday afternoon.

*Sweet Tea's* men can be seen as intersubjectivity where there are a number of traits that make their existence in the community more complicated than those whose sexuality is copacetic with normativity. Looking from the outside, we might find their behavior repressed and limited but time and gain the men show that their lives were as "normal" as those who did not identify as homosexual. Self-awareness is a gnawing part of their consciousness of survival mixed with the traditions sutured to their ethnic and regional experience. The matrix of homosexuality permeates their spirituality, sexuality and intelligence. Their identities are complicated by a traditional rearing meaning their community has been subject to generations of violence and legally enforced separation where their very being was antithetical to what was considered by the white power structure as civilized. So the fine line they walk with these tensions embedded in the quotidian existence within the black community is forever subject to a negotiated behavior that sometimes appears to be capitulation but is inherently derived from their emersion in and reaction to a hostile public space.



The front porch like any other symbolic image in theatre such as Chekhov's *Seagull*, invites a further investigation of what this cultural code means to certain members of the audience. In American iconography, the front porch has come to signify a certain entrance to the man's castle where the point s of the house is seen as a masculine or feminine domain. The front porch is a traditionally located feminized space because it is the place of confrontation before the home is entered so it can be seen as the place of first defense. In many American plays the front porch is n middle class security and a symbol of leisure. It is the place for surveillance, for courtship and for community. The front porch is American is a space and place of gentility particularly in line with a perceived Southern gentility. Because documentary theatre is likened to the courtroom drama figuratively speaking since it offers verbatim testimony from the participants (characters) and poses a question of legality. As Carol Martin indicates, an aspect of documentary theatre "[to] intermingle autobiography with history."<sup>163</sup>

Next to the porch is a tree. The tree is hung with jars of what is described by Johnson as sweet tea. The play's program also depicts the tree with the names of the characters played by Jonson like the hanging jars of tea. Since the stage area is relatively small, the actor is moved around the tree and even at some points in the play sits at the base of the tree. It is as if he is being protected by the souls of the men. Their essence is equated with the sweet tea, almost like floating signifiers as they suspend from the branches, But it is also the image of the lynching that further histories the black gay body. In keeping with one of Martin's tenets for the documentary theatre, the future of the past is discourse in these plays. Johnson's dramaturgical movement from page to stage is the explicit insertion of black gay men into the reality of black life in the south. As vexing as that action seems to the heteropatriarcal authority in the black community,

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<sup>163</sup> Martin 13.

the two are sutured to each other. Ironically, in all of its poetic resonance the tree then becomes the sign of the thoroughfare into the imagined community of the southern black experience. Even as the projected and interjected shame of homosexuality reifies an identity that must be shaded in many ways for self-protection and as a way of conterminous existence with the black community within a larger hostile public sphere, the tree is both cover and roots. As a place of remembrance for the black community, the obvious meaning implied is both literal and figurative as the forensic symbol of black gay men's evidentiary presence in the black Southern community. Johnson sits in the tree's trunk to recite some of the narratives substantiating the lives of these men as embedded carriers/tellers of knowledge that extends into the cultural memory. In the reimagined narratives of black life that *Sweet Tea* provides the intrusion into the tradition of black cultural memory where the sexually variant are unannounced even though with the narratives provided by these men the tradition is clearly a one-sided remembrance. Therefore the tree reifies a silhouette of the transgressive within the cultural memory of black people. The black gay landscape gains by having these men shown as participants in their community and thus actors in the history of blacks in the South.

Are there constraints to Johnson's performance? Yes, sameness amongst the men which includes the transgendered is not reductively imposed as the something the audience should be expecting from the individual narratives. As Johnson has stated he remains outside/inside as the chronicler but identifies with many aspects of his subjects' lives. What is precarious is to avoid the stereotype and to keep the individual. Such a narrative particularly once adapted to performance then would seek to make the men "characters" in a structured sense as dramatic narrative instructs the playwright to give his characters "traits" invested with particular emotional releases. The simplicity of their recounts and yes, reminisces, would only provide the

outline for the character to be performed. Even so, the trap of becoming these subjects through a performance can not entirely be avoided. It is in the interstices of this slippage where the authentic devolves into the inauthentic and the fantasy and the real tends to become blurred.

Johnson's says of his performance that these men inhabited his body. It is a useful metaphor in describing the number of physical stances he adopts for each character. He is the flirtatious quintessential southern belle when performing Countess Vivian; a primping exuberant football jock with a healthy sexual appetite for Chaz. It is the performance of black gay sensuality and sexuality that permeate his embodiment. Guided by Johnson's abandon to these performative gesture in his interpretation of these men, the audience is made apart of the historization of the performance. Johnson's accurate portrayal may be less important than having the spectral bodies of each of these performed before the spectator's gaze. Confronting this reality, the gay black body formulates its own fraught and tortuous history extrapolated in its subjectivity. At first this might seem detrimental to the cause of black gay theatre but I would submit, in its immanence, a certain *oeuvre* of black gay aesthetic emerges. Harry Elam Jr. says, "The race question is inherently theatrical. From the arrival of the first African slaves on American soil, the discourse on race, the definitions and meanings of blackness have been intricately linked to issues of theatre and performance."<sup>164</sup> For the purposes of this interrogation, I would insert *gay as* a companion to blackness whose coupling would also be applicable to Elam theory. Johnson's body becomes the site for black gay history; it is the reification of the spectral image of the black gay male that is accomplished.

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<sup>164</sup> Monica Miller, Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 5-6.

Johnson as the actor of these men is the embodiment of their experience. His presence means we are figuratively receiving the lives of these men taken from the archive (document) and each time it is performed the repertory takes on an aliveness of memory. To be clear, it is Johnson body on to which the spectator projects their own appropriation and affiliation with these men. It is Johnson as mediated subject because he is acting verbatim dialogue in addition to his own experiences as a link between the narrations; it is Johnson who will emphasize connections depending on his own read of the audience. This is not to say his performance will vary greatly from night to night but it will vary. Still, the slight variance in “the hidden seams of documentary theatre raise questions about the continuum between documentaries and simulation.”<sup>165</sup> This is where a healthy skepticism is useful particularly when a mediated source is available, the idea that a “real” representation is at play before the spectator should invite further scrutiny.

Regional specificity is usually part of the actor’s distinctions in building their character. This is not the case so much for Johnson and his acting of each of these men; their specific location is a blur. It is a departure from the performance ethnography he so assiduously applied when writing the document. In Johnson’s performance the accents glide by with each character whether they are from South Carolina or Louisiana, without the distinct placement other than black Southern drawl. It is not to demean the characters but it is less of an emphasis than Johnson intends. It is the distinction of their stories that matters and the physicality he imbues with each character that show his strength as performer. In approaching this project from the perspective of social research, an argument can be made that Johnson research would be commensurate with the qualitative subset where his observations come directly from his contact

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<sup>165</sup> Martin 11.

with this subjects and they are in fact the suppliers of the information. If this is the case, then we can avoid the messy psychological underpinnings of a performance drawn from the actor's interior monologue in producing a desired emotional affect. Even if the emotions of actor and subject overlap, the performed piece satisfies the criteria of social research rather than ethnographic study merely by definition.

### **The Spectator and Performing the “I”**

I sat in the Viaduct Theatre in Chicago, waiting for the play to begin<sup>166</sup>. As I looked around the audience, I was struck by the large number of black people attending. Coming from California, I was not used to black people outnumbering any other color as spectator. Granted the subject matter was more encouraging to a specific demographic but being in the majority produces its own effect on those who are marginalized in any specific community. But I will speak more about that later. But my observation included that amongst the black people were black gay men. Since *Sweet Tea* is a play about black gay men this was also not unusual but again the obvious attitude signifying a “queen” even if that queen is on the down low, the markings are still discernable providing its own assertion of gayness. To put it another way, we were all queer in this room whether we admitted to it or not.

This section does not reflect a qualitative approach to the audience response to the play. I did not conduct a survey or any kind of random sampling to determine some pattern of spectator reaction. My observations emerge out of two days of attending the play. I was not privy to the reaction of every spectator but there are some non empirical observations that can be formed by attending. The sociology of culture in this instance gay culture serves as the meeting place for

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<sup>166</sup> In May2010, I attended two performances of *Sweet Tea* on two successive days, Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon.

the audience and performance. In *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett writes, “The hypotheses which constitute an audience’s immediate reading are inevitably influenced by as well as measured against the internal horizon of expectations of the performance.”<sup>167</sup> Johnson’s audience may not all be totally aware of his performance ethnography document but it is the physical presence of black gay themes which resonate within those who desire to witness an event that is seldom seen. It is the expectation of validation that brings in the audience. Their participatory attendance makes them co-creators just as Johnson is co-creator with his subjects forming a strategy of performative activism. While the actual performance becomes the location of verisimilitude in the minds of the spectator, there are more complexities to consider in unpacking audience participation in this emerging aesthetic of black gay theatre. Identification becomes a more complex issue and is not the clearly delineated choice.

As a space, the mapping of the black gay bodies is a reciprocal activity for the audience and performer. Messages of acceptability temporarily displace that of shame. Thus the performance space opens itself up to a place where the ideas of difference sexual can be seen and at times laughed at. Open acknowledgement of subjects of same sex attraction is the response from those who are black and gay and understand that these stories were never to be mentioned in public. *Sweet Tea* becomes a site of intervention for many of the audience members. For those who connect with the mythic image of the South as a location of slow and passionate livings. It is a place where the complexity of urban living such as the Chicago world outside has had to deal with its sexual outlaws in a very different manner. As I had just ridden through the gay part of Chicago on public transportation where I could see the diversity of the urban landscape appear and disappear while I received several cruisy approving and knowing smiles and glances. My

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<sup>167</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audience: A Theory of Production and Reception*. (New York: Routledge , 1990)151.

introduction to the space where the Viaduct theatre resides and from which the play will be performed, I am propelled into a hyper Saturday night life. Ironically, the play's landscape is the opposite of where I have just traveled and exited. I enter into a setting of welcome and a place of gay-friendly revelry. To be sure, there are no disparaging words from this audience; no one walks out (there was no intermission). The playhouse and the play present an audience coding<sup>168</sup> that raise expectations of the playing /audience area as spaces respite of societal judgments where anything might be possible. It is the possibilities that are most pronounced by the men of *Sweet Tea*. They have no illusions about their experiences and as it is relayed to the spectator verbatim, they offer that as a collective tactic against the homophobic reactions of the black and white community. Normal is a term on which they all seem to agree is different for different people.

It is interesting the play is performed adjacent to an established gay community. Safety for those who might take the bus to the theatre (as I did) was not a question. Being a tourist of sorts allowed me a naiveté that worked out for the best since there was no incidence of harassment. But sitting in the safe space of the theatre in an urban American city, I thought of myself that the men whose lives the play is based on are not allowed the comfortably of their stories to be told in the places where they live. This I not to say there is no gay and lesbian theatre in the South but the region and its positionality on sex, race, class and politics determines the comfort and facilitation of the performance. Sweet Tea is located in a safe space but the safety of the space might be endangered if the place is the American South. De Certeau is specific in defining the differences between space and place. He writes:

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<sup>168</sup> Bennett 152. Bennett writes, "The audience understanding of the stage world is then subject to their perception of an extensive code system." Because the Viaduct theatre is a receptacle for the experimental, the audiences that attends performances there are always already open to an "othered" experience.

A *place* (lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence...The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.”

On the other hand:

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of mobile elements...Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual or contractual proximities...”<sup>169</sup>

The spectator is part of the contractual proximity, willingly and comfortably in solidarity with Johnson and his performance. It is a symbiotic relationship that is not meant to be wholly definitive but an offer of liminality where the rules of the Southern place have been temporally suspended.

Aesthetically, scenography recapitulates Southern cosmology dominated by two iconic images: the front porch and the tree. We assume it is the mythological space that is signifier for the rural south. The porch is the resting place, the communal place and the place of surveillance. It is the place where a traditional world is remembered, a small town-ish lens that implies a neighborly environment even though the actual history of the area contradicts this bromide in many instances. The porch represents a heteronormativity but in this case it is the platform from which Countess Vivian/Johnson testifies. This is an important setting because it affirms a gentility that is meant to distinguish the south of America from other places. In her review Folino White tells us, “. [the] realistic scenery...represented the South as a unique sensorium, a set of practices and an idea.” The glowing hues of sunset indicate this is the time of the day for gathering, a time to swap stories and to commune. A scene of homegrown community perpetuates in the mind of the spectator be they black or white, familiar or unfamiliar with

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<sup>169</sup> Michel De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984)117.



cultural codes of the South that it is a place of calm reflection. This is problematic in that the South was in many ways uncivil towards those who were not white. There is a considerable amount of staging around the porch so that it comes to represent the playing environment but the characters circulate about it; it is the place of comfort for Johnson, the men and the spectator. The men speak about it as they see as the common link to community for them. For these men, the porch recapitulates cosmology as it relates directly to their understanding of the world and their identity in it. To be clear, the cosmopolitan appearance of all of the characters is pitted against a struggle between tradition and modernity.

What might appear to be a critique of the use of the porch setting as limiting forces those observing the makings of the language of staging black gay life? Johnson and his collaborators opt for a familiar with the understanding that many the audience may fixate on this one aspect of the production whether than looking at the potential intrusion into the familiar. It is a culturally coded space for sure but hence it had been that of Southern whites due to the repeated stagings of the southern white experience. The black experience dramatized saw the porch play as too familiar and therefore it would not fit in with the emerging black dramaturgy that wanted to emphasize mobility. Johnson has inverted the image as to now include black gay men who thrive in this setting. It is the betweenness that confronts the spectator as well as a world that is about to hear a black voice, perhaps for the first time, uttering reminisces in a place that had been exclusive used for white Southern characters.

The audience response is equally a place determinant of collective cultural memory. On the days I saw the play, the audience was predominately black and from the markings of the men, well attended by black gay men. The spectators came in groups or couples for the most part too. It is an observance that is not unusual for theatre outings but this being a place in the mid

west, a major urban center like Chicago, and the black gay male population was neither cowed by the subject matter or was comfortable in their own self-acceptance that the play was seen as place to be seen. Interestingly, Johnson refers to Chicago as the “up south” meaning there are a great number of southern blacks who have moved north including a number of black gay men. So the community itself is different from what I’ve come to expect from anything black and gay in the city of Los Angeles. Since much of the narratives experiences are very familiar and easy to relate to, it would appear that the regionalism of black homosexuality uncovers behaviors that had occurred elsewhere in the country but were held to a secretive existence in the black southern community. The audience acknowledges its familiarity with “that’s right” and “uh huhs.” Audible support for the contact zones within the performance where we see ourselves and our experience maybe for the first time. The theatre takes on the cultural memory as an epicenter in the heretofore closeted landscape of black gay life. The audience is reverential in a sense where the church of our youth is brought into the performance arena.

The audience participation in what becomes an excursion into the rarely seen black gay life in what is essentially a temporality. Those who can relate to the monologues view the men as part of their own existence while those who cannot relate but empathize use the experience to “queer” their own. To be clear, the temporal is a way of seeing into what was not seen before even if the vision will alter quickly, it is the presentation of the what if against the normative view. The audience may wonder if these men have any relevance beyond the moment. It is not a wholly axiomatic observation but what is significant is that they were there to witness the narratives and then bear witness to the stories told through Johnson. What may be most important is that there is conversation started arguing the need to live one’s choices openly. It is clear that the men interviewed availed themselves of every tactic they could to live the life of a

black gay man in a black southern community. None of the men on stage sought to deny, delude or distance themselves from an identification marker of homosexual. This in itself is a forward movement in breaking through the wall of silence and invisibility even if the movement itself is likely to be checked by the heteronormative authority, the idea is planted that the marginalized can survive the rejection and still thrive.

Spectator narrativity is the least controllable aspect of theatre. What is presented by the theatre collaborators invite a wide range of reaction that have much to do with identification and emotionalism. The arguments for and against a particular performance would begin with the kinesthetic and then the aesthetic, or the reverse. But the ability of the practitioner to know what is extracted or instilled is not dependant on their manipulation of audience response. The live performance is caught in the phenomenological stream; bodies doing things to each other, performer and spectator in a symbiotic dance. Spectators are allowed the freedom to project, edit and digest the parts of the performance as they invest or divest from the emotional orbit of the performance.

Are the spectators for *Sweet Tea* privy to the extensive coding surrounding the play? Of course, it doesn't take a black gay male to decode the language that habituate the characters because the tropes of the South have a mediated familiarity embedded in American tradition as cultural codes even for those who are not black gay men. Johnson embodies a sort of prismatic Southern black man that emerges out of each of the men featured. So that the gesture of the black male body mixes with that of the gay male, specifically the camp and sissified gestures as well as a languid tonal quality associated with southern speech patterns. The same sex intimacy need not have a lot of explanation either because the Johnson's natural fluid body movements speaks of the black male corporeality in close proximity so that the dandy-fied spectacularity of some of

men is also cross referenced for the audience. So that the performance is layered in a codified comprehensibility is well suited to the production's aim. Furthermore, the men themselves having requested anonymity in most of their identities would not want a picture perfect portrayal but rather the impressionistic. To illustrate my point, the set itself is minimalist where the front porch because the lectern for each of these men in the shade of a giant but theatrical tree hung with jars of sweet tea.

The audience then is to raise a cognitive awareness through performance that seeks to teach about a seldom seen group in society and to authenticate their stories as part of the community. The telling of these marginalized men is a recuperative in that the stories deliver both the framework of an argument which says these men have always been amongst the "normal" and a solution which says their presence is now a part of the larger movement of human rights. The authentication stems from their words which are now reclaimed and the mere mention or whisper of the word "homosexual" with its myriad of negative connotations is re-imagined, claiming a new lens that adapts and insinuates itself into the politics of identity that says 'I am here, too.' The narrations, though they string together a commonality of experience at the same time contextualizes the performance of the sissy in the gothic metaphor of the South. Gentility and an easy careful attention to detail is emblematic of a leisurely paced lifestyle drawn from a tradition of separate communities clearly distinguished by race and class but with very stringent rules as to how one conducts themselves in this volatile space. If the southern society were seen as a Venn diagram the meeting between black and white resists modernity as the negotiation between the two groups is historic and complex.

As documentary theatre's aim is provide some missing information on a seldom seen subject, the performance of black gay men is intended to supply a look into this netherworld. I

use the term deliberately because of the experiences of black homosexuals is framed in a very limited way where the fantasy and fears of their existence get to play out before our eyes. There is no need for Johnson to possess great acting prowess because the distinction of the each man is verbalized in their own speech. The spectator is not perhaps as viscerally involved as mentally stimulated by stories that aside from the fact they are the subject of same sex attraction, they could be interchangeable with "normal" black life in America.

In the midst of a barrage of the hyper masculinity of the black male, embedded in hip hop and on film and television, the audience response to the range of black maleness is difficult to gauge without some quantitative methodology to accompany the responses. If we look think of men playing women's roles throughout much of western and eastern theatre history, there is no recording of what the spectator thought once women were allowed to play women on stage. What we do know is the change was a long time in coming so the sudden disruption of the hyper masculine image with that of the flexible image of black gay men, the imaginings have yet to reach any consensus Where these black gay images would compete in the minds of the spectator after witnessing the number of homophobic reactions from the black community itself in light of a post-racial script circulating amongst some liberal media pundits, the ability for these images to remain in the minds of the individuals is determined by Johnson's performance of the piece to have numerous repeats. As documentary theatre seems to live in the moment, it is more difficult for other black actors, gay or straight to perform the piece with the same eventful aura surrounding Johnson's virtuoso turn. It is the same problem with Devere Smith's plays. However a recent production of *Twilight* in commemoration of the riots of 1992 was performed with multiple actors playing the parts to critical acclaim. It is a proposition that might interest directors for future productions of *Sweet Tea*.

The possibility behind Johnson's effort is obvious in the panel discussion afterwards. The group I saw that Sunday consisted of three black gay undergrads. This is the new generation of black gay men; educated, enthusiastic and unbridled by a past of self-inflicted patterns of constructed identity. To me, they appeared to be the black gay hope. But there is much to be gained by the mentorship and reflexivity of the men from *Sweet Tea*; those who have gone on before and experienced some of the worse episodes in black and gay American life. Johnson remains true to the co-performer's premise of performance ethnography. When R. Dioneaux, a transgender educator, is asked if there is more interrelating between the white and black gay communities in the South, he answers: "As opposed to anywhere else? I would say, as others have said and I 'm sure you've heard this before, unless it's a very sexy issue, unless it's a hot-button issue, unless you need a couple of black drag queens for color commentary, no. It's just as segregated as the general community."<sup>170</sup> The disparity between the white gay community and the black gay community is indicative of the same practices of segregation historically present in the larger community. The white gay community seemingly inclusive and in some ways more progressive than the hetero white community is still invested in the stereotypical imaging nagging the American cultural representations from the days of the days of the minstrel show. *Sweet Tea* acknowledges the communities working toward knowing and understanding each other. The men are not under any illusion that their blackness is not a factor in the hindrances. What Dioneaux may not realize is the same tension between white and black gays in the south is also a northern issue. White gay men tend to be very mobile and carry with them their cultural baggage, so the prejudices get to be played out in another region of the country.

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<sup>170</sup> Johnson 381.

In the phenomenological sense, the audience becomes the co-creator of the production. Along with Johnson's performance, the performativity of the audience is to engage and participate; the moments of church, disco songs, sexual innuendo and humor. Reinelt writes, "Partnering with the documentary as co-producer of the reality in question, spectators evaluate or contest the truth-value of the documents."<sup>171</sup> Even if we don't get a realistic portrayal, realism is being offered. This is the place through which these men's stories can be realized and made visible. The visceral reaction from the audience is the aesthetic the documentary theatre promises.

Even though the spectators present on the night I attended were mostly black, their response to Johnson's direct confrontation with them never felt uneasy or reticent. He opened the plays with a provocative engagement with the audience. Johnson sashays along the front row handing out lollipops, tossing them to those in the other rows. Sucking humorously and knowingly on the lollipops as he greets friends and strangers become the single gesture of defiance and resistance to generations of taboo in black and white society. His breaking of the fourth wall is an immediate set up for the nontraditional structure to follow. Johnson is himself from the beginning and ends with his words. Throughout the play, he will comment on the characters as if they are part of his identificatory subjectivity. His insertion of his own experiences is then prelude and leitmotif to the other characters. Their stories of sex and agency, difference and acceptance and metaphysical comradeship with those they have never met may seem as a wrestling with the fragmentation and hyper awareness of being both black and gay in America. It is this visceral reaction to what Johnson performs that is the most informative about the piece. His decision to be visible for these men is the cathartic for the audience members who

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<sup>171</sup> Reinelt 10.

can relate to some or part of the narratives before them drawn out of characters who for the most part still request anonymity.



#### **Chapter 4 *bonded*: Masculinities, Slave Narratives and the Melodrama Performance**

"...black slaves in North America engaged in a range of sexual practices and elaborated a variety of family structures."-- Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*

"In the historical narrative, it is the content alone that has truth value. All else is ornament."-- Hayden V. White, *The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory*

"Melodrama presented blackness as vehicle of protest and dissent..."-- Saidiya v. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

"Niggahs cain't love niggahs!" --Sonny from *bonded*

Gender non conformity and sexual variance are rare themes in the African American drama. From the ordinary works of the slave narrative adapted into the anti slave melodramas of the antebellum period, black masculinities have received caricatured treatments from even the most well intentioned white playwrights ranging from the virtuous black male to the sex starved gargantuan, to the submissive black male. In the context of stage performance, these inaccurate representations became the basis on which to illustrate black male sexuality eliding the range of masculinities that would have been reasonably present in this fraught period of American history. It is only in the last decade that experimental dramas have attempted to introduce themes of non normative black males into the canon of African American history plays. Donald Jolly's 2010 play *bonded*<sup>172</sup> is one of these efforts.

Using Jolly's play, my aim in this chapter is to ascertain a genealogy of black gay male representation as well as examine the possible reasons for the absence of the sexually variant black male in African American slave dramas. Jolly's play re-enforces and substantiates the inherent theatricality in black and gay performance/performativity. It is an illustration of the

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<sup>172</sup> *bonded* debuted at the Los Angeles Theatre Center on March 18 2011.

ontological reading from a contemporary black gay playwright where a deliberate re-imagining of the history of slave sexuality collapses into the theatrical mode of melodrama. Jolly's use of the dramatic structure of melodrama is actually attuned to the historiography of the antislavery plays of the 1800s in that the melodramatic was employed to arouse the sympathy of white Americans against the evils of slavery<sup>173</sup>. Jolly's homoerotic antebellum melodrama moves in the same trajectory bringing along with it the same excessive emotional representation found in the anti slavery plays of the periods emerging as a drama of social construction. Building upon the liberating and limiting oeuvre of the melodrama is a resonant discussion of sexuality's "...licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden"<sup>174</sup> power relations, Jolly opens up a taboo subject in contemporary black drama drawn on a canvas that is meant as an amended discourse on black masculinities and history.

*bonded's* premise posits: what if two black male slaves in the period of the 1820s expressed a same sex attraction towards each other and ran away together? Jolly's attempt to insert the nonstandard black male sexual subject into the racial history acts as an experiment in re-imagined historic narratives that future black gay playwrights can look to in bringing same sex intimacies which echo contemporary history in its radical verve. His assertion is drawn from slave narratives introducing homoeroticism amongst African American men into the historic "event".<sup>175</sup> Jolly's narrative derives from a perspective of social reconstruction supported by sociohistoric and performance studies wherein a black gay cultural heritage emerges as a modern "call out" to the conservative interpretation of African American slave histories. By using a theatrical device of melodrama to retrieve black sexual variance, Jolly re-imagines the virtuous

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<sup>173</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-making in Nineteenth America*. (1997): p. 27

<sup>174</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. vol 1* (1990) p. 83.

<sup>175</sup> Charles Clifton, "Rereading Voices from the Past: Images of Homo-eroticism in the Slave Narrative." p. 342-43

slave seen in such antislavery melodramas as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by adding to the trope a male slave attracted to another male slave, a nuanced intimacy of slave culture that is meant to appeal and inform a modern audience. History theorist, Hayden White tells us, "In the historical narrative, it is the content alone that has truth value. All else is ornament."<sup>176</sup> White's theory would seem to support Jolly's re-interpretation of intimacies relayed in the slave narratives is the message that subsumes the entire range of sexual experience. In doing so black gay theatre practitioners begin to establish a black gay aesthetic grounded in self-relexivity and in turn formulate our own definition of "avant-garde" performance.

If we reflect on the tensions under which the slave population had to live, the prison like atmosphere of the plantation, the brutality of disrupted relations to add to the physical and mental torture, slave intimacies are sure to take on a nonstandard trajectory at the same time that they attempt to form structured familial relationships. Moreover, as male prison populations have been shown to reflect a high degree of homosexual practice due to the homosocial structure, it would not be uncommon for male slaves to experience the same kinds of intimacies. It is also not surprising that these relationships would have been kept secretive because of the association of same sex attraction with weakness and femininity. "The defense of black masculinity," writes Charles Clifton, "and reclamation of black manhood is an intricate component of the African and African American male slave narratives."<sup>177</sup> Just as in contemporary society, the black family has undergone a scrutiny that no other ethnic group has experienced in American society; an alternative to the standard was nevertheless an option that is not outside of the possibilities considering the limited freedoms slaves endured. Jolly's excursion into the antebellum South as

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<sup>176</sup> Hayden V. White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory" The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, (Jon Hopkins University Press, 1987) 41.

<sup>177</sup> Clifton 342.

the conduit through which a message of inclusion can modify a speculative history is the makings of bringing same sex attracted black people out of the closet.

### **Trauma, Historic Narratives and Black Gay Bodies**

Writing on his blog, Jolly says the impetus to write *bonded* arose out of “a desire to see black gay men in the history of African Americans.”<sup>178</sup> His research into slave narratives to uncover coded same sex intimacy found a more meaningful creative outlet in play format. When he began the process he was well aware of the rigid discourse on sexual behavior amongst the slave and their white owners that awaited him. “As a black man,” Jolly says, “I know stories set during slavery are painful and embarrassing. But through the pain there is hope and perhaps there can be growth for a better listen.”<sup>179</sup> Slavery as collective psychic wound, as irretrievable loss and as a scab of memory that cannot heal insinuates itself into the imaginary of the black people as recurring personal trauma that manifests as much a part of the present as the past. It is a melancholic construction that seeks to mend itself even when institutional discourse reminds the racialized body over and over of its inequity. It is no wonder the black male found the need to never disclose any impulses that were out of line with conformist attitudes.

Consequently, the enduring maligned depiction of black males foments a collective barrier against non conformity which reaches deeply into the present black community informing their responses to the sexually variant. To be clearer, the enduring racialized culture is still part of an ungrieved memory of lost heritage embedded in the black psyche. “Racial ideas,” says Anne Cheng” continue to drive those most oppressed by it”.<sup>180</sup> This is equally true of sexual

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<sup>178</sup> Donald Jolly, “Why I Wrote bonded.” Mar 18 2011. <http://jollydrama.com/>

<sup>179</sup> Jolly “Why I Wrote bonded.” Mar 18 2011. <http://jollydrama.com/>

<sup>180</sup> Ann Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalyst, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. (Oxford University Press, 2001) 6.

variance and racialized bodies. To be clear, the melancholic construction of race and sexuality is a contributing factor to the gendered representation of the other in American history. In particular, the American ideal of white, heteronormativity has worked to produce misrepresentations that have been repeated in mediated form for generations. Images of black men had become so solidified in the civic mind that the majoritarian's control came through the cultural circulation of the defamatory caricatures. Denigrating black masculinity either as in undersexed read as less than manly or oversexed as in beast-like became the polar opposites of how black males have been and continues to be misrepresented in American culture. If a melodramatic structure is used to re-inscribe these images, the suspicion that this genre is somehow perpetuates the images display the complexities of a sometimes unfairly discredited genre where its elemental components such as the neat delineation of good and evil housed in emotionally wrought performance gestures is seen as unbelievable and out of step with the subtle but effective modalities of institutional racism. A neat ending to the horror of past events seem to be the curative offered in the melodramatic performance to the traumatized subject. Knowing these tensions, how can there be a justification of re-interpreting slave narratives?

It would seem to follow the aim of this kind of historic drama is to infuse a liveness where the "dead" black male exists. If bonded is to have any effect at all it would be to shift the tactical silence around the subject of black gay men to a place of animation and testifying performativity to actively retrieve the absent body. What is at stake has always been the misrepresentation as signifier for the non-citizen both inside the black community and outside of the black community. It is not unusual or rare for the documented chronology surrounding historic events to have an altered re-telling. The archive can be an authentic marker of the specific moment but the document may be extant (or not) because of extenuating circumstances

such as regime changes or religious or social pressures that dictate the terms and the preservation of the document. Returning to Hayden White:

Chronology is no doubt a code shared by the both chronicle and narrative, but narrative utilizes other codes as well and produces a meaning quite different from a chronicle. It is not eh code of narrative is more “literary” than that of chronicle—as many historians and of historical wring have suggested. And it is not that the narrative “explains” more or even more fully than does the chronicle. The point is that narrativization produces a meaning quite different from that produced by chronicalization. And it does this by imposing a discursive form on the events that its own chronicle comprises by means that are poetic in nature...<sup>181</sup>

In the case of *bonded*, the play interrupts the traditional rules of preservation and reception of the documentation and cultural imagination of slavery because of the instantiation of normative gender and sexual roles that accompany the re-telling. The discursive is mindful of being black and same sex attracted as bifurcated existence suffering trauma etched onto the body of the black gay male. In re-telling the story so that there are now all forms of sexuality considered, the traumatized subject never forgets. Jolly’s justifiable use of poetics in unpacking the ontologies of homosexual desire on the plantation is an exercise of reclamation. In other words, Jolly’s use of invention and artistry are methods for inserting black gay men into a history that assiduously avoids acknowledging their existence.

The play also inspires a broader interrogation of why history is a recurring theme in African American drama. From all of August Wilson’s play to Suzan Lori Parks *The America Play*. These dramas tend to stage heteronormative codes within the African American history where characters that represent the sexually variant are either excluded or if included marginalized to derogatory effect such as Amiri Baraka’s *The Baptism*. To the extent that African American families can be brimming with a number of children with different fathers or wives with many lovers, rarely do we see an African American drama in which a man or a woman is engaging in a same sex relationship. Robert O’Hara’s *Insurrection: Holding History* or

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<sup>181</sup> White 42.

Tarell Alvin McCraney's *The Brother and Sister Plays* are a few recent examples. Playwright Donald Jolly then has performed a service to the theatre going community at large and the black community in particular by providing us with a look into the lives of two male African American slaves who find themselves attracted to each other.

Theatre about history is a location for redress too. It is the place where the history can be written from the perspective of those whose existence in historic events have been de-emphasized or denigrated. A theatre piece can inform even those who are marginalized within the group such as the effeminate black man that their contribution is extant and very much part of the larger historic legacy of the black community. For black gay men this area of historic narrative is just beginning to be explored. We have an in Brian Freeman's work about black Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin, *Civil Sex* This play deal with the black homosexual in the context of African American historical narratives, writing against the recurring theme of masculinist imagery. Like *bonded*, this play reminds the black community that sexual variance was not an anomaly but was interwoven into the quilt work of the community, even when non-acknowledgement was the strategy adopted by the majority of the community. These plays effect a kind of retro documentation of an imagined archive. Reading these plays about the history of the black gay experience suddenly puts the community into a conversation with its past, confronting such issues as the complexities of slavery, the Civil Rights movement, and other major markers of black history.. These representations of alternative sexual practices and acts of intimacy imbricate the rigidity of the heteronormative code that has defined black male masculinities from the antebellum period to contemporary American society. Portraying the black gay male as inclusive in the black community is the beginning process of making visible the black gay male on stage.

Obviously, including a study of same-sex relationships in the historical narratives of black lives has been difficult because of the lack of evidential proof. Yet, simply because there is little to substantiate the claims of actual male-male or female-female relations in the era before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is no cause to assert there they didn't exist. Since the subject itself was taboo and even dangerously negative to broach, given the differences in education and class and male/female status, same sex coupling was hardly even documented at the time even under the most tolerant of communities. What is available as a guideline of sorts to imply a sexual practice

other than heterosexuality are slave narratives that could be construed as portraying narratives that speak of same sex attraction, if read from a different perspective.

It is important in consideration of the context of the persistent narrative where masculinities are always already believed to be heteronormative, *bonded* gives adequate contextualization in its creative treatment and re-imagining of the conformist slave narrative. The playwright goes further in his engaging with male-male sex even implying with one of the young black men that he had a sexual relationship with his mother's owner. Given the ease and "natural" manner in which this topic is introduced *bonded* pedagogy instruct that beyond the well documented rape of female slaves by white masters is overwhelmingly evident but also avers there was also the possibility of rape of male slaves as well. However, Jolly goes further when he implies the relationship between the young man and his white owner was consensual. Moreover the play cites a sexual curiosity of white men toward black men glimpsed in the melodramas of the day.<sup>182</sup> The defensive positions against this kind of revelation is seen in the dynamic between the male slaves in the play where their sense of helplessness might be read as feminine resulting in overcompensation to the extent that adherence to the hyper masculine leads to the betrayal of other blacks. The act of sex had always been implied or comically depicted amongst blacks but the fascination with black bodies deemed by white slave owners that resulted in many children of mixed race where normal relations are condoned. Subject to the repressive political regime predicated on their inferiority, the psychological and physical torture meant that anything normative would have been very difficult obtain let alone maintain. Desire is seen as having a reciprocal modality in conflict with a recognized code of virtue ethics. By virtue ethics, I mean, a code of morality that includes duty, responsibility, filial piety and more importantly, family. The

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<sup>182</sup> William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships*, (Routledge, 2001) 146-147. Banemann describes a section of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where a foppish white planter, St Clare, has a very odd, intimate relationship with his equally foppish black valet, Adolph.



opposite of virtue is vice, thus anything outside of this set of ethical behavior is to be considered transgressive. The central conflict presented is the black slaves' struggle with a devotion to this virtue; the tension between the expected family man and their own tacitly acknowledged desire for someone of their own sex.

My discussion of a purposeful use of melodrama as the theatrical framing device recalls the evidential slave narratives enhance the temporality of the historic narrative. My intention is not to probe the history of the melodrama but to apply it as a method of cultural, performance studies and history theories to unpack slave narrative in particular through the medium of theatre and the contemporary playwright's use of it to argue the method through which marginalized peoples gain visibility in contemporary theatre. Jolly states the main reason behind *bonded* was his overwhelming curiosity to "dig into that history." He writes, "I want to play around in all its dirt, get all messy and covered in its secrets, sift through the myths and facts, and get buried so deep that when I return to the surface, I will have exhumed something precious and unexpected."<sup>183</sup> Here a black and gay playwright's sensibilities re-claim and re-imagine our contemporary notions around the dominant societal taboo of male/male intimacy providing a vibrant and daring inquiry into the lived experience of black slaves.

Even the word "bonded" conjures images of sex and servitude. It is literally the contractual obligation of Asa's mother who has a bonded slave is allowed her freedom once the debt is paid. But the word resonates more widely on several levels that are not literal. Seeing the word, unity is inferred by its definition. Bonds hold things together as in binding two objects with rope or adherent. It also means cultural practices that unite a community or individuals. It is a word that in legalese would meet a marriage of sorts, something legally binding as a contract

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<sup>183</sup> Jolly, Donald. "Why I Wrote *bonded*." Mar 18, 2011 <<http://jollydrama.com/>>

between two people. For all of its many referents, it is a signifier of commonality. In addition, Jolly has chosen to punctuate the word with a small “b” recalling two forms of marginalization at the same time; black slavery and black same sex intimacy. What the word says to the reader/spectator is that the commonality of forced labor and inequality are two sides of the same coin. The existence of one is inclusive with the history of the other. What emerges is a complicated construction of black masculinities that allows for a fluid re-interpretation of slave narrative that might be considered as nodding toward an awareness of sexual variance that had long been a subterfuge of those who documented and those who edited the narratives. A stronger argument against the lack of the empirical might be made if the genre of cultural medium were not literature or in this case a play script. Implanting a romantic situation of a love triangle where two of the participants are men in love with each other is the creative edge to the slave narrative beginning with a unique expression of the title.

Lastly, if the *mise en scene* of *bonded* moves around in a muddy atmosphere of historiographical evidence, it moors itself in racist American iconography by using “nigger” repeatedly. It is an attempt to recreate slave dialogues that does not depend on authentically researched documentation but rather as a place where stream of consciousness dominates and the play becomes an expository exercise of loss and memory in the retelling of traumatic events. I mention the consistency as an authentic link to the past but it remains a stinging reminder of the language and its correlation to the rules of power and sex so defined by Foucault.<sup>184</sup> In a climactic scene Sonny, the closeted slave fends off the repeated advances of Asa, the younger male slave, turning on him. “Niggahs cain’t love niggahs!”<sup>185</sup> The rebuke insinuates itself into the relationships between the characters as a word used to both demark as less than and more

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<sup>184</sup> Foucault .84-86.

<sup>185</sup> Sonny, *bonded Act II*.

than. Hearing the word in the midst of a modern audience, it is revelatory that the wince I felt as a black man from a generation that sought to eradicate the word from everyday use, I realize the word retains its musculature even though a younger black generation uses the word habitually in their song lyrics. I mention this because hearing Lily refer to Asa as the “new niggah” and to her yet unborn children as “niggahs” has reference to the hip hop language of Jolly’s generation. Embedded in the script’s notes<sup>186</sup>, Jolly indicates the word is a deliberate dramaturgical device used for authenticity and to wrench the audience sensibilities around the word’s modern taboo and at the same time remind the audience of its resilient power to demean. Interestingly, the word though politically incorrect in contemporary society has a numbing effect as it is repeated continuously as the slaves refer to each in a concerted way to debase and control and in another way to show camaraderie. Moreover “nigger” has come to represent epithet and endearment depending on the situation and who utters it. The word like the binding imagery of the play’s title is floating signifier for black identity, historic in its origin but consistent in its resilience to remain defined by debasement/affection intentions. In keeping with the play’s underpinning of abuse and debasement, “nigger” presses the sore spot of moral outrage perhaps even more than the image of othered sexuality. “Niggah faggot” is never used or any other anomalous sexual identification language which is understood in modern society as epithets for homosexuals. The tacit sexual variance in *Bonded* is not named as “sissy” or even “unnatural” so “nigger” has nothing to compete with as far as words to mark the slave body as other than an inferior black body. Seeking substantiation where the poetics of the play’s narrative runs into the prosaic historical facts, “nigger” is the bridge that always already leads the spectator back to a definite period of American history heightening an excessive emotional attachment of the proceedings, an

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<sup>186</sup> Donald Jolly, *Bonded* script. “A Few Notes on Style.”.1

elemental use of the melodramatic as a lure into the twisted sociocultural currents of antebellum plantation life.

### *Staging Melodramatic Masculinities*

*bonded*<sup>187</sup> opens on two slaves on the porch of their slave cabin; a young woman in her teens, Lily, is shaving Sonny, a big hunk of a black man in his twenties. It is home and as such is emblematic of melodramas known as the “space of innocence”.<sup>188</sup> The structure may be the property of master but so are the Lily and Sonny. Still it is there space where they are allowed to have some respite from their daily labor. The specificity of the slave cabin provides an immediate referent for the contemporary audience schooled in the “livings” of those who are forced to labor; it is a living apparatus, a museum piece to the spectator as we listen in to dialogue that mixes a vernacular of the past with a familiar sentiment in that the plantation is a character in the scene that does not have to speak in order to assert its authority over Lily and Sonny. In the the world of these characters this place provides and takes away, in that they are dependent on their every need by this harnessed geography that surveys their every move and in turn induces them to watch each other for signs of transgression. Lily and Sonny are the archetypes of the black man and woman bound to the whims of the nation-state. They have no worth other than free labor so the razor in Lily’s hand is metaphor for Sonny’s life and death on another level. Even though she is only fifteen, Lily is aware of the failing plantation and desperate for protection as the creditor’s close in. They are one of the few remaining slaves left; the others have been sold off to pay the master’s debts. So the talk turns to marriage and Sonny

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<sup>187</sup> *bonded* is unpublished. Jolly has allowed me access to the final draft of the script to use as the source of citations.

<sup>188</sup> Linda Williams, Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 28.

evades the commitment. Lily is suspicious but does not go beyond the boundary of to push him away for good. Instead, she has knowledge of the impending arrival of a new slave brought from the North. She warns Sonny that he is in danger of losing his “head niggah” status. Sonny is riled but nevertheless remains confident that he is not going to be replaced. The message projected is the looming rivalry between the conformist and non conformist paradigm.

Sonny’s sexuality is framed for the spectator in two unambiguous ways. The first is the stripping and washing of Asa as he is baptized/re-born into his life as a slave. Sonny is left to the task. The tension between the two is plain in the script but it is managed as a moment of chemistry between the actors and is projected kinesthetically to the spectator. In the small space of the theatre and way the play is staged gives the audience a direct looks at Asa’s nude body. Inferred with the implicitly embedded bondage and discipline of the slave/master system and the accoutrements associated with the s/m act, the tying up and the whipping and then the washing is uncomfortable and titillating at the same time. Asa revisits but is finally unable and submits. Sonny finds the act of performing the overseer and the person in control and means to assert his power over the “new niggah.” Still his attraction to Asa is meant to be seen and felt and the sensuality of the ritual is as rich and terrible as anything experienced theatre goers will find in their repertoire of theatre attendance. The other moment of sexuality takes place while Sonny and Asa are asleep and Sonny reaches out to touch Asa’s foot. The foot fetish implied is interesting and unique to a black drama where the sexuality is strictly normative even for heteronormativity. Sonny’s fascination and attraction to the young slave man who once wore shoes exposes a loose and experimental curiosity about what might be a pleasurable moment. The scene occurs at the end of an exhausting day of labor when the two men fall to the ground and soon fall asleep, positioned near each other. It at this time Sonny hears Asa speaking to

someone in his dreams. It appears Asa slept in the same bed with his Boston mentor leading him to relate to their sexual encounters. Sonny is strangely aroused by what he hears and begins to fondle Asa's foot in his dream as if it were some new found toy. The brief moment of fetishism is abruptly stopped when Asa awakens.

If *bonded* appears to be traditional and modern, it is because it incorporates both idioms into its *mise en scène* for dramatic effect. It is the hoped for life that is built into the melodramatic framing of the same sex relationship between Sonny and Asa while simultaneously stepping into the brutality of the slave system. While the play retains a certain adherence to the virtuous dictates of the melodrama, it also gives way to a slave's imagined-fantasy life, romantic and sexual. In using Sonny and Asa to illustrate the complexities of sexuality, even if the practices of same sex attraction had to be discreet, the hoped for relationship was not anathema. But still the normative as the top force of propriety asserts a strict behavior of outward decorum. Sonny finds his ambivalent feelings toward Asa to be powerful, irresistible, repellant and shameful all at once repeats. Asa is desperate for Sonny and freedom. Jolly emphasizes his characters conflict while providing a genealogy of the self condemnation of black same sex relationships. More over same sex attraction under enormously complex circumstances opens the door to a conversation about fixity and fluidity amongst the slave caste that resonates to contemporary sexual placement of black men, gay and straight. Like Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, Jolly imagines the scenes of gendered intimacy as oneiric where the men are intimate with each other without revealing their feelings. It is only when Asa declares his love to Sonny that the reality of the situation becomes in the best sense of melodrama, the marker of their destiny.

Meanwhile, Sonny struggles against jumping the broom with Lily because of an unexpressed avoidance and ambivalence of his deeper understanding of his orientation, an

orientation confirmed by a long lost love Matthew, sold up the river, at a point before the play begins. Lily is the only black woman left on the plantation. She entices and attempts to seduce Sonny over and over until she gives up ever having him commit to her. Then Asa, the “new niggah” enters the picture. From his entrance the tensions between all of the characters becomes heightened as threads of the past begin to unravel to give the spectator a fuller account of plantation life. As it is, the north is forcibly transported to the south bringing with it the progressive sentiments embodied by Asa to the entrenched sensibilities of lives disciplined by bondage exhibited by the slaves.

It is Asa as the antagonist in the piece that disrupts the play’s flow of heteronormative fixity. Not only is the Northern educated Negro who is suddenly forced into slavery but he is also the Northerner who has a different lens from which sexual intimacy is explored. It is intimated in a dream scene when Asa is playfully fending off the advances of his white mentor. Apparently, he slept in the same bed with him and was allowed or expected to respond to him sexually. The idea that this was a statutory rape would not be historically correct so the relationship between black boys or black women were on the same level of freedom whether it was the North or the South. The thinking and critical awareness of this unequal status is the point of negotiation for black people during this era (as it would be for many generations to follow) lending Asa a street smarts that is advantageous to his calculating strategy and tactics. It is also a representation of a character who may not know what he’s feeling but is true to his same sex attraction as something “natural” to him.

Jack is the oldest character in the play that fiercely defends his identity as “the true African.” It is here where the metaphysics enters the play’s conversation. The reiteration of Africa and nigger become purposeful tautology. Jack abuses the word as well as applies its

inferred inferiority as his weapon of power/knowledge reified by the use of the whip. Jack knows the secret of Sonny's past liaison with Matthew. The homoerotic uttering is mixed with this knowledge as he attempts to discipline Asa. Countering some of the Afrocentric theories of no knowledge of same sex relations in Africa, Jolly re-imagines this narrative through Jack. Not only is there knowledge of these acts but he has learned to demonize the actor from a Eurocentric bigotry.

Africa is represented in the character of Jack known amongst the slaves as the "old African." He is the oldest slave on the plantation and is also the conduit between the traditions of the mother country and the adapted ways of the new country. His idea of sexuality is more toward the hyper masculine in that he is the appointed overseer and therefore has some control over the other slaves on the plantation. This is where the idea of punishment and discipline are helpful in understanding a way of control by physical beatings and knowledge of the other. The localized center of knowledge, the plantation is a world untold itself that is not subject to outside interferences. It is the one place where the ability to treat one's property as one sees fit is strictly a private decision. The old African is told to train Asa to be the docile slave nature has intended. But the African sees the inherent sissy qualities and uses the means of discipline at his disposal to pleasure himself with the stripping and beatings. Humiliation is the first resort. When Asa continues to resist, the old African though probably more opposite sex attracted than same sex forces himself on the boy setting in motion events that will sever his ties from the plantation.

Lily is the lone female character that is seen. She acts as the liaison between the house and the slave quarters. Since the plantation has fallen on hard times (it is implied there were never many slaves on this particular plantation to begin with) her duties have multiplied. But as the play's single female, she is also the center of attention for the few black men available to her.



Of course it is Sonny who she fixates on as the husband and protector of her fantasies. Lily is also speaks for the white master and his wife (they are never seen) so we get a variety of voices and interpretation of events from Lily. Hers is a unique position as she teases and flirts with sonny and taunts Asa. If her position is narrowly drawn it is because her character seeks to stay on the plantation where she has some power instead of the usual escape fantasies that she never initiates with Sonny. Hers is the familial position. She wants and needs a family made expressly clear by her concerted efforts to “jump the broom” with Sonny. She perceives Asa as a threat from his very entrance even if she does not know exactly why at first. Her relationship is interesting to note because it parallels what contemporary issues of black women being involved with black men who are attracted to other men.

Whites are never seen in the play only referred to or they speak through the slave characters. Jolly makes it clear that even though they are not seen t, their control is tangible. From the old African as the eyes and ears of the white master to Lily who also acts as the double role of surveyor and subversive, the lives of the slaves are dictated and determined by the unseen force of power that is always waiting to alter your life circumstances. That the sexual roundelays occur under their noses is indicative of power’s unreasonable belief in their hold on to the less powerful. Plantation life becomes a place of dual knowledge where the slave has access to a different kind of knowledge that he/she uses as their own toll of a certain control over their jailers. The master’s bidding is held to out of self preservation. The spectator witnesses the old African carrying out the master’s orders to whip Asa to teach him his place. Asa’s eventual submission to the rules of plantation life are adhered to only on the surface while his transgressive desire to be with Sonny allows him to affect the dual life of the other slaves.

Jolly's exclusion of white characters might be seen to be as an inversion of racism but that is precisely the point. What resonates for the contemporary spectator is the image of the white master so embedded in American imagination that their actual presence is unnecessary; omitting them out acts to reify their existence. We are asked to examine our own subconscious submission to the power that is not directly in front of us but projecting their control through our own process of self- subjugation and self-delusion. In their absence a self-reflexivity is asked of the spectator. This is the transformative nature Jolly attempts in the not so subtle messaging in an effort to have the spectator consider his/her own self-imprisonment. The idea of moving away from the traditional definitions of historic roles to a place of recognized fluidity is implicit in the poetics of *bonded*. Consciously separating the traditional slave story to the modern understanding of racist tropes is there as pedagogy. Jolly's use of the absent punisher is used in contemporary drama of the marginalized to project a "please respond" attitude from the spectator.

Slavery and religion is debated in the piece, as Jolly has his characters testify at various times about their faith or lack of faith where a virtuously lived life has clearly been part of the slave owner's indoctrination and discipline of his responsibilities. It is interesting to note that by 1820 (the play's setting year) the introduction of Christianity was now very much ingrained in the lives of black slaves. Sonny uses Biblical phrases to guide his thinking against resisting the rigid rule of life on the plantation. His faith in the European God has erased the memory of any connection with the African religions. His identification is that of a slave with no prospects or any other existence. As with the colonial subject, the effects of being colonized begins to take on a life of its where the colonized becomes more and more in sync with imitating the colonizer. Although the formal black church has not yet organized on the plantation, the empathy of the

slaves with those who struggle in the Biblical stories has already seeped into their consciousness. There is a cognitive dissonance that pulls and pushes the chartaers between Christian doctrine and the injustice of being kept as property by another human being. Good and evil, virtue and vice strain against each other for dominance in the theatre of black and white.

*bonded's* sensational use of "the theatrical function of melodrama"<sup>189</sup> is meant to amplify an idea of moral truth, in this case a natural attraction between two slaves who happen to be of the same sex, in gesture and image where the depth of their passion is undeniably a possibility that could not be explicated in the spoken word. The play insists on wrestling with an unsubtle indication of a power-knowledge that is to be never to be spoken or written for that matter. The avoidance dance knows about sexual otherness but as power relations play out seeks to keep this information within the familial or at the very least the community, policing in a direct/indirect strategy that limits circulating ideas of sexual discourse in the black community. The pro and con of black men as less than men implied through same sex practices is the at the very core of the disidentifactory mode of hiding same sex attraction excites a discussion on the fixity of hyper masculine image, family and religion; issues the play discloses in order to engage the audience on the very nature of historical narratives where nuance of sexuality is ignored and the myriad forms of intimate relations including fetish is ignored.

Labor is the overwhelming metaphor embedded in the narrative, the abuse of labor and the power of the labored body. The designers concoct a set that is serves two functions: the slave quarters and the plow. At one point in the play, Asa and Sonny use a transformed slave quarters as the plow because, "the master's mule died." The two men labor, one pushes and one pulls, to complete their task for the day. Sonny remarks, "tomorrow is today all over again." Therefore

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<sup>189</sup> Williams 18.

the set becomes floating signifier that Sonny and Asa must dismantle/deconstruct before their shared desires are acknowledged, from the outside, Jack and Lilly, then Asa and finally by Sonny. Ironically, it is Sonny, the performer of the hyper masculine that will ultimately, not resort to killing himself but in the phenomenological sense will re-move him from the immediate hostile public sphere for a counter space, taking his beloved Asa with him.

Staged in the yard of the plantation where the slave cabin figures prominently as a spectacular theatrical device and place of imagined cultural referent. The slave cabin serves a double function. It is the place of the public and private identity of the slave. It is in proximity to the master's house and yet in the shadows. It is a place of shelter but it's identification as a "home" is negated as it is a place of impermanence. The slaves do their work, come to the cabin to rest a bit at night and then return to work at dawn. Interestingly, the place as public and private because it is supposed to be the slave's domain but it is understood that it can be taken away at the whim of the master. So it is a place/space of limbo. When the cabin turns into a field plow before the eyes of the audience, it becomes clear that home and hard labor are inextricably linked. The converted cabin, now a plow, is pulled by the two black actors in a grueling workout as it simulates a day's work on the farm. Being as close we were to the actors, we could see the strain of their muscles as they maneuvered the plow from the slave cabin, pulling it into full view of the audience as it stretches the length of the playing space. We were hear the call and response of the slave men as Sonny, being the more experienced of the two, tries to get Asa to commit to a rhythm that will give the plow momentum. At last, Asa understands not to resist and Sonny learns a persistence urging is what is needed for Asa to respond. The intense struggle between the two is metaphor for their struggle to be intimate with one another and the phallic plow is tool Jolly uses to emphasize the sexual overtones of the scene.

The linear structure along with the iconic slave setting is familiar elements that give the audience expectations certain validation. Such production conventions than make the play an easy one to sit through building sympathy for the plight of the unrequited love like so many melodramas deliver. The staging of the play has much to do with the constant look and look away deliberately messaged by the creative team. In my audience, the play was set in the middle of the playing space, a middle passage if you will while the audience sat on either side, forcing the spectator to look at one another as the play unfolds. This mirroring effect imbricates, interpolates and collates our responses so that we are not distanced from the performance but included and, yes, collusive. It is probably the most effective staging for a play with this subject matter which enhances the intensity of observation for a play espousing these things of sexual variance within the slave community.

Is there precedence for the character-types of Sonny and Asa? By the antebellum period, the black male representation had been produced and re-circulated amongst European playwrights in several notable characterizations. The stalwart black and the dandy black can be seen to have a link with sixteenth and seventeenth century black characterizations namely, Othello, the virtuous but impulsive black moor, Oroonoko, the noble Surinamese black from Aphra Behn's adaption of her novel and Mungo, a Carribean slave (performed by a white actor in black face) from Issac Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock*.<sup>190</sup> known for his dandified (read as sissy) demeanor and appearance. Sonny may not be the king in the making as Oronook but he is the noble leader struggling with identity in the midst of white oppression. Beyond a sense of trying to convince others that this was a real occurrence, the search for the black gay male, much like

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<sup>190</sup> Mungo is a Caribbean slave in Bickerstaffe's 1768 comic "afterpiece" operetta. Played by a white actor in blackface, Mungo is the classic servant who knows more about the relationships in the household than his rich employers. Mungo is also one of the first black dandies on the English speaking stage.

my own search for his/her presence in contemporary performance is less a case of pure proof but an awareness of desire that a community or nation-state strives to control for a number of different reasons. It is the black gay male subject who is caught in the middle of the argument for and against their visibility. It may be buried deep in theatrical traditions such the noble black or the dandified black sissy but having these prototypes in place expose the domain of curiosity that white playwrights reserved over black characters. This is especially true as the colonized subject found a closer scrutiny as the tensions of slave ownership became a *cause célèbre* amongst a certain group of liberally minded thinkers. It is not that the black characters were any less inferior to their colonizer but that images of them were being put into place alongside a certain kind of physical and emotional categorization. But the range was small, either the noble savage of Othello and Oronook or the emasculated Mungo.

Thus playing against type becomes a strategic maneuver in establishing a re-claimed heritage and to create a black gay cultural niche within the larger understanding of black history. The process of performance has been in a sense becomes a borrowed tactical mode of resistance reminiscent of mainstream black culture to an accepted traditional method of discussing or in this case not discussing homosexuality. Obviously, including a study of same-sex relationships in history has been difficult on a purely lack of evidential proof. Because there is little to substantiate the claims of actual male-male or female-female relations in the era before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is no cause to assert there they simply didn't exist. Since the subject itself was taboo and even dangerously negative to broach, given the differences in education and class and male/female status, same sex coupling was hardly even documented at the time even under the most tolerant of communities. If we look at the black American throughout their existence in American society, the question of variant sexuality become moot given their lack of

consideration as any other than nonwhite and therefore unthinkable as far as whites were concerned. What is available as a guideline of sorts to imply a sexual practice other than heterosexuality are slave narratives that could be construed as portraying narratives that speak of same sex attraction.

The cast is mostly young and lighter skinned blacks except for the actor playing the African. Sonny and Asa have been cast to resemble an iconic rendering of imagined male couples. In other words, sonny is butch: tall, broad shouldered, deep voiced. While Asa is small bottom; small framed, sassy and overly emotional. I would suggest the casting is to contemporize history and not to complicate embedded images of gay men. Modern audiences might not accept the reverse of body image and sexual role playing. Jolly has written the description of the men this way so the casting director is being true to the script. But what we know of sexually variant behavior that the usual models are reified rather than challenged. I mention the color of their skin because in casting people of color tends for roles of “good” and “bad” characters re-enforce a subtext of racism as the darker the person the more malevolent they appear. Furthermore, Asa and Lily are light skinned blacks implying a sameness of gender identification. Jolly’s script does not specify the color combination but in staging the play, a reliance on coding in casting choices reveals the confines of melodrama as having an advantage and disadvantage in bring the black same sex couple into a modern theatre project.

However, the performances are modern in approach meaning they don’t necessarily subscribe to experimental or Method training but these modern black actors utilizes a magic “what if” to project themselves into role of a slave. The gender roles are acted so that the believability of the character that is out of place (Asa) can be seen as a disruptive force in the midst of plantation gentility. If the work of modern actors is to lose and regain the ethnic

quotient in their subjectivity what the acting offers in *bonded* is intersubjectivity. That is to say, the young actors haven't been trained or schooled in the historic vocal cadences of the period which might have made their characters seem more connected to the past than they actually are. Vocally the cast mouths the words in Jolly's script without authenticating the sounds of a second generation of Africans thrown into the American south intermingle the nuances of their African dialect with American English. It is understandable that they could not possibly have had the time to study and absorb the cadences of antebellum speech patterns amongst slaves but it might have added a layer of intensity to the performances had it been suggested.

As an audience, our "hoped-for" ending exudes a hyper-emotionalism where according to Jolly the pace "quickens like a heartbeat in the throes of passion"<sup>191</sup> generating a series of directorial movements meant to use the audience's collective empathy to emphasize a message of sexual and racial agency. Here the melodramatic is appropriate allowing ensuing events plausibility; careful covert activities unravel revealing true motivations and secret desires while confrontation rips the covers off of character denial. Asa's passionate disclosure of love to Sonny is the audience's longed for denouement. Again, it is an apt conclusion for a play that has as its aim the full emotional involvement and release of the spectator. It as if Jolly and the director have made a wordless dance piece that plays out to a kinesthetic extreme linking the spectator to the proceedings to include rather than to distance. Thus, quickened pace and dogs barking on a recorded soundtrack involves the audience in the destiny of Asa and Sonny as well as their own. Our contemporary understanding of the psychological trauma of slavery performatively acts as symbiotic connection between actor and audience intended to engage our emotions as we identify with the possibilities of survival for the male couple.

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<sup>191</sup> Jolly, Donald. *bonded*. Notes .



## ***bonded* and Melodrama's Promise**

"Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?"<sup>192</sup> The quote is taken from a slave woman's narrative. It speaks to the humanity of the slave as a counterfactual to the prevailing legal reality and cultural misreading of black people and their ability to be intimate. It is a poetic piece of writing that Jolly uses to foreground the play's central of historic narrative that asks the spectator to ponder the intimate life of a black slave. Could there have been a real bond between two people trying to negotiate a day to day existence in the most unimaginable of circumstances where their worth was not as a human being but as an object of forced labor? Jacobs's plaintive statement assures us the ability to bond was attainable. If this was true for what we can assume are male/female relations, it must be true as well for the opposites. On its surface the play tends to resemble the kind of slave drama that Americans have become accustomed to where the slaves are all-suffering and their sexuality is never an issue. From this traditional approach the spectator can extrapolate the degradation and the historic racism afflicting the black community giving context to a host of sociocultural challenges. So the piece seeks to view these invisible intimacies as another avenue to suggest that sexuality was a lively and fluid enterprise on the plantation not restricted to the plantation.

*bonded's* sensational use of "the theatrical function of melodrama"<sup>193</sup> is meant to amplify an idea of moral truth, in this case a natural attraction between two slaves who happen to be of the same sex, in gesture and image where the depth of their passion is undeniably a possibility that could not be explicated in the spoken word. The play insists on wrestling with an

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<sup>192</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: A Harvard Book, 1973) 36.

<sup>193</sup> Williams 18.

unsubtle indication of a power-knowledge that is never to be spoken or written about for that matter. The avoidance dance knows about sexual otherness but as power relations play out seeks to keep this information within the familial or at the very least the community, policing in a direct/indirect strategy that limits circulating ideas of sexual discourse in the black community. The pro and con of black men as less than men implied through same sex practices is the at the very core of the disidentifactory mode of hiding same sex attraction excites a discussion on the fixity of hyper masculine image, family and religion; issues the play discloses in order to engage the audience on the very nature of historical narratives where nuance of sexuality is ignored and the myriad forms of intimate relations including fetish is ignored.

The dictionary defines *melodrama* as “a dramatic form that does not observe the laws of cause and effect and that exaggerates emotion and emphasizes plot or action at the expense of characterization”.<sup>194</sup> Exaggerated emotion offers a method of dramatic presentation that leaves no room for ambiguity. In the case of the missing black gay male from history, an emphasis on excessive emotionality forces the characters in behaviors that would defy the consequential outcomes in the context of the plantation life. This is to say it would seem to follow the aim of this kind of historic drama is to infuse a liveness where the “dead” black male exists. If *bonded* is to have any effect at all it would be to shift the tactical silence around the subject of black gay men to a place of animation and testifying performativity to actively retrieve the absent body. Furthermore, “Melodrama,” write Saidiya Hartman, “presented blackness as vehicle of protest and dissent...”<sup>195</sup> She is specifically referring to the antislavery plays where blacks were the heroes and heroines of the piece mostly due to their noble bearing and an ability to suffer horrendous treatment with dignity. It was an effective use of overly-emotional situations to

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<sup>194</sup> Dictionary. Com “Melodrama”.

<sup>195</sup> Hartman 27.

present an argument for manumission in Manichean terms that were meant to be seen as truth. What is at stake has always been the misrepresentation as signifier for the non-citizen both inside the black community and outside of the black community.

Because of a lack of evidentiary proof, the sexually variant male representation was deemed apocryphal by conservative purveyors of American history narratives, seen as invention or at the most condescending, needed to be read between the lines of slave narratives. Re-inventing black masculinities from historic (mis) representations is the ongoing work of black playwrights, gay and straight. The case to be made for using melodramatic elements to relay the story of same sex loving black gay men offers the same heedlessness of evidentiary proof as verisimilitude. It is not unusual or rare for the truths (the documented chronology) surrounding historic events to have an altered re-telling. The archive can be an authentic marker of the specific moment but the document may exist because of extenuating circumstances such as regime changes or religious or social pressures to somehow dictate the terms of the document. In performance, we can see this when real gender was ignored when having men perform women for many hundreds of years, crossing cultural boundaries, east and west.

As Jacobs relates a female slave's desire for companionship, the idea of male slaves experiencing the same need for attachment to members of their same sex is not unimaginable. For black gay men this area of historic narrative is just beginning to be explored. We have examples such as *Civil Sex* and *Sweet Tea*. These two plays deal with the black homosexual in the context of African American history narratives. The temporality of these dramas lies in their placement of black homosexuals into the overall history of African American life, writing against the recurring theme of masculinist imagery stemming from the 1960s Black Nationalist movement. Re-telling and reminding the black community that sexual variance was not anomaly

but interwoven into the quilt work of their lives even when non-acknowledgement was the agreed upon strategy by the majority of the community. Its affect is a kind of retro documentation of an imagined archive. Reading these plays about the history of the black gay experience suddenly puts the community into a conversation with its past, confronting the complexities of slavery, sexuality and agency. I use those words in that order to express sexual practices and areas of intimacy that imbricate the rigidity of the heteronormative as black male masculinities are defined and debated from the antebellum period to contemporary American society. Making the black gay male inclusive in the black community's cultural arts is the beginning process of re-claiming the image of the black gay male.

There is now some scholarship investigating the historical evidence of same sex relations in the black community from the days slavery was introduced in the American colonies. The argument that there are no documented examples of this kind of sexual intimacy was seen within certain sectors of black academia during the black studies programs in the late 60s and throughout the 70s and 80s. It was the idea that homosexuality was a white man's disease and that the entire notion of a black homosexual meant something had gone terribly wrong in their family life that made them into sissies or punks. The impulse to defend against black homosexuality was certainly the backlash of racist and homophobic reactions against this kind of assimilation. Where the late 60s black movement had become a radicalized version of the King movement where strategies of resistance were being re-thought by latter group of black cultural and academic agents. Deciding the conversation of an inclusionary gesture towards the nascent LGBT movement was seen as a capitulation with Western decadence amongst the Marxists in the groups and thus the very notion that the black family had to come to terms with its "punks and bull-daggers" was seen as weakening of the black political ascendancy. However, the

soiohistoric evidence of same sex relations amongst blacks whether enslaved or free was as difficult to research as their white counterparts.

As identity designations became sexualized and gendered, the feminist movement and the simultaneous gay liberation movement protested against traditional white heterosexual male hegemony interjecting into the post 60s discourse a different perspective on the arts and sciences. Gays in particular in their understanding off queer theory sough t disrupt a pattern of invisibility by prioritizing the act of “coming out” as the nascent performative stance against years of injustice and ridicule. Even though the racial divide between white gays and gays of color could not be described as starting out on an equal footing, the advantage of visibility was meant to be a teleological break from the past. Most gays of color could understand the concept but putting into practice was not always the liberating force it was meant to be. Instead, a modulated response could be the only safe method for their acknowledgement of their homosexuality. This was unique to each community of color and therefore it had to be left to them to devise a particular strategy of “coming out.” The arts reflected the same tenuousness.

*bonded's* storyline is created out of the archive of the slave narrative, we can perceive the narrators as “innocents” in the grip of politically and cultural debasement which strengthens the case for their liberation. I say “innocents” because these stories exist as the normative family structure, one man and one woman, generally fractured by the system of humans as commodified objects seems foremost and standard throughout the archive. The meta-narratives remain under-researched and under-reported. Utilizing the slave narrative and discovering the same sex eroticism hidden within its rich, lugubrious and nuanced language, Jolly has complicated the centrality and causality of the persistent depiction of the heteronormative paradigm in African American life. That writing has come to replace embodiment as a slippery slope for the

playwright whose intent is to historicize the other, more specifically the Afro queer other. Jolly's re-imagining is aware of the incongruities and yet seeks to avoid them by letting the characters speak for themselves in the "what if." Even if the slave narrative never states the erotic variance of slave life, for Jolly, there has always been a parallel narrative embedded in the prose suggesting the navigations of sexual intimacy amongst the African American male slave population as a reality. In essence, the spectator is brought into what is seen as a rarefied event, inviting privity to those who might have dismissed the notion of the intimate same sex slave relation.

So very early in the history of storytelling amongst the slave population, the behavior to be emphasized was the normative in the context of the harsh realities of the slave regime. Black and white historians of the period point out the frustration of attempting to read between the lines as the references to sexuality and more importantly the evidence of same sex intimacy is buried in a sophisticated subversion built around an epistemology erected by the slaves. It is a curious inclusion and exclusion of the outside where the narration is being constructed by the colonized as Bhabha describes. The slave knew very well their actions were being scrutinized and thus their families, many were transitory, was researched by the majoritarian population, the heteropatriarcal power structure. The result is a coded language that speaks to those who know and confounds those who do not. It is an attempt by the slaves to be a part of the ruling power structure, mimic their language and in doing so provide a framework for subsequent generations in understanding their past and to carry the narrative into the future. From their first days as a population enslaved, the black slaves sought to resist a certain narrative that depicted them as not human.

Listed amongst Jolly's research sources on black same sex relations on the plantation is Walter Banemann's *Male Intimacy in Antebellum America*. Banemann tells us: "Little documentation survive on which to reconstruct male-male sexuality under slavery during the early part of America's history, but remnants of the complete story may be located in a few places, especially in the antebellum period."<sup>196</sup> Banemann is the first to aver that the authenticity of same sex relationships remains a complexity to the extent that the availability of archived material is nearly non-existent. So then is it all just conjecture? Not necessarily since the subversive homoerotic leanings can be found in song lyrics of the period as well as public performance. His research finds some evidence in the slave narrative of a sexuality that might be considered fluid. Banemann cites Eric Lott's work on the sexual context of the minstrel performance where white men in blackface interweave in their songs the mythic huge black phallus. Lott suggest the working class white patron of the minstrel show are indeed harboring a desire for sexual contact with black men and this is the subversive performance that allows them to fantasize about the prospect with losing white male privilege. As a reference for Jolly, Bateman's research is available to extrapolate the same sex experience present in every area of American life from its earliest history.

Bearing the responsibility to be authentic, Jolly is able to re-create an aural/verbal representation of early 19<sup>th</sup> century master/salve social interaction that relies less on the quotidian exchanges but a dramatic rendering; consisting of words and phrases of degradation introduced by the majoritarian and set into a continual pattern of circulation by the other. In other words, the dialogue seems authentic because of its inclusion of historic aural imagery. The lashing imagery of both the bondage and discipline of the epitaph the pierces the body and soul

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<sup>196</sup> Banemann 144.

is delivered in the context of an unexplainable same gender loving scenario. Both aspects of the word are resonant amongst the spectator and there are audible gasps when it is first uttered. The epitaph troubles the young black man brought forcibly to the plantation as he declares “I am not a nigger!” At the same time being forced to self emulate to find that his self worth is dependent on his resistance and tacit self-acknowledgement that in this hostile space he had better come to the place where the word can flow in and out of his consciousness just as the realization of his servitude becomes the place where his tactical transgressions only magnify his subservient status. The place where the double bind of being black and same sex attracted and a slave feed the “excesses and limits” of his existence suggest the degree of trauma the play traverses.

As this melancholic reverberation pierces the narrative it foregrounds a social ordering around black sexuality experienced in the discipline/bondage of the slave system. Whether this is Jolly’s intention or not, the circumscribed playing arena to he plantation populated by those who are literally under the whip recalls the fetishistic bondage fantasies of those who exorcise their traumatic emotionalism by dominating someone else. It is a psychic mind game that is meant to erode the self esteem of the individual being dominated until they submit. Their passivity is at the core of their malleability. *bonded* thus explores this unspoken sexually subversive dance as it touches on every aspect of the quotidian in the lives of the slaves. A co-mingling of labor and intimacy blur lines of gender roles so that normativity is distorted and only appears as the slaves’ option to acquiesce to the master’s wishes. However, the disruption of the normative is the slaves’ agency in practice. Having foregone the normative after several generations of conditioning, their recourse as in a strategy to assimilate in order to survive was to tacitly embrace the variant in their community as long as they remained more or less invisible.

### **Virtues’ Problematic Recreations**



Having laid down a positive approach for melodrama and a modern approach to re-interpreting history narratives, Jolly's project is beset by a particular set of obstacles. Being simplistic and emotionally excessive does work in favor of the emotional arguments against slavery so depicted in the abolitionist dramas of the era however complications arise in the equitable treatment of other marginalized peoples in the narrative, in this case, the predicament of slave women and the backlash of reductionism from dominant discourses which tend to dwell on a "normative" sexuality of black male and female subjugation as the paramount theme of slave narratives. Within this discourse there is the contention that a black gay male subject position is ahistorical since the evidence does not present itself either in storytelling or written documentation.

I have quoted Saidiya Hartman's work as an example of the positive influences that melodrama can bring to a identity politics project but let me also problematize the melodramatic structure by quoting Hartman again:

Melodrama provided the dramatic frame that made the experience of slavery meaningful in the antinomian terms of the moral imagination. The emotional power of melodrama's essential language of good and evil armed antislavery dissent with the force of moral right and might. Abolitionist discourse shared melodrama's obsession: virtue, virginity and the sanctity of the family.<sup>197</sup>

One of the arguments made by abolitionists that blacks were actually human could be explained by their ability to form familial structures like whites. Thus there developed a virtue ethics adopted by white abolitionists to prove the moral fortitude of blacks supported by Christian doctrine. The sexual depravity repeated in the minstrel performances was to be deemed false and misleading. Virtue is defined as "moral excellence." To exhibit any behavior that might be

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<sup>197</sup> Hartman 27.

questionable was to be outside of moral character and therefore not worthy of society.

Antislavery plays built upon this notion where blacks were heroes and heroines due to their unshifting uprightness. Even as *bonded* is able to utilize the humaneness of this sentiment, its othered sexual characters are positioned with a moral judgment that condemns them as less than their normative counterparts.

Theatrically, *bonded*'s reliance on melodrama as the primary dramaturgical framing to tell the story has its advantages and disadvantages. I state that immediately because my interrogation of the play is to defend the author's stylistic choice in telling the story of two males slaves in an intimate relation. In using melodrama as the play's excessively emotional background, Jolly utilizes the genre's strictly emotion rich and didactic *oeuvre* that allows for a clearly delineated representation of heroes and villains. Although melodrama has attained a pejorative meaning in by contemporary standards, I would argue Jolly's play the sentimental against the harsh realities of plantation life is more for the spectator's involvement rather than trying to stage a complex situation in simplistic terms. In doing so the play is much in keeping with a traditional approach to ethnic dramas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as the dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Characters represented in the *mise en scene* of obvious intent on the author's part. In relative terms of contemporary African American drama, the history play is applied with a nod backwards to the melodrama where black gay characters can finally be incorporated and the beginnings of the hyper masculine image of black males on the stage can be observed.

Still within the folds of the melodramatic style of the play Jolly interweaves a modern metaphor for agency. The idea behind the clearly defined and overly emotive messaging of the play is useful in seeing the strain of having a threefold existence for black gay men in America. The play wants to be persuasive in its deliberate approach to relaying the intimacy that was

present between two black men and at the same time the melodrama, a preordained method of performance returns the spectator to the place where the normal persists in intruding. In other words, Sonny and Asa's sexual connection is thwarted by a kind of performance genre that sees everything as a simplistic binary. Master/slave, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual etc The binaries bind these characters in the mise en scene created by Jolly that is intends to produce both a dialogic and dialectic but instead leaves the spectator with limiting options. Furthermore the incoherence around homosexuality is reified by a heteronormative paradigm even for the opposite attracted individuals who would find anything resembling a modern family structure to be almost nonexistent given the control and power tensions between master and slave.

An overdetermined use of melodrama and a hurried pacing tends to blur the narrative somewhat and may need a revisit by Jolly for future productions. I mention this because it is the disadvantage of the overly excessive emotional underpinnings of melodrama that the audience senses what is about to happen generally does happen. The lack of surprise is built into a sophisticated contemporary audience that is presumably already always accepting of the same sex couple having the obtaining the freedom to be together. However, the pedagogical intent is blurred by what is more portrayed as ambiguity rather than possibilities. In other words, Sonny and Asa realize their love and desire for one another but their existence is so tenuous at the realization because what had been denied is now exposed to Lily who is understandably hurt and angry. She runs off to inform he master that his degenerate property is intent on escape, where as the sounds of attacking dogs, a familiar sound track for those of the civil rights era, growl at them and at the audience. It is their rhizomatic line of flight, to places unknown, that splinters any notion of the utopian but rather Jolly offers the phenomenological as a way of agency for Sonny and Asa.

The marriage of Sonny to Lily is the play's highlight. It is a celebration that seems sadly anticlimactic, in that her pleas have been constant since the play began. It is Sonny's discomfort with his attraction to Asa that drives him to act. Jolly heightens the stakes in a melodramatic arc with overt interventions in Asa's direct action by having him declare his love not just physical attraction but desire and romance to Sonny. Of course, the spectator could see the projection coming but our own wish for the true lovers to unite is a trope that motivates countless romantic themes in the theatre that we tend to suspend our disbelief and support the illusion before us. This might appear to be a fault with the play's structure but in some of the cases with melodrama the actual excessive emotion seems to fit the decidedly emotional narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> century drama and therefore appropriate in telling the story of Sonny and Asa. The direct approach taken by Asa is an allegorical illustration of going beyond the down low. Thus the messaging here is to discard the language of the closet in asserting his identification as homosexual. Asa is sensitive enough to understand the need for this even if he has to suffer a dangerous reaction from Sonny.

As for gender referents, Asa and Lily compete for the "womanly" space. It is the place of comfort and understanding and acts as a respite from the harsh realities of slavery. It is one of the more problematic elements of the dramaturgy that the sissy (Asa) and the gender specific (Lily) vie for Sonny's affection and attention. Lily pleads her case very much like a defense lawyer having marriage as her client. Sonny seeing this as the way to go on the down low accepts. Sonny and Lily jump the broom, the broom being symbolic of good and evil in black mythology. The wedding dance becomes a frenzied dance macabre of non-hierarchical instability as the three characters exchange one another in the course of the roundabout. Asa tries to join in but repeatedly rebuffed by Sonny. At first. But his insistence is so concerted the velocity of his emotions and the excellent physical actions of the actors, propel sonny into his arms and they

kiss. Lily is discombobulated and then angry and then hurt. If there is a voice that is lessened in the production, it is her voice, as she is used by Sonny to cover his feelings for men, Asa uses her to get back at Sonny and finally Jack whose sexual fluidity recalls his African heritage and now seen as moral depravity in the American South makes him an unsympathetic character and unacceptable as husband material.

If we look closely at the relationship between Asa and Sonny, we have to realize that there is no language for their feelings toward one another. Jolly has to write about same sex attraction as an abstract while the real racial implications of their status are very real. If it appears to be hypocritical for a country to be ostensibly founded in freedom when a substantial portion of its population is legally cargo and forced labor, the word “bonded” takes on many resonances. Unlike heterosexually focused narratives of the slave family, the nuances within the family manifested in same sex attraction are not included in the telling. The playwright then is in uncharted waters here where he cannot stringent proof of homosexual communities, it has to be surmised that the behavior itself even though unnamed does not go unmarked. This is to say the characters around Asa and Sonny observe what is happening between them, the subtle and not so subtle body language that is commented upon. Asa says in Act II, If I dream about someone every night and I cannot bear to be separated from that person who haunts my dreams, regardless of how wild, or unimaginable those dreams are...”<sup>198</sup> He professes his love for Sonny in a bold pitch to “jump the broom” with him and so legitimize their love in the manner of the normative male and female slaves. Of course Sonny is uncomprehending and true to his virtuous character responds angrily and with rejection. However Asa continues to plead,” Your very being is my

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<sup>198</sup> *Bonded*. 59.

only source of hope and salvation in this horrid, wretched place!”<sup>199</sup> Here is the moment of melodrama’s promise that the two lovers suddenly see the light and plan their escape. As might be predicted with the escalating series of overly emotional events characteristic of the melodrama, this is just what happens.

Director Rivers moves the play along at an accelerated pace in act two whereby the pace “quickens like a heartbeat in the throes of passion”.<sup>200</sup> It is as Jolly describes in his notes as the writing process for him was like Dadaist stream of consciousness. Forbidden desires being discovered (years earlier, Sonny had attempted to run away from the plantation with another male slave named Matthew who was killed during the escape) make the characters anxious. Their careful covert activities unravel revealing true motivations and honesty. Sonny’s wife and the African are never deceived. Their confrontation rips the covers off of Sonny’s denial. Along with Asa’s passionate plea of love, the decision to escape the plantation is made impulsively. The heightened dramatics surrounding the ending might appear over the top but in keeping with the melodramatics of the earlier scenes, it is an apt conclusion for a play that has as its aim the full emotional involvement of the spectator. It as if Jolly and Rivera have made a wordless dance piece that plays out kinesthetically linking the spectator to the proceeding as included not distanced. Quickened pace and dogs barking on a soundtrack involves the audience in the destiny of Asa and Sonny. Our contemporary understanding of the psychological trauma of slavery and marginalization is meant to engage our sensibilities about the stories of survival that our unfamiliar in our cultural but nevertheless have always been present.

Dance is integral to the interplay of sexuality and race. There are two places where it used most prominently, both times for a reification of African sexuality that relies on the

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<sup>199</sup> ibid

<sup>200</sup> Jolly, Donald. Bonded. p.

seductive body of a woman and the second time the seductive body of a sissy. In the first act there is a time of respite given to the slaves generally on a Sunday, called the “juba.” The ritual consists of drumming before it was outlawed amongst slaves and a kind of energetic bodily display between male and female slaves in a mock ceremonial sexual union. The scene is integrated with a song called a “niggah song” in the script which is a call and response style progenitor of a blues format where the present situation of the plantation is sung along with gossip and much sexual innuendo. Lily and the African Jack participate in the song as they trade an interior dialogue back and forth while Lily moves her body enticingly in front of Sonny. The scene is powerful in its depiction of slave ritual and also for the sexuality displayed in a public space. Ironically the scene ends with a debate amongst their slaves about their African heritage. Sonny adamantly states “I ain't no Affurkin. Jack the onliest Affurkin around these here parts!”<sup>201</sup> But it is Jack the African who is most offended, “That neegrar gonna learn! I'ma break him! I had to go all the way from NewYork with that neegrar crying and woo-hooing and cursing my name and carrying on. This Neegrar got to learn his place. Ain't got no time for no uppity neegrar from up North telling me what to do. I's in charge-- first come JesusLordGod, then Marster Atkins, then ME! You hear that? You neegrarsdown underneath way at the bottom.”<sup>202</sup> Having knowledge is power. Asa's assertion of his Africaness is at odds with the plantation slaves who are being educated away from their roots as it were. Jack's sense of control is threatened because he is the keeper of this connection, using the power of knowledge to maintain his status as the master's liaison with the slave population.

The wedding dance of Sonny and Lily offers a particular imagery that establishes in its roundelay between bride, groom and friend of the groom, a power play between the normative

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<sup>201</sup> Jolly *bonded*. 18

<sup>202</sup> Jolly 19.

and nonnormative. It is at the moment of the traditional bride and groom dance when Asa interrupts to first dance with Lily. Lily in a triumphant tone beckons to Asa to join her and Sonny, “Dancing make you feel like new.”<sup>203</sup> The half mocking, half sincere gesture turns into interesting pas de trois, as the three characters perform: Sonny interrupts to dance with Asa then Lily pushes her way back into dance with Sonny when suddenly the three of them are dancing together for the briefest interlude while their tensions and frustrations mount. It is obvious Asa cannot contain is jealousy and Sonny cannot deny his feeling for Asa. Lily is left to defend her marriage and to resist any intrusion from the outside. The scene is choreographed by the director as the plowing scene, in that the dance of power is a strenuous physical exercise. What is deemed natural is in disputation in both scenes. Whether the forced labor of slave work or the forced gender roles the outcome is exhaustion. Power is seen from the outside as the place of repetitious actions of the body. In the metaphor of master/slave relations, the rules of the relationship are to be decided beforehand. Such is the case in the marriage scene though unspoken and spoken as in taking vows. The dance of bondage and discipline reveal the performativity of the role playing that is certainly in evidence in the slavery paradigm.

Therein lays the most problematic reach of melodrama to substantiate the play’s message of dissent. The only self identified same sex attracted man is in conflict with the only woman in the play as they vie for the affection of the lone studly male. Even as Lily is the in-between, the link between Sonny and Asa’s mutual attraction for each other, she performs the pivotal role of female gender representation; the bottom to the top, the passive to the aggressor. Images created such as her physicality is akin to that of Asa. These stage picture tend to re-enforce contemporary gender conformity rather than disrupt the contemporary spectator’s referents to the

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<sup>203</sup> Jolly 55.



sexually defined roles of Western society becoming conflated with and parallel to modern gender roles. As the her performance moves to the fever pitch of fierce defense of the family unit, Lily's representation as the woman scorned is the one note played from this scene to the conclusion. The true interchangeability of family structure is not performed but instead the old African is utilized metaphorically as reminder of the non Eurocentric linkage here and the reminder that time is the essence of queerness on the plantation where nothing is as it should be in relation to the worth of humaneness. Lily is the signifier for the female and male inherent in Sonny and Asa. The trio's attraction cannot occlude the sensitivity of their nature even as it includes within it's make up a rejection of the femaleness where the melancholic manifests as denial and outright self-hatred. Watching the scenes unfold and reveal historic truths, a bridge of causality is built.

Lily is not given enough of the play's time to respond to the exculpatory events of the second act. If there is a somewhat less opportunity for her to defend against the overwhelming odds of being black and female on the plantation, it is not explored fully. Her time is spent in pursuit of Sonny as a security and her warding off the tacitly understood connection between Sonny and Asa. Her actual role as link between the master and the other slaves where she in effect becomes the slave owner's mouthpiece is interesting in the power play Jolly has set forth. Lily is omnipotent in her presence. Her language has to represent the power-knowledge and the strategic of her own ambitions and means of survival. Even though it is still misleading to think of blacks as monolithic, their fealty may have been a more complicated enterprise on the plantation where it was never guaranteed that one could remaining in a stable place with those who were familiar to them in any sense of the sword. Asa arrive to destabilize an already tenuous situation. So Lily looks to Sonny for protection against a soon to vanish life of some stability.

She also comes to represent black women in a contemporary setting whose mate is on the down low. The play does not become less of a social commentary in the process of a diminished female voice. It is Jolly's intent as an openly black gay man and dramatist to personalize and therefore politicize the entire fraught setting with those who had been invisible as the heroes of the piece.

The actress portraying Lily takes a modern approach. The feminist movement's influences her work to the extent that her assertiveness is seen as part of the psychological profile of the womanly role they are playing even when that role is pre feminist. That is to say, the actress relies on her modern sensibilities to cadence the interplay with Sonny revealing a knowingness and suspicion of his non aggressive "manliness" towards her. There is a seriousness of purpose that is somewhat lacking as she watches her chances at protection (if there could be any protection of a slave-woman on a plantation) slip away with the eroding situation of the plantation's financial security as Sonny moves closer to an intimate relationship with Asa.

So Lily's association with the unseen villains (that would be those who are against the male lovers) is in keeping with the melodramatic underpinnings of the play. It is the normative paradigm in a sense forced on the men that provides the centrifugal force for them to overcome. It is excessive emotion and the audience's full investment in the outcome of the heroes of the piece that is meant to persuade the spectator to accept the unequal viewpoints. Her unwillingness to see Sonny's "othered" behavior as a manageable thing is very much in line with 19<sup>th</sup> century limited understanding of same sex attraction which includes the slaves' attitude toward the transgressive amongst them. In the balance however is Sonny's own self hatred is seen as his opposition and resistance to love of either sex. Asa asks Sonny "If I dream about someone every night and I cannot bear to be separated from that person who haunts my dreams, regardless of

how wild, or unimaginable those dreams are...”<sup>204</sup> Sonny rebukes his question, telling him he is a “fool.” He adopts the hyper masculine identity as an armor that is clearly seen by a modern audience as his an inner homophobia and more tacitly seen by the other characters in the play.

But not to be put off, Asa persists, telling Sonny, “Jump the broom with me.” Jumping the broom is the euphemistic phrase in slave culture meaning marriage. The romantic friendship between men common in the era and probably known to Asa because he is an educated black, is by passed to the marriage stage. Both characters are used to the masculine and the feminine that demarcates even slave communities but there fixed ideas, according to Jolly appear to be more fluid. Roderick Ferguson writes “...black slaves in North America engaged in a range of sexual practices and elaborated a variety of family structures.”<sup>205</sup> If there was anything closely akin to a “family” in the contemporary sense of the word, slavery was directed against any consistent structure for reasons that would counter the support of the slave regime. Furthermore, sexuality amongst slaves was useful to produce more slaves not intended as places of normative respite. The world of *bonded* closely resembles that of the authentic antebellum plantation where sexual dynamics amongst the enslaved is cannot be seen to be anything but inherently unstable.

Furthermore, in introducing this double life, the black gay man takes on actually a triple life that echoes the contemporary black gay man’s search to understand the multi-identifcatory markers as their own strategy of survival. Sonny’s masculinity was in doubt when it is revealed a very close friend of his was killed trying to escape from the plantation. Lilly teases sonny implying an unnatural connection going so far as to challenge his friendship as something more akin to lovers. Sonny’s reaction is virulently reactive. When Lily sees the danger she has exposed herself to, she backs away. She is in need of Sonny’s fealty because he is the last slave

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<sup>204</sup> Jolly *bonded*.59.

<sup>205</sup> Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black*.(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 85.

of marriageable age left on the plantation. So she allows what could be seen as a down low situation in its coding which Jolly intends as yet more of the artistic freedom to pass onto the spectator this sort of historic “information.” Sonny represents the black man who may find his affections directed more toward men but is unable to act on it because of community pressure and therefore vehemently denies it while secretly having relations with men that remains uncommitted.

The staging of the play’s final scenes heightens the elements of melodrama. The script calls for an accelerated pacing of the action and the audible increasing decibel of dogs barking as it is obvious the hunting for escaped slaves has begun. It is partly due to the writing and partly due to the direction. Having built up an authentic orality, in that the slave talk is accomplished by Jolly as nonmodern. The love triangle suddenly becomes too much for any of the characters to remain silent. Asa declares his love for Sonny stunning him into taking action against Lily. Sonny and Asa make hasty plans to run away from the plantation incurring Lily’s wrath. She warns the overseer. Suddenly the stage is filled with rushing bodies, shouts of “They’re getting away!” To emphasize the combustible atmosphere, barking dogs are heard on the soundtrack, leading the spectator to wonder if Sonny and Asa will really escape. If they are caught the fate is unthinkable. It is in these moments that the sentimentalisms of melodrama work against the play’s “realness.” Leaving the ending open to the less utopian or happy ending model is not necessary but the ambiguity of slaves in flight is the lasting impression we have of these two unique black gay men. It re-enforces the melodramatic where the protagonist after suffering through an overwhelming number of challenges triumphs. It is the pay off for the excessive emotionalism of the genre. Instead, *bonded* leaves the audience with a different perspective on antebellum relationships but something conservative remains in the plays’ final analysis. As a

historic narrative with the possibilities to rearrange as well as gesture toward a new paradigm, the disappointment stems from the excitement of seeing black gay men introduced into the archive only to have them subject to the same distressing pursuit that many slaves in the history of slave narratives must endure.

The play brings to the fore an inherent problem that may not have the universal appeal once it leaves the environs of the Los Angeles. The theatre is well known in the Latino community for its artist director, Jose Luis Valenzuela and his dedication to plays from the Americas as a priority for productions. *bonded* certainly is a diversion but the situation could be moved across the boundaries of the Americas if it were to be performed in Spanish and the setting was changed to any other colonized part of North and South America. The American-ness of the play would then open itself up to other specifics of slave experiences but fundamentally able to express the sameness of bondage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, the play is so American in its portrayal of slave dynamics; it isolates blacks in this particular era that is to the detriment of a more accessible audience. Thematically circumscribed to the American south, those on the outside (I am speaking to Latinos who mostly patronize the plays at LATC) have come to see a same sex relationship that would play out somewhat differently if the play were set in 1820s Cuba.

I mention this because *bonded* like any other gay themed play focused on people of color draws an audience of mostly gays who are always already sympathetic to the play's conflict in addition to a certain desperation to see their stories told on the stage. It re-enforces a sense of liberatory emotion that the play can be performed openly and they can attend without a fear of attack. But the idea of seeing blacks in bondage further embeds an image of the sub status position. To this extent, *bonded* is a play that does not connect with all gays in this diasporas but

remains the museum piece of the historic artifact. Another fact that needs to be considered is the division in the Los Angeles community between blacks and Latinos as Latinos are rapidly expanding their numbers and replacing blacks as the states' largest minority and soon to be the majority. So these kinds of American slavery plays are not so identified with their participation in the what is called the American experience The play is not expansive enough in its creative scope to fashion an "invitation" to all of those whose heritage does not speak to the African American slave story.

Of course obfuscation exists in the telling on the separate histories of colonial Americas and American slavery. There is a determination by those who wish to control the narratives that the slave stories are very different. It is the effort to keep the races at odds with each and is evident in the skin color prejudice of former Spanish and Portuguese colonies. (The two actors cast in bonded are not black skinned men but what was called "redbone"). In this act of surrogation where the black gay men are meant to be seen as representative, the conceit is not always obvious that these men are outsiders being gazed at by those who will soon have the power as the deciders in many of the community's most vital interests. The history narrative may be a useful tool in creating the individual who has never been seen or mentioned before but the performance's determinant ability to have them identify with these characters remains problematic. Bearing in mind, there were few blacks in the audience which has to do with location and publicity and yes, subject matter. The slave story is so deeply regarded in the black community that the introduction of sexual themes other than the rape of the black woman by the white master produces a wary and hesitant response.

Finally, the play's denouement surmises a life together for Sonny and Asa even though the audience knows they are escaping into a dystopian world. In the midst of fleeing the

plantation, Asa asks Sonny,”... where are we going? Sonny replies, “Home.” It is in keeping with the romantic and melodramatic antecedents established in the narrative but in reality what kind of life awaits the two men? If we consider the possibilities awaiting two escaped male slave, the spectator might envision the trajectory of their flight taking them to more southerly route because of the close proximity of Mexico. They would certainly have to bypass the major American cities of the south on their journey. se representations of black men as sexualized subjects their effigies can be read in the main characters. Sonny and Asa becomes surrogates and their interaction relying on contemporary gay role models that delineate the masculine gays from the effeminate gays, the spectator finds a way it imagine same sex intimacy mirroring contemporary representations. If there is a parallel rendering then there is way into history that dramatic works such as *bonded* can fill. On the circum Atlantic, there is a borrowing from culture to culture that makes a good case for the circulation of slaves and white immigrants exporting their rites and rituals that evolve over time but never lose the authentic origins. Since the subject of homosexuality freely moves about in conversation and legal prohibitions in Western Europe, the same prohibitions are peripatetic and tend to surface in the Americas as prohibitive sexual practice.

The spectral homestead is actually recurring through the play. It is the place that is now a far off memory to the slaves. The African character is the metaphorical last link to their origin but the generation the play represents is neither citizen nor fully human. The America of the play is the circulating hole of history written by later black playwrights as the empty void through which a construct of identity is forged. The masculinities circulate in this hole. So home becomes an ineluctable journey. New Orleans is mentioned as the era’s most cosmopolitan American city where sexual liaisons between upper class men and prostitutes are a frequent practice. Emerging

out of the Spanish and then French colonialism the lingering Eurocentric sexuality that tended to be more transgressive than colonial American cities, a same sex liaison would most likely be available yet most discreet. If Sonny and Asa are to have a life together, it is not out of the realm of imagination that they would end up in a city like New Orleans at least for a time while they were on their way to Mexico (where slavery was outlawed). So the masculine image that adopted by black men as they became more and more visible through stage performance would actually be able to draw from this cultural location as it acted as the cross roads of race, sex and commerce. Though their stage personas were written by whites, the place of integrationist thinking would stay embedded in the free black imaginary and thus the least of their identification with what would have been seen as European decadent behavior the least inferior they would seem. Of course this was a complicated strategy that would need to include all of their community so strict guidelines of behavior would remain problematic. What we have to remind us of this period of sexual fluidity is the black sissy that was never to leave the southern United States and became in some ways integral to the music and Christian movements in the South.

Building on the historic narrative, possibilities emerge from an ahistorically constructed narrative which takes shape in producing the inclusive medium where same gender loving relationships are suddenly in conversation. *bonded's* potentiality as a model in forming narratives that now use black gay men as central to the action rather than as extraneous or even as the foil to the hyper masculine protagonist re-defines the black family drama and reifies the transgressive edge in post 60s American black drama as more fluid in its temporality. The play's homoeroticism wrestles with a historic silence that seeks to pin down an argument at the very least a tolerance for the ambiguous. Various masculinities are presented at a time when the hyper



is preferred as the cultural norm in the black community but the idea is not to discount but to disencumber the variances from being talked about or testified. There is a great deal of energy surrounding the black community's the social acts of denial and distance. In the effort to conserve and protect the family against the traumatic flood of American apartheid, the impulse is to separate the two performances. To be clear, there will be acknowledgement but we are not going to support the as "usual" the non normative elements of our community. History tells us not to because we can't trust it to treat us fairly; it never has.

### ***Home as theatre of Social Construction***

"Home" is the place of idyllic memory in melodrama. It is no accident when Sonny declares to Asa they running away to get back home. Sonny and Asa must survive the militia in pursuit with their growling dogs on their heels as the theatre lights fade. Where will they go even if they are not capture? The answer is unresolved in the minds of the audience. We are left with the exhilaration of the male lovers escaping servitude and debasement. In the modern imagination they are able to live out their lives on some far place like Mexico, posing as brothers or father and son. It is a scenario that is plausible because of the yet to be resolved slavery question in the US and the tensions between black and white in the so called northern free states. Sonny and Asa's fate is left to our imagination by the playwright and it is melodrama's trope of "home" that conditions the nagging question. As with so many heroes and heroines in melodramas, their happy outcome is linked to the fantasies of the audience member who is emotionally drawn into the events because they identify so strongly with the lead charter who endures all for that place/space of comfort.

If we look at the play's themes of plantation regime, slavery and homoeroticism through the lens of social construction<sup>206</sup> where they lived experience of the subject is dependent upon social, cultural and economic elements, then the love object in the slave relationship can be varied. Given the trauma of bondage over many generations and then the absolute uncertainty of a stable family unit, as Roderick Ferguson points out the slave system was used to constructing its own sex system. Strategies of normalcy would become necessary after manumission due to the ongoing inequality in American society as institutionalized racism and heterosexism made the queer tactic of disidentification a place of survival. In keeping with this idea, the plantation drama as I have pointed out earlier in this chapter is not always amenable to the black community's disquiet in witnessing the torture and humiliation once again even for inclusionary reasons. Many black gay playwrights have found their way into the genre through the experimental design while *bonded* may be the first to simply let the narrative play out in linear fashion incorporating into its plot homoerotic situations in black history.

Masculine identificatory markers where the natural versus the unnatural is prescribed by middle class white society was in effect the prevailing and guiding conformist attitude that blacks adopted much like white Christianity. These sociocultural signifiers are in evidence as the two ostensibly same gender loving black men grapple with their desire within their sexualized and racialized bodies as concurrent modes of identity crisis. For Jolly, it is the sissy who is more comfortable in his own skin than the "normative" male character. He is the character most likely to act on his feelings of otherness in ways reminiscent of the 60s gay liberation movement.

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<sup>206</sup> Gay cultural theorist, John D'Emilio in "Afterward, 1998," to *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, divides the theories of homosexuality into two categories: essentialism proponents would argue homosexual is found in every society; it is universal. It is the historian's job to find it. While the social constructionists would argue that human sexuality is malleable and can be organized in many different ways. Therefore, identity labeled as homosexuality appears at some historical periods and at other times not.

Sonny like the husband to the fairy found in same sex relations in the late 1800s and early 1900s is surrogate for the hyper masculine in the future of categorized masculinities in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In this sense his surrogation is an enactment of a sexuality perhaps remembered subconsciously from his African ancestors whose rituals of manhood included male to male mentorship. However Joseph Roach says, “Surrogation rarely if ever succeeds. The process requires many trials and at least as many errors”.<sup>207</sup> The future for the black gay male presence in theatrical performance would seem then to have to be re-visited again and again as long as the hyper masculine is ever present to crowd out alterity.

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<sup>207</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 2.