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April 12, 2015

Failure in Excess, Desire in Abundance: The Aesthetic Queering of Black Masculinity and  
Performative Utopias

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

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## Abstract

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By Troizel Carr

Black masculinity is plagued with narratives of authenticity, fraught with statements of “Boys don’t do that! Don’t be a sissy! Be a man!” Alongside these narratives, violent images, caricatures and stereotypes are blasted in different forms of media that construct black masculinity as a villainous subject-position. What happens if we begin to consider a hidden potential within black masculinity outside of these vicious images? How exactly does black queer masculinity relate to a “normative” black masculinity and what does the term “queer” do? Perhaps black masculinity already takes up queer discourse and the “queer” in black queer masculinity functions as a performative, a performative that occasions a glimpse of utopia. Through this project, I hope to uncover the relationship between black masculinity, black queer masculinity, and utopia in performance.

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## Acknowledgements

I am incredibly indebted to so many individuals for supporting me and challenging me in this academic/honors journey. Though I will not name them all, here are just a few:

Michael Evenden, thank you so much for meeting with me every single week this semester and last. I know that those meetings were sometimes painstaking as my progress on the writing was not always up to par. Thank you for saying that you were afraid that I might not finish. That scary, hopeless, failed moment showed me a glimmer of utopian possibility. You inspired and continue to inspire this project.

The foundation of my thoughts on this project would not have been possible without the direction and teaching of Dr. Rizvana Bradley. It has been such a privilege learning from you in the three classes that I have been fortunate to have with you. The countless office hours of you enthusing me to actually pursue performance and telling me about the incredible performance artists out there. For whatever reason, you came to Emory and happened to change my life. I am eternally grateful to you for putting me on this path of performance and resistance.

Janice Akers, to you I am forever indebted because it was you who changed my life my very first semester at Emory. You showed me that performance was more than just words in a script, but that theater and performance was also a way of life. Thank you for pushing me beyond my limits and always pressuring me to take risks.

To my lovely cast of *for colored girls*, you all taught me so much about throwing everything I had on the stage and to continuously move to the end of my own rainbow. You are my inspiration. My love is with you all.

Jojo, thanks for shooting in the gym with me and always being my sounding board and having dope conversations with me about life, learning, and love. I love you with every inch of being in me. You're a star.

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# One

## Introduction

Five black male bodies move up and down on a spiral staircase. Each body is almost completely nude, except only for strings of material running across the buttocks, the forearm, and the waist. With the anatomical sites of black sexuality bared—the penis and testicles—these men expose what bell hooks calls the “perverse historical backdrop that has shaped an informed black male sexuality,” which presented black men as the “sexual fiend.”<sup>1</sup> Black male bodies stripped naked resists the perverse characterization of black male sexuality and the history surrounding it. Their movements up and down the staircase are sensual, erotic, and sultry. A percussive rhythm strikes up; it seems to resemble the ticking of a clock. These men rub one another down, touching each other’s nipples, buttocks, and penises. They slide up and down the staircase seductively as if on a stripper’s pole and pantomime oral and anal sex. Amidst the continuous rhythmic ticking, a lone, deep voice resounds in a Jamaican accent, “Wife comes home at 11... or 7... Anybody taking? No strings attached. Pump and Dump.” His call resembles a Craigslist ad soliciting an anonymous sexual encounter. The pantomiming of sexual activities continues as exaggerated moans begin to rise against the ticking of the clock. A transgressive performance, *NSA pUmP & dUmP* brings to light actions and words that are supposed to be concealed, namely homosexual extra-marital affairs. It is

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<sup>1</sup> hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 64.

this transgression of culturally accepted behaviors that becomes excessive to the point of liberation, which is a concept I will take up later.

As Richard Schechner articulates in the essay “What is Performance Studies?,” “performances are actions” and they must be understood “as a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions.”<sup>2</sup> The broad spectrum or continuum of human actions pertains to both a performance art tradition, as well as everyday life practices. Lawrence Graham-Brown’s *NSA pUmP & dUmP* (2014) described above, is one example of performance that this thesis will encounter, but performance also encompasses those performative forms of social life outside of the traditional art space like the gallery where *NSA pUmP & dUmP* takes place.

This paper theorizes expressive forms of black queer masculinity that have not been undertaken by many scholars. Most specifically, this project grapples with one main question: Through contemporary performance art, how does black queer masculinity expand the definition of black masculinity? I argue that black queer masculinity, as expressed in black queer performance, expands the definition of black masculinity by showing an aesthetic queering of black masculinity.

I am interested in *NSA pUmP & dUmP* because it fits into more than one performative tradition; it can be classified as both a black performance and a queer performance. How do these two performative traditions work in tandem and intersect? Black performance expresses what Sarah Cervenak calls the “‘elasticity’ of blackness—its ability to mean and take on many different ideas, forms, and

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<sup>2</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994, 2.

definitions.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, black performance does not limit itself to being produced by black artists; instead, it grapples with the transient quality of blackness as an abstract concept, loosened from racial signification. According to poet Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), blackness is “a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity,” where subjectivity denotes to Moten the capacity to possess.<sup>4</sup>

Blackness, in Moten’s view, troubles the consistency attributed to subjecthood and personhood. In this pursuit, Moten cites Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that defines performativity as a stylized repetition of the norm, which, through that repetition, subverts that very norm. In this light, black performativity, the repetition of black performative acts, deconstructs the dialectic of subjecthood and personhood by revealing the “dispossessive force [that] objects exert.”<sup>5</sup> Here, objecthood serves as a resistive force to subjectivity because it denotes the capacity to *be* possessed, instead of subjecthood’s possessive capacity.

Moten opens *In the Break* with the declaration that “the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”<sup>6</sup> His discussion of blackness does not disconnect the history of subjecthood and objecthood from that of a history of blackness—most specifically, one of slavery—where the dichotomy of subject-object is most clear. The self-objectification of black bodies holds a particular liberating potential due to the violent, historical objectification of black bodies.

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<sup>3</sup> Cervenak, Sarah Jane. “Against Traffic: De/formations of Race and Freedom in the Art of Adrian Piper.” *Discourse* 28.2/3, 2006, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Moten, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Moten, 1.

There is a freedom in being able to label oneself as one sees fit, to self-identify. According to Cervenak, “black artists [experiment] with a level of self-abstraction and objecthood,” which points to the resistance that black performance exercises.<sup>7</sup> Cervenak’s notion of self-abstraction is the process by which artists turn themselves into objects, exerting Moten’s dispossessive force, to resist the subjecthood/personhood formation. The elasticity of blackness allows the decomposition of the subjecthood/personhood formation to be revealed through performance by way of self-abstraction, which is resistive because it activates the object’s agency over itself. How does this idea of self-objectification connect to our leading example? It would seem as though *NSA pUmP & dUmP* participates in the black performative tradition by presenting black bodies as sexual objects—naked *things* participating in sexual acts that are supposed to be hidden away in the private sphere of aberrant desire. To me, the bodies in *NSA pUmP & dUmP* are willfully choosing to participate in this unveiling of perverse sexual history ascribed to black bodies. Although the bodies in this performance become objects of sexual spectacle, their participation in self-abstraction becomes a mode of self-empowerment, an exercise of sexual agency.

Through the exploration of a personal performance art piece, this project is interested in black queer performance, which exists at the interstice between black performance and queer performance. With this in mind, queer performance is “an intellectual and discursive occasion for a queer worldmaking project.”<sup>8</sup> Jose Muñoz

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<sup>7</sup> Cervenak, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996), 6.

outlines queer performance as a catalyst for creating a queer space in which transformative, dialectical conversations can take place. He also proposes queerness “as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality.”<sup>9</sup> Queer performance then becomes a space for the possible, for knowing one’s self, for knowing others. Muñoz’s notion of the possible is exemplified in Crémieux et al’s introduction of *Understanding Blackness through Performance*. The possibility of queerness is the “space and time where the . . . body can appear, disappear, and mutate . . . oscillating between the real and the phantasmic.”<sup>10</sup> To properly label *NSA pUmP & dUmP* a queer performance, we have to tease through how, and if, it interacts with a queer performative space. The artists in *NSA pUmP & dUmP* self-abstract and turn themselves into objects within the space that queer performance enacts that makes transformation of the body possible. In that space, the artists become sexual *playthings*; although this transformation into sexual objects seems less than empowering, the potential of transformation is presented. By creating a space where subjects can alter themselves and exist in other forms, contemporary performance artists who intersect black and queer performance—or black queer performance—speak to the resistance demonstrated by blackness as well as the space of the possible procured by queerness. It is important to note, here, that the resistive quality of blackness can also demonstrate possibility as a function and the possibility of queerness can occasion resistance. The labor of black queer action is

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<sup>9</sup> Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> Crémieux, Anne, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi. *Understanding Blackness through Performance: Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*, 2.

not formulaic; indeed, it functions reflexively and fluidly. They influence one another.

In order to properly understand how black queer masculinity expands the definition of black masculinity, the initial groundwork for my research establishes a fundamental definition of how the black masculine is constructed, how the black queer masculine functions and relates to the black masculine, as well as the relationship between identity and performance art.

### **Black Masculinity**

Maurice O. Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (2002) assists in further understanding the space that black masculinity occupies. By analyzing literature and culture, Wallace struggles with the notions of blackness and masculinity and their intersections. Wallace begins to question what spaces black men have been able to occupy and in what capacities. Much of his discussion centers on the juxtaposition of how black men are seen and how those representations affect their self-identification and self-vision. According to Wallace, the way that black men see themselves as men relative to the "masculine hegemony" is unclear.<sup>11</sup> The masculine hegemony that Wallace refers to involves "the organization of social institutions in ways that appear 'natural,' 'ordinary,' [and] 'normal.'"<sup>12</sup> Social institutions such as

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, Maurice O. *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Donaldson, Mike. "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?" *Theory and Society* 22.5 (1993): 644.

the state, education, and the law work to maintain and reproduce masculinity by asserting it in a normative version. These social institutions tell the black masculine subject that he must fit into the normative wave of masculinity without giving him the proper means to do so.

Similarly, in *we real cool: black men and masculinity* (2006), bell hooks articulates that the dominant culture's existence as a system of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy impedes the black man from attaining his potential by limiting his own self-understanding through perpetuation of untrue representations, which illustrates black men as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers."<sup>13</sup> Black masculinity is then characterized by violent caricatures that "overdetermine the identities that black males are allowed to fashion for themselves."<sup>14</sup> Because of the identity limitations that are presented, black men adopt the untrue representations about themselves, instead of putting pressure on them. In this way, it can be understood that black men do not construct black masculinity. According to Athena D. Mutua, men at large have "more narrow traits, roles, and messages about how to *be* from which to draw on in constructing their identities;" furthermore, it would seem as though black men have even less access to resources that allow for identity formation.<sup>15</sup>

Bryant Keith Alexander articulates in his book *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (2006) that the black masculine is defined by a pathological limitation, that "[b]lack male identity is often constrained by... borders

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<sup>13</sup> hooks, *we real cool*, x.

<sup>14</sup> hooks, *we real cool*, x.

<sup>15</sup> hooks, *we real cool*, viii.

that are neither fluid nor flexible.”<sup>16</sup> Here, we see the idea that the black masculine is confined to severely limited grounds. I would argue that the borders that Alexander discusses exist within the social institutions that Wallace gestures towards. The black masculine is subjected to the constraint of the violent, particularly toxic, caricatures listed previously. The idea that the black masculine cannot be expanded, but also holds a particular toxicity for black men is detrimental to the formation of a healthy, affirmative black masculine. According to hooks, the black masculine can only be “defined in relation to [its stereotypes] whether by embodying [them] or seeking to be other than [them].”<sup>17</sup> Is the black masculine subject stuck within these violent borders or is there some hope? Hortense Spillers makes the claim that the black masculine subject cannot be normative: “the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself . . . the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within.”<sup>18</sup> Spillers opens up a different approach to conceptualizing black masculinity outside of a heteronormative framework. What we see here is that there is more to tease out of the space of black masculinity, which allows hooks to hope to create a “vision of how black males [can] create new and different self-concepts,” which I argue already happens through the queering of the black masculine in performance art.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander, Bryant Keith. *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006, 75.

<sup>17</sup> hooks, *we real cool*, x.

<sup>18</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64.

<sup>19</sup> hooks, *we real cool*, viii.



## Black Queer Masculinity

The “queer” in black queer masculinity encapsulates the tenets of queer theory that work to deconstruct heteronormativity. Heteronormativity, which parallels Adrienne Rich’s idea of compulsory heterosexuality, is the idea that heterosexuality and the practices thereof are normal and normative, where normative denotes a particular limitation of social norms for identities and practices. Although Rich speaks specifically about “lesbian existence,” compulsory heterosexuality places all queer subjectivity “on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or rendered invisible.”<sup>20</sup> The heteronormative project attempts to extinguish the possibility of all forms of queerness. Nevertheless, queerness exposes the reach of heteronormativity through two concepts: “radical deconstructionism” and “radical subversion.”<sup>21</sup> According to Adam Green, radical deconstructionism does the work of dismantling “otherwise intelligible renderings of sexual orientation,” while radical subversion functions to disrupt. Though Green’s terms “dismantle” and “disrupt” seem too similar, it is important to differentiate. Dismantling takes apart (read: deconstructs) the heteronormative structure, while disrupting interrupts and problematizes; radical deconstructionism opposes the structure, while radical subversion works against the ideologies in place. Through these radical processes, queerness “seeks to disrupt the normalizing tendencies of the sexual order, locating nonheteronormative practices and subjects as crucial sites

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<sup>20</sup> Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5.4, *Women: Sex and Sexuality* (1980): 632.

<sup>21</sup> Green, Adam Isaiah. "Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies." *Sociological Theory* 25.1 (2007): 28.

of resistance.”<sup>22</sup> Queer acts—which José Muñoz says “[stand] as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities”—function to destabilize the system of heteronormativity. I am interested in considering the masculine hegemony referred to previously as an instrument of the heteronormative system, where normative masculinity becomes the avenue by which male subjects achieve heteronormativity. With this in mind, Muñoz’s queer acts deconstruct and subvert heteronormativity and also normative masculinity.

According to Mae G. Henderson, the terminology “Black Queer” captures and in effect names the specificity of the historical and cultural difference that shapes the experiences and expression of queerness.”<sup>23</sup> She goes on to say that, “just as queer challenges notions of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia, Black resists notions of assimilation and absorption.”<sup>24</sup> Though Henderson is mostly speaking to the need to critique the project of queer studies/theory with the need for racial expansion, she points to something very relevant. Queer on its own does not do all of the work necessary to disrupt and dismantle the system of heteronormativity; blackness both critiques and specifies queerness. E. Patrick Johnson comments on having the desire to “rewrite and reshape the paradigm to include [his] experience as a gay man of color,” which gestures towards the void that queerness alone neglects to fill.<sup>25</sup> With the powers of both black and queer in tow, black queer masculinity offers a critique of the black masculine as too reductive and

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<sup>22</sup> Green, “Queer Theory and Sociology,” 28.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander, Bryant Keith. “Reflections, Riffs and Remembrances: The Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference (2000).” *Callaloo* 23.4 (2000): 1287.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander, “Reflections, Riffs, and Remembrances,” 1287.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, “Reflections, Riffs, and Remembrances,” 1287.

opens up its boundaries, airing out the violent historical caricatures housed there. Through black queer performances like Graham-Brown's *NSA pUmP & dUmP*, the black male body is potentially granted the space to mutate and become something other than what it has been allowed to be.

### **Performance Art and Identity**

José Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) grapples with the politics of self-identification for queer people of color. Muñoz's most salient point is that minority individuals, or minoritarians, cannot identify in the same way that majoritarians do. The majority has more access to "the fiction of identity," which allows them to "activate their own [sense] of self."<sup>26</sup> Minority individuals do not have the privilege of self-identifying as they see fit, instead they must disidentify. Muñoz's theory of disidentification is an attempt to understand the ways that queer people of color identify with queerness in spite of the societal phobia against it. In a later chapter, I will take up why queer people of color take up queerness despite its negative subject-position. Disidentification is the "strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."<sup>27</sup> In this way, the minority subject does not completely reject the dominant ideology, but rather works to interject and expand it. The acts of interjection and expansion are the salient practices of disidentification, which is to "read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the

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<sup>26</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

disidentifying subject.”<sup>28</sup> Disidentification, then, correlates with E. Patrick Johnson’s desire to “rewrite and reshape the paradigm” in which he places his own life narrative into queer history.

Thomas DeFrantz understands the concept of “excess” to be central to Muñoz’s notion of disidentification.<sup>29</sup> As an “interpretative marker of scale,” excess comes to signify a steering away from the normative.<sup>30</sup> Most specifically, the process of reading one’s own life narrative into a moment or expanding the dominant ideology creates excess—where excess means more than what is needed. DeFrantz’s idea of excess is the material evidence that results from disidentifying oneself. Speaking specifically to dance, DeFrantz states that, in performance, excess becomes materialized through “queer gestures.”<sup>31</sup> The queer gestures that materialize excess line up with Muñoz’s notion of “ephemeral evidence,” which “grants entrance and access to those who have been locked out of official histories and, for that matter, ‘material reality.’”<sup>32</sup> In this way, then, performances that create and materialize ontological excess, or excess of being, participate in the disidentification process. I argue that black queer performances come to participate in an excessive performative tradition.

This begs the question: what does “ontological excess” look like? From where does such a term come? Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco in “Performing

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<sup>28</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> DeFrantz, Thomas F. “Blacking Queer Dance.” *Dance Research Journal* 34.2 (2002): 103.

<sup>30</sup> DeFrantz, “Blacking Queer Dance,” 103.

<sup>31</sup> DeFrantz, “Blacking Queer Dance,” 103.

<sup>32</sup> Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 9.

Excess” define excessiveness as too much *X* making one too much *Y*, which can describe DeFrantz’s queer gestures. For example,

Too Much: eating, drinking, fucking, drugging, talking, erotic dancing, protesting, shopping, yelling, swearing, gorging, binging, purging, confessing, gambling, plastic surgery, working out, botoxing, TV watching, marrying, puking, piercing/tattooing, limping, raving, ranting, writing, dieting, bariatric surgery, makeup, energy, difference...

Makes One: too fat, too skinny, too plain, too freaky, too girlie, too mannish, too light, too dark, too ugly, too perfect, too fake, too promiscuous, too outspoken, too visible, too poor, too rude, too hairy, too old, too gossipy...<sup>33</sup>

Excess alters and adds to one’s being, arguably creating other selves/bodies. Braziel and LeBesco articulate “the grotesque body is a productive body, birthing other bodies in and from itself.”<sup>34</sup> Muñoz posits the disidentificatory self, or Braziel and LeBesco’s grotesque body, as “the ‘real self’ who comes into being through fiction.” Fiction, or the “contested field of self-production,” deconstructs binaries as it creates other selves.<sup>35</sup> *NSA pUmP & dUmP*, for example, exemplifies this notion of ontological excess where too much engagement in sexual acts creates other bodies that participate in sexual acts. Excess—as necessary for self-production and binary deconstruction—becomes critical to black queer performance as a means to expanding the boundaries of black masculinity.

How exactly do all of these topics come to work together? What can we take from a theory of black masculinity and its relation to black queer masculinity in performance art? Does black queer masculinity free the black masculine subject

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<sup>33</sup> Braziel, Jana Evans, and Kathleen Lebesco. "Introduction: Performing Excess." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15, no. 2 (2005): 9-14. doi:10.1080/07407700508571502.

<sup>34</sup> Braziel and LeBesco, “Performing Excess,” 10.

<sup>35</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 20.

from the restrictive borders that characterize black masculinity? Can performance be a space of utopian desire? Perhaps, through this thesis, we can deduce another way of being in and through this relation.

## Two

### Black Masculinity and Its Construction

- I'm a man. I'm a Black man.
- Bryant Keith Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity* (2006)

The first mark of our journey to uncover a black masculinity is to delve into discourse on gender and ask the questions: *What is gender? Where does it come from?* We tend to understand gender as cemented to our bodies, as determined by our sex at birth. If you are born with a penis, then you are masculine. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) begins to problematize our largely socialized cultural conceptions of gender and how fixed they are to our bodies. As is well known of Butler's scholarship, gender is defined as something that is "neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex."<sup>36</sup> She moves toward establishing a discontinuity between sex and gender in order to make the claim that gender has been constructed both culturally and socially. The construction of gender, per Butler, comes from "stylized repetition of acts."<sup>37</sup> By way of these repetitive acts, the constitution of gender lines up with a performance of gender. Bryant Keith Alexander further outlines this by asserting that

[t]he performative elements of masculinity are then situated locally and mediated by context. Masculinity as a performance is set to a musical score; a dirge orchestrated by culture and social design. It is an audience-based

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 520.

construction of movement, choreography of talking the talk and walking the walk. It is a performance of self for others.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, masculinity—as well as femininity and everything in between—is a constructed performance characterized by what has been socially and culturally attributed to be acts reserved for men. These acts are performed for other males to gain social validation, instead of for identificatory validation. Males perform in order to be accepted by other males, not for the sake of their own identity.

Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe's "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts" (2009) takes the time to define 'male,' 'masculinity,' and 'acts of manhood.' In their discussion, they weave these terms together. The term *male* comes to define the biological body that divides "male" from "female" on the basis of reproductive anatomy (ie., sex). Like Butler, Schrock and Schwalbe take the time to piece apart reproductive anatomy (sex) from gender identity (gender) in order to investigate the common conflation between the two concepts, but also tie in the matter of gender dominance. *Men* are *males* that are "claiming rights and privileges attendant to membership in the dominant gender group."<sup>39</sup> In order for a *male* to gain access to the "benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group," he must "put on a convincing *manhood act*."<sup>40</sup> This assertion of the necessity of *manhood acts* in order to gain membership in the dominant gender group begs some interesting questions: Who are these acts for? Are they only for membership into this group or do they function as more than notches on a membership card? I find it

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<sup>38</sup> Alexander, Bryant Keith. *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006, 76.

<sup>39</sup> Schrock, Douglas. "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 277-95. JSTOR. Web. 04 Feb. 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Schrock, 279.



interesting that Schrock and Schwalbe reiterate Butler's premise that gender is a performance of constituted acts—masculinity, in their view, comes to be defined as “a configuration of practices.” In this way, there is some understanding that bodies *do* gender and do not *possess* a gender; instead, gender—and most specifically, masculinity—is about the way that these acts are socially arranged. Schrock and Schwalbe bring specificity to Butler's claim about gender performativity by applying it to their definition of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Plurality of Masculinities: Hegemonic/Subordinated/Marginalized**

As discussed in the previous chapter, masculinity comes to be performed and constructed in such a way that it operates as a hegemony. The very configuration of these performative motions is built to generate and reproduce a hegemonic masculinity. Schrock and Schwalbe use Tim Carrigan et. al's “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity” to call upon the formulation of “hegemonic and subordinated masculinities.”<sup>41</sup> However, in their discussion of a plurality of masculinities, Schrock and Schwalbe turn to dissolving the multiplicity in an attempt to properly diagnose a universal masculinity. For Schrock and Schwalbe, stratifying masculinity into distinctive identity groups creates the idea that “all members of the category practice an identifiably unique form of masculinity.”<sup>42</sup> I want to resist this universalizing gesture. A multiplicity of masculinities allows for the theorization of a black masculinity, a queer masculinity, and a black queer masculinity. What Schrock and Schwalbe neglect is that recognizing the multiplicity of masculinities allows for

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<sup>41</sup> Schrock, 278.

<sup>42</sup> Schrock, 280.

the possibility of what Carrigan et. al's identify as hegemonic and subordinated ways of being male. Without multiplicity, there is no hope to understand hierarchical differentiation among masculinities.

To open up a counter-conversation about hegemonic and subordinated masculinities, I find it advantageous to think through Carrigan's understanding of masculinity in "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" (1985). Carrigan et. al outline masculinity as a set of images that men cannot even "live up to," finding the role they had been taught "hard to inhabit."<sup>43</sup> Going further, Carrigan juxtaposes hegemonic masculinity "as a particular variety of masculinity to which others are subordinated."<sup>44</sup> Although no male can truly inhabit hegemonic masculinity, those who most visibly fail are a part of the group of subordinated masculinities including "young," "effeminate," and "homosexual."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," Mimi Schippers apropos R.W. Connell articulates "gender hegemony operates not just through the subordination of femininity to hegemonic masculinity, but also through the subordination and marginalization of other masculinities."<sup>46</sup> However, according to Schippers, there are more than just subordinated masculinities; there also exist marginalized masculinities, which are "those of subordinated classes or

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<sup>43</sup> Carrigan, Tim. "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity." *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 551-604. JSTOR.

<sup>44</sup> Carrigan, 587.

<sup>45</sup> Carrigan, 587.

<sup>46</sup> Schippers, Mimi. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36.1 (2007): 85-102. JSTOR. Web. 14 Feb. 2015.

racial/ethnic groups.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to theorize and promote a universal masculinity—as Schrock and Schwalbe desire—because class, ethnicity, and race influence the space of the masculine.

In other words, the varieties of masculinities provides for a plurality of masculine performances. To keep with the extended performance metaphor, it can be said that the subordinated and marginalized masculinities play minor roles to the major performing role, hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, which is, according to Schrock and Schwalbe, “the kind of manhood act most revered in a culture,”<sup>48</sup> comes to be parallel and “conflated with whiteness and middle-class status.”<sup>49</sup> It would seem, then, that every other masculinity would be a failed attempt to emulate the hegemonic masculinity to gain access to the privileges of hegemony—to be white, to be middle-class. However, this is not precisely so.

### **The Construction of (Faux-Hegemonic) Black Masculinity**

It would seem fruitful to juxtapose subordinated and marginalized masculinities as splinters of the hegemonic masculinity that long to acquire the same status to fully participate in the hegemonic system. However, this is both a damaging and imprecise description. bell hooks’ “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), is a call to reconsider black masculinity and its relationship to hegemonic masculinity, which hooks calls

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<sup>47</sup> Schippers, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Schrock, 280.

<sup>49</sup> Schipper, 88.

the “patriarchal masculine ideal,”<sup>50</sup> a term that she, interestingly, does not specify racially. According to hooks, black masculinity—a marginalized masculinity—has been constructed in such a way that it is understood to be a failed attempt at this ideal. hooks makes an interesting move to analyze narratives by formerly enslaved black men in order to historicize black masculinity. She asserts from this analysis that enslaved black men “saw ‘freedom’ as that change in status that would enable them to fulfill the role of chivalric benevolent patriarch.”<sup>51</sup> Freedom from slavery would grant these men the opportunity to achieve a space within hegemonic masculinity. In this kind of imagination, the contemporary construction of black masculinity can be understood as a constant vying for a hegemonic status in hopes for freedom. Weaving a narrative through history, hooks asserts that as “the gendered politics of slavery denied black men the freedom to act as ‘men’ within the definition set by white norms, this notion of manhood did become a standard used to measure black male progress.”<sup>52</sup> Here, hooks understands black masculinity as an always already failed attempt at hegemonic masculinity from the historical moment of slavery. From that point, she posits a construction narrative that “perpetually constructs black men as ‘failures’ who are psychologically ‘fucked up,’ dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallogentric masculine identity.”<sup>53</sup> The creation of the black masculine from failure to obtain the white masculine ideal positions the black male as always in constant

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<sup>50</sup> hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End, 1992. Print: 88.

<sup>51</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 90.

<sup>53</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 89.

view of the white ideal as he molds and develops his own masculinity. As he molds, he incessantly fails and it is this failure that allegedly influences his violent, manic disposition. Such a process seems pathological. Interestingly, it seems unclear whether hooks believes that this is the way that black men are or if these are only stereotypes. Therefore, hooks' desire to position black masculinity as a failed variant of the hegemonic white masculinity is not as specific as it should be.

hooks redeems herself in *we real cool: black men and masculinity* (2006), where she grounds hegemonic masculinity's role in impeding the black male from attaining his potential by limiting his self-understanding. As previously drawn out, she sets up black masculinity as being characterized by violent caricatures of "animals, brutes, natural born rapists and murderers"<sup>54</sup> and black men, she says, subscribe to these caricatures. The role of hegemonic masculinity, then, is not to serve as some paternal blueprint, but rather as a standard or an ideal. What is the difference here? A blueprint prescribes certain behaviors and structures in order to attain a specified result; on the other hand, a standard or an ideal informs imagination and subjective identity, it gives the subject something always to strive for. Although hooks does not seem to solidify an exact position with regards to whether hegemonic masculinity serves as a blueprint or ideal, she leans towards a position that sees it as a blueprint, always advising the black masculine subject, whereas, I want to imagine hegemonic masculinity as an ideal, constantly influencing the black masculine subject's imagination. An ideal seems much more deleterious than a blueprint because ideals become internalized and reproduced

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<sup>54</sup> hooks, *We Real Cool*, 64.

internally. Therefore, hooks' gesture towards the black male always already having failed at the white hegemonic masculine ideal seems appropriate, but, not in describing an effort to be white, but rather defining a will to attain the privileges of hegemony in his current positionality. Or as hooks posits, "[black men] have reworked those norms to suit their social situation."<sup>55</sup>

The hegemonic white patriarchal ideal puts Bryant Keith Alexander's constraining borders in place, where the violent caricatures are housed. If the white patriarchal ideal sets the borders that line black masculinity, then it encourages the failure of black masculinity to achieve any kind of patriarchal ideal. Black males who subscribe to this ideal are left to inhabit this cramped and violent space, where they are seemingly obligated to take up and embody these detrimental images and representations. According to hooks, "the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it."<sup>56</sup>

### **Black Masculine Authenticity**

What becomes interesting about this negotiation of visibility is that there appears to be no escape. As black males come into a very early socialization of the ins and outs of black masculine performance—fraught with phrases of "Boys don't do that! Don't be a sissy! Be a man!"—an ideal is established. Bryant Keith Alexander explores the complexity of a black masculine ideal in his book *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture, and Queer Identity* (2006). In his reflexive ethnography,

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<sup>55</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 96.

<sup>56</sup> hooks, *We Real Cool*, x.

he describes being a “Good Black Man” who stands “in contrast to the problematized and media-produced images.”<sup>57</sup> Alexander recognizes that he does not fit into the violent caricatures that hooks outlines and this transforms him into an exception, “a credit to [his] race.”<sup>58</sup> He notes:

I am perceived as a Black man trying to transcend his ‘natural’ state, elemental and unsophisticated. I am perceived as a Black man who is trying to pass for White, not based on appearance but in the metaphoric drag of linguistic performance and wearing the garments of academic accomplishment. I am deemed Bad Black Man because I seemingly do not perform the expected role of indigenous Black man, authentic Black man, real Black man—someone who is perceived to be organically connected to the Black community in ways that are deemed appropriate. In this context the qualities that make me a Good Man—being relatively articulate, relatively intelligent, relatively polite, a ‘gentleman’—transform me into ‘Bad Man.’ Here I am critiqued on a different standard.<sup>59</sup>

Because Alexander does not fulfill or uphold the stereotypical position of black males, he is placed into a category of transgression. There is something unnatural about a black man who is not animal-like, temperamental, and slovenly. Here, we see that living up to such images is damaging to the black male, but attempting to exist outside of these confines labels him offender. The “different standard” that he is critiqued with confines him to the very vicious borders that line the black masculine and even an attempt to step outside of those boundaries leaves Alexander in the wrong.

I call upon Alexander’s Good Man-Bad Man paradigm, not to promote his use of respectability politics in an attempt to combat the stereotypes attributed to black malehood, but rather to call attention to the limitedness that the black masculine

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<sup>57</sup> Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 74-75.

space is confronted with. For Alexander, there is no way to exist outside of being a “Black man” that is divorced from negative traits. Alexander discovers that attempting to exist outside of the violent caricatures housed in the black masculine automatically position him as “trying to pass for White,” which mirrors hooks’ assertion that black males are always in view of the white masculine ideal in black masculine formation. Nonetheless, the move to be other than the expectations of black malehood makes Alexander a “Bad Black Man.” He is not a “Good Black Man,” where the use of “good” comes to mean properly filling out. He is not properly filling out the perimeter of the black masculine space, inhabiting every preconceived notion and image presented in the mainstream as black malehood. He is not performing a black masculine authenticity, as he should. This discovery raises an important question: What becomes an authentic black masculinity or black masculine authenticity? Where does it come from?

I would argue that a black masculine authenticity derives itself from the creation of a black masculine ideal, which attempts to situate itself as hegemonic within the black community. I use the word “attempt” here because, calling upon Hortense Spillers again, black masculinity does not have the propensity to be normative because it must always come in contact with the feminine within it. According to Schippers, “male dominance falls through the conceptual cracks when considering groups whose members are not white and middle class.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, Schippers finds it difficult to theorize about the effects of hegemony when it comes to subordinated and/or marginalized masculinities. Yet, it is far from

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<sup>60</sup> Schippers, 88.



impossible. hooks describes the childhood of her brother who “loved to talk, tell jokes, and make [his sisters] happy.”<sup>61</sup> Her father, displeased with the disposition of his son, wanted his son to be more like himself and let his son know “early on that he was no son to him.”<sup>62</sup> hooks’ brother was “made to feel inadequate, less than male in his childhood”<sup>63</sup> by their father. Due to these feelings of inadequacy, hooks’ brother “became forever haunted by the idea of patriarchal masculinity.”<sup>64</sup> Her brother was not properly accomplishing a black male authenticity and due to this failure, he was “urg[ed] . . . to aspire to a masculine identity rooted in the patriarchal ideal.”<sup>65</sup> I would postulate what hooks calls “patriarchal masculinity” or the “patriarchal ideal” in this instance as the black masculine ideal, the imagination that constantly hangs over black malehood. hooks’ account of her brother’s personal experience showcases the pervasiveness of a black masculine ideal. Her father, having internalized this ideal, wanted nothing more for his son to fit into this ideal and, even more, to perform black masculinity authentically.

In trying to push this ideal onto his son, hooks’ father exemplifies the ways in which the black masculine ideal seeks to be hegemonic. According to Alexander, “the expectations and possibilities of being a Black man are conflated into a limited series of performative displays—you are or you are not . . .”<sup>66</sup> Black men internalize the conflation of performative displays and police themselves and other males in order to reproduce an authentic black malehood. The construction of a black

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<sup>61</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 87.

<sup>64</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 87.

<sup>65</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 88.

<sup>66</sup> Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, 75.

masculine ideal that polices the performances of black male bodies appears to me to be a reaction to the anxiety onset from always having failed at the white masculine ideal. Returning to hooks' articulation concerning the anxiety that black males experience, the positioning of the black masculine ideal as a hegemonic force negotiates that anxiety while simultaneously alleviating it by setting up a new ideal. The cycle of failure to properly succeed in forming the black masculine comparable to the white masculine, anxiety due to that already constant failure, and re-appropriation of the ideal causes black masculinity to operate as a faux hegemony. It temporarily takes the place of the white patriarchal ideal and becomes the dominating force that governs the performance of black malehood.

As illustrated by both Alexander and hooks, the creation of a new ideal comes with more anxiety. The new anxiety inhibits black males from constructing and identifying a true sense of self. This anxiety mirrors Kristie A. Ford's claim in "Doing *Fake* Masculinity, Being *Real* Men: Present and Future Constructions of Self Among Black College Men," not measuring up to the black masculine ideal has "sociopsychological costs for those who are either directly or indirectly affected" and such a "limited notion of black masculinity does not allow (some) black men to publically develop a different representation of self within intraracial settings."<sup>67</sup> hooks states she wrote her chapter "Recovering Black Masculinity" for her brother

in hopes that he will recover one day, come back to himself, know again the way to love, the peace of an unviolated free spirit. It was this peace that the

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<sup>67</sup> Ford, Kristie A. "Doing Fake Masculinity, Being Real Men: Present and Future Constructions of Self among Black College Men." *Symbolic Interaction* 34.1 (2011): 38-62. JSTOR. Web. 28 Feb. 2015.

quest for an unattainable, life-threatening patriarchal masculine ideal took from him.<sup>68</sup>

Here, hooks mourns the authentic self of her brother that was lost in trying to reach towards and grasp an authentic notion of black masculinity. He lost himself and “the peace of an unviolated free spirit,” which is the anxiety generated from trying to match up with the black masculine ideal, in the process. Additionally, hooks posits the black masculine ideal as something unattainable, similar to the white patriarchal ideal. Therefore, black males always already fail at trying to reach the white patriarchal ideal as well as the black masculine ideal. Logically then, the generation of the black masculine ideal as a faux hegemony in response to the anxiety from the white patriarchal ideal creates a double failure. Consequently, black masculinity and the space surrounding it are characterized by a cycle of constant failure. This cycle of failure becomes instrumental in the theorization of black queer masculinity to follow.

As previously discussed, there is a multiplicity of masculinities at play. It is interesting to think of the existence of a masculine ideal as a force that unintentionally produces this multiplicity. As a subject fails to reach the ideal, there is a unique version of masculinity and manhood that is being created. Thus, there is production in failure. hooks, along with other scholars, recognizes that “[t]hough the patriarchal ideal was the most esteemed version of manhood, it was not the only version.”<sup>69</sup> As a child, hooks became “fascinated and charmed by black men who were not obsessed with being patriarchs” and these men were “black men who

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<sup>68</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 88.

<sup>69</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 88.

chose alternative lifestyles, who questioned the *status quo*, who shunned a ready made patriarchal identity and invented themselves."<sup>70</sup> Arguably, these men, who a young hooks became enthralled with, were performing a queer black masculinity.

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<sup>70</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 88.

### Three

#### Black Queer Masculinity and Its Function

Some things which seem to be opposites are actually different degrees of the same thing.  
 - Charles Ludlam, *Manifesto, Ridiculous Theater* (1992)

Now that we have a black masculine platform on which to stand, it is now time to ask the question: How do we go about inserting queer into the conversation? As previously discussed, Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" posits the notion of compulsory heterosexuality that establishes the idea that heterosexuality and its practices are normal and normative, which is paralleled with the notion of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a hegemonic project. It pervasively reaches every part of the social structure. Interestingly though, Sara Ahmed's chapter "Queer Feelings" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) argues that "heteronormativity refers to more than simply the presumption that it is normal to be heterosexual. The 'norm' is regulative, and is supported by an 'ideal' that associates sexual conduct with other forms of conduct."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, heteronormativity functions through the act of regulation by setting up an ideal. As previously stated, the rhetoric of an ideal is most pernicious because it infiltrates one's mentality in order to be internalized and reproduced. In this way, one participating in heteronormative practices regulates itself by internalization of a normative ideal that becomes constantly remanufactured to become a culture.

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<sup>71</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.

Ahmed states, "Heteronormativity involves the reproduction or transmission of culture through how one lives one's life in relation to others."<sup>72</sup>

Through a discussion of Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, Ahmed posits the idea that "[q]ueer theory advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms."<sup>73</sup> It is for this reason then that queer theory has come to be "defined not only as anti-heteronormative, but as anti-normative."<sup>74</sup> Normativity, in Ahmed's view, parallels with a notion of comfort; she states, "Normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it."<sup>75</sup> For Ahmed, comfort is bodily and illustrates a body fitting into an ideal. In her view, heteronormativity "shapes what it is possible for bodies to do."<sup>76</sup> A heteronormative ideal crafts the way that bodies are shaped through repetition of acts, which mirrors Butler's theory of gender performativity. These repetitive acts not only shape the body, but they involve "a way of orientating the body towards and away from others."<sup>77</sup> Comfort then becomes about the ease in which a body can shape and orient itself towards other objects; in the case of heteronormativity, a body must orient itself toward some objects and not others. What happens when a body cannot or chooses not to shape or orient itself toward the appropriate object or set of objects? The unshapeable, unorientable body is then labeled a queer body because "the failure to orient oneself 'towards' the ideal [. . .] object affects how we live in the world, an affect that is readable as the failure to reproduce, and as a

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<sup>72</sup> Ahmed, 149.

<sup>73</sup> Ahmed, 149.

<sup>74</sup> Ahmed, 149.

<sup>75</sup> Ahmed, 147.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmed, 145.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmed, 145.

threat to the social ordering of life itself.”<sup>78</sup> A queer body, through its failure to be shaped or reproduced correctly, resists the comfort that comes from embodying the heteronormative ideal. Ahmed goes on to question what sort of feelings arise from queerness, but she raises an interesting question:

Do queer moments happen when this failure to reproduce norms as forms of life is embraced or affirmed as a political and ethical alternative? Such affirmation would not be about the conversion of shame into pride, but the enjoyment of the negativity of shame, an enjoyment of that which has been designated shameful by normative culture.<sup>79</sup>

Although Ahmed gestures toward this question in passing, I wish to investigate it a little further. For her, the category ‘queer’ “is produced in relation to histories that render it a sign of failed being or ‘non-being’.”<sup>80</sup> My question then is: What kind of political work can happen if a queer body accepts, and even relishes, in its history of shame, failure, and negativity?

### **Shame and Failure as Politically Functional**

In “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” (1993), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes a very radical claim concerning queerness’ failed position. Ahmed’s question about queerness’ acceptance of its own shameful history lines up perfectly with Sedgwick’s assertion that “the self-application of ‘queer’ by activists has proven so volatile [because] there’s no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in detaching the word from its associations with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant

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<sup>78</sup> Ahmed, 145.

<sup>79</sup> Ahmed, 146.

<sup>80</sup> Ahmed, 146.

or otherwise stigmatized childhood.”<sup>81</sup> However, Sedgwick goes a step further by articulating that queer’s associations with its childhood scene of shame does not liquidate its political potency. In fact, she states that “it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy.”<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick posits this interesting claim that queerness notices that it cannot be divorced from its shameful history and uses that shame to construct a transformational politics. According to Sedgwick,

... shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove: shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance . . . Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed, like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication . . . shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. Many developmental psychologists consider shame the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop [...]. Nonetheless, shame both derives from and aims toward sociability.<sup>83</sup>

Shame possesses a lot of potential for Sedgwick because “it generates and legitimates the place of identity” as well as having “its own powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.”<sup>84</sup> Shame shows itself to have a productive quality by creating a queer identity position, but never sheds itself of its negativity. In short, shame demonstrates the possibility that there can be production in negation—which is an important point because negation is constantly viewed as a position of stagnancy and death.

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<sup>81</sup> Sedgwick, Eve K. "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993): 4.

<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Sedgwick, 5,14.

<sup>84</sup> Sedgwick, 14.



As can be understood, shame is an affective position that can be generated by way of failure. When one fails, shame comes in as, according to Sedgwick, “a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is.”<sup>85</sup> Shame in its creation of an identity inhabits one’s being and generates a failed subject-position. Judith Halberstam (now Jack Halberstam)’s book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) wrestles with the potential of a failed subject-position and the premise that there can be production in negation. Utilizing what s/he calls low theory, Halberstam attempts to “[dismantle] the logics of success and failure with which we currently live.”<sup>86</sup> In short, *The Queer Art of Failure* wishes to theorize an alternative way of being, doing, and knowing. According to Halberstam, “[l]ow theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.”<sup>87</sup> Halberstam uses imagery from the children’s show *Spongebob Squarepants*, in all his failed glory, to make the claim that low theory recognizes that the alternative ways of being, doing, and knowing sometimes exist in dark, grimy waters, instead of in the shiny, well-lit gift shop. As per Halberstam, failure can be politically engaging:

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in

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<sup>85</sup> Sedgwick, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Halberstam, 2.

contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.” In fact if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.<sup>88</sup>

Mirroring both Ahmed and Sedgwick, Halberstam’s claim that queers have mastered failure is an important point. In order for queerness to “inhabit the bleak territory of failure”, it is necessary to also “write and acknowledge dark histories.”<sup>89</sup> If a queer position is one of failure and the transformational function of queerness is connected to its dark history of shame, then the resistance of all norms enacted by queerness as well as its productive nature must also be connected to and work through this negativity. Interestingly, the political potential of queer failure takes its value from relishing in a failed state and not moving out of it so quickly—or arguably, at all.

### **“Queering” Black Masculinity**

It is this notion of queer negativity and failure that I find most imperative for a theorization of black queer masculinity. As previously worked out, black masculinity is haunted by an incessant double failure. The black masculine subject, in trying to secure his own positionality within the dominant gender group, fails once because the performance of masculinity—regardless of racial signifier—is unattainable. Secondly, in an attempt to reconcile the anxiety caused from the first failure, the black masculine subject goes about instilling a black masculine ideal, which seen through Bryant Keith Alexander’s Good Man-Bad Man paradigm, enacts another failure. Such a cycle of failure characterizes black masculinity as an

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<sup>88</sup> Halberstam, 2-3.

<sup>89</sup> Halberstam, 23.

irreconcilably failed subject-position. What happens if the failed subject-position of queerness and black masculinity come together? Is it possible to map queerness' artistic mastery of failure—a failure that has political potential—onto the anxiety-ridden double failure of black masculinity?

The introductory chapter, “Feeling Utopia,” of José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* opens up a discussion of queerness that helps to answer these questions. For Muñoz,

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality . . . Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present . . . Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing . . . Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.<sup>90</sup>

Muñoz’s notion of queerness is steeped in rhetoric of futurity. It is movement into the future from the present—an ideality, a longing. Interestingly, Muñoz rejects a reading of queerness that cleaves to negativity; for him, queerness moves beyond it. However, I want to continue to utilize queerness as never divorced from its history of shame and failure while simultaneously using Muñoz’s definition of queerness as “not simply a *being* but a *doing*.”<sup>91</sup> Queerness, in this view, operates as an action or, to use Muñoz’s wording, a performative. Queerness becomes queering—an opening up of potentiality. Therefore, a theory of an essentialized black queer masculine subject-position is not the most precise aim of this project. Instead, a queer black masculinity, indeed the action of *queering* black masculinity,

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<sup>90</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009: 1.

<sup>91</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

is the corrective. The question then becomes a matter of what happens *when* black masculinity is queered.

Queering black masculinity, in my view, is an attempt to show black masculinity to have already taken up queer discourse, to already be engaged with a queer politics. Returning to a claim made by Halberstam, “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.”<sup>92</sup> Failing with flair and with ease characterizes the position of the queer. In *Black Looks*, hooks illustrates the failure of black males to attain both a patriarchal ideal and a black masculine ideal as irrevocably negative with no hope for reconciliation. Here, it is necessary to adopt Halberstam’s hopeful, almost cheerful, approach to negativity and failure. If failure is potential and failure is the way of the queer, then the double failure of black masculinity *is* queer. Therefore, queering black masculinity is an unraveling—arguably, a double unraveling—of black masculinity’s hard exterior to reveal its queer center, which is characterized by its failure to attain masculine, patriarchal ideals.

E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* demonstrates the double unraveling characteristic of a queering of black masculinity, which he names “manifest faggotry.”<sup>93</sup> In his chapter “Manifest Faggotry: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture,” Johnson utilizes Butler’s corrective to Sigmund Freud’s theories of mourning and melancholia to theorize the formation of a heterosexual identity as constructed by “[t]he

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<sup>92</sup> Halberstam, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003: 57.

ambivalence toward the love-object in the melancholic ego,"<sup>94</sup> which comes to be homosexuality in heterosexual identity formation. Johnson's first example of manifest faggotry begins with Eldridge Cleaver's "Notes on a Native Son," which is commentary on James Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son." Cleaver begins with "orgasmic praise"<sup>95</sup> of Baldwin's power over rhetoric, but soon after attacks Baldwin's character by labeling his essay a "sycophantic love of the whites."<sup>96</sup> According to Cleaver, Baldwin's love of the whites, and in turn, his self-hatred, is generated by his homosexuality. Cleaver continues to condemn Baldwin, but also articulates ambivalence towards Baldwin that he cannot place. In this ambivalence, he employs homoeroticism towards Baldwin and his writings:

I, as I imagine many others did and still do, lusted for anything that Baldwin had written. It would have been a gas for me to sit on a pillow beneath the womb of Baldwin's typewriter and catch each newborn page as it entered this world of ours. I was delighted that Baldwin, with those great big eyes of his, which one thought to be fixedly focused on the macrocosm, could also pierce the microcosm. And although he was so full of sound, he was not a noisy writer like Ralph Ellison. He placed so much of my own experience, which I thought I had understood, into new perspective.<sup>97</sup>

Cleaver's disavowal of Baldwin is wrapped up in a sense of longing. While attempting to discredit Baldwin by feminizing him, he also manages to feminize himself—" [w]hether as midwife there to aid with 'literary' birth or as homosexual lover feeling 'those great big eyes' gaze upon him while he performs the cultural work of fellatio."<sup>98</sup> Johnson recognizes in Cleaver's rejection of Baldwin that

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<sup>94</sup> Johnson, 49.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, 52.

<sup>96</sup> Johnson, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, 54.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson, 54-55.

“[h]omophobic repudiation becomes unspoken homosexual desire.”<sup>99</sup> A recollection of Huey P. Newton illustrates the moment that Cleaver and Baldwin meet in person for the first time and partake in a “long, passionate French kiss.”<sup>100</sup> Baldwin, who never commented on Cleaver’s homophobic attacks or on the kiss, stands as the mechanism of queer black masculinity that unravels Cleaver’s black masculine exoskeleton: “. . . Baldwin’s silence, both about Cleaver’s attack and during their encounter, functions differently in that his ‘non-verbal communication,’ and mere presence, make manifest Cleaver’s faggotry—queering not only the event . . . but Cleaver’s masculinity and blackness as well.”<sup>101</sup> The act of queering here is catalyzed, not by Baldwin’s participation; rather, by Cleaver’s double failure of attaining patriarchal and black masculine ideals. Newton commented that “Cleaver’s participation in the Black Panther Party and his obsession with guns was an attempt to ‘prove’ his masculinity.”<sup>102</sup> Baldwin’s queerness then served as apparatus to unzip and expose Cleaver’s fleshy queer center. Such a thesis is not an attempt to posit all black men as closeted homosexuals, but rather to render the performance of black masculinity as an example of queer failure and to imagine the potentiality of such a position.

To return to Muñoz briefly, queerness is a forward motion, an opening up and an instrument of futurity. With this in mind, it would seem advantageous to theorize a queerness that moves the black masculine subject forward, out of a contemporary moment of violent caricatures and anxiety, into an external utopian

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<sup>99</sup> Johnson, 55.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, 56.

<sup>101</sup> Johnson, 57.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, 56.

freedom; however, my project seeks to think through queerness as an opening up, activated by a failure to move forward and out of while still holding on to utopian desire. Is it possible to consider utopia by way of black queer failure?

## Four

### Disidentification, Ontological Excess, & Utopian Longing

Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death,  
 which is to say Black Eros, is the ongoing production of a performance.  
 - Fred Moten, *Black Mo'nin* (2003)

In this thesis, I set out to consider black masculinity, its queering (and its relation to that queering) as well as contemporary performance art. Following a theoretical tradition that investigates contemporary performance art as a space of utopia, this chapter will explore questions raised in Chapter Three concerning utopia and the possibility of its existence by way of black queer failure. José Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) works through the process of how people of color and queers—what Muñoz names minoritarians—come to self-identify. “Disidentification,” according to Muñoz, “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”<sup>103</sup> Muñoz’s “phantasm of normative citizenship” lines up with Sara Ahmed’s discussion of comfort wherein minoritarians participate in the disidentificatory process because they cannot find comfort. Interestingly though, Muñoz states that the comforts of normative citizenship are only phantasmal; they are just as illusory—if not, more—than the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and

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<sup>103</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 4.



black masculinity. Because minoritarians subjects cannot access or construct an identity within the “phobic majoritarian public sphere,” instead they must create a way to survive within that sphere—disidentification.

### **Disidentification: The Creation of Excess**

Disidentification “neither opts to assimilate within . . . a structure nor strictly opposes it,”<sup>104</sup> which is to say that the process of disidentification is neither a gesture of complete discursive acceptance or refusal. Instead, the work of disidentification is a “working on and against” that seems to challenge the rhetoric of identification/assimilation and counteridentification/utopianism. If disidentification resists the thought of utopia because utopia lends itself to a certain kind of breaking free, moving forward, and moving out of, then why consider disidentification at all? It would seem appropriate to pitch a tent for disidentification between the two camps of assimilation and utopianism, but it “is not an apolitical middle ground between the positions.”<sup>105</sup> Appealing to Michel Foucault’s theory of the polyvalence of discourse, Muñoz posits the disidentificatory thesis as one that counteracts any kind of fixity. It is a fluid process that moves between and beyond the two. This is a difficult formulation to grapple with because disidentification contains rhetoric of identification, assimilation, counteridentification, and utopianism and utilizes them all. With that said then,

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<sup>104</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 18.

disidentification is worth discussing for this project because it encloses “active kernel[s] of utopian possibility.”<sup>106</sup>

So what is disidentification? Most precisely, Muñoz says that it is “a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance”<sup>107</sup> and, for the minoritarian, “is a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy.”<sup>108</sup> Therefore, disidentification is a performance—a doing—and there is a component of incorporation and disavowal within it. In order for a subject to disidentify, he must incorporate or reproduce aspects of that which he is disidentifying with, but, additionally, he must discard portions of the disidentified object. To further explicate this point, Muñoz uses the example of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol’s artistic relationship. As commonly known, Warhol was the father of the pop art artistic movement. Basquiat, in his identification with “highbrow cultural production” (most specifically, that of pop art) and “lowbrow graphic genre of comic books [and graffiti],” comes to look to Warhol as a sort of artistic hero. Basquiat incorporates facets of Warhol’s pop art movement within his process of art production. By incorporating valences of pop art and graffiti in his art, Basquiat disidentifies with pop art’s race ideology, where “there are next to no people of color populating the world of pop art—either as producers or subjects.”<sup>109</sup> In his process of disidentification, the Haitian and Puerto Rican Basquiat identifies with his white artistic hero Warhol. Muñoz posits a disidentificatory narrative that

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<sup>106</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.

<sup>108</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.

<sup>109</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 38.

begins with identifying with one's heroes, actually becoming like one's role model and then moving on. This line is not easy to follow inasmuch as it is neither linear nor in any way straight. It is, in fact, a very *queer* trajectory.<sup>110</sup>

The process of disidentification then must begin with identifying. In striving to perform artistically like Warhol, Basquiat was influenced by Warhol's work and, in turn, incorporated in his own work. However, instead of existing as a colored replication of Warhol, Basquiat moved on from the image of Warhol's pop art and used it to "inform his own strategies and tactics in powerful ways."<sup>111</sup> What is seen now is the way in which disidentification takes up an object and breaks down the composition of that object to recycle, reproduce, and reiterate that very object. In his performative disidentification of Warhol, Basquiat neither fully incorporates the essence of Warhol and pop art by adding in graffiti, but he also does not fully disavow it by using remnants of it in his artistic production.

As previously formulated in Chapter One, Thomas DeFrantz understands an articulation of excess to be at the core of Muñoz's process of disidentification. The excessive, or the space of excess, is an "interpretative marker of scale."<sup>112</sup> Scale, which is to invoke language of measure, is a gesture towards the question of quantity: *How many? How much?* For DeFrantz, in order to "materialize excess,"<sup>113</sup> it is necessary to disidentify. The materialization of excess in disidentification comes about in the recycling of the object that minoritarians are disidentifying from—where excess is more than what is. As shown in the Basquiat/Warhol example,

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<sup>110</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.

<sup>111</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.

<sup>112</sup> DeFrantz, Thomas F. "Blacking Queer Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 34.2 (2002): 103. JSTOR. Web.

<sup>113</sup> DeFrantz, 103.

Basquiat incorporates Warhol's pop art into his own artistic production in an effort to emulate Warhol, but—in the queer trajectory of disidentification—surpasses Warhol. He becomes more than his hero. The becoming more than is DeFrantz's notion of excess, which is the material evidence of the process of disidentification.

Excess as a becoming more than—becoming because disidentification is about process—is, by way of disidentification, really a question of ontological excess, or the excess of being. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco's "Performing Excess" (2005) posits a formulation of excessive being that understands excess as "too much"<sup>114</sup> *X* making one too *Y*. For example, too much eating makes one too fat. Too much working out makes one too skinny. Here, excess is generated and activated through action, or in other words, the performative.<sup>115</sup> In this formulation of ontological excess, there can be a literal, physical addition to one's body in the performative. Such an addition to the body, arguably, not only augments the current body but also has the potential to create other selves/bodies.

As per literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Braziel and LeBesco iterate that these other selves/bodies are indeed a part of the same body. The performing body—especially the queer body performing out of shame—might partake in some of the qualities of Bakhtin's grotesque body:

The grotesque body, for Bakhtin, is a body in the act of *becoming*. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body . . . The grotesque body is a productive body, birthing other bodies in and from itself: as if imbued or suffused with parthenogenetic

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<sup>114</sup> Braziel, Jana Evans, and Kathleen LeBesco. "Introduction: Performing Excess." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15, no. 2 (2005): 9. doi:10.1080/07407700508571502.

<sup>115</sup> This also speaks to the temporality of excess: excess is materialized in the present-ness of performance, which becomes important in a later analysis.

potency, it spawns other bodies that spiral out from its material growths, protrusions, and orifices.<sup>116</sup>

The body in performance—the act of becoming—is always in a state of the performative; it is always already creating as it is being created itself. The excessive body grows out of and from the material excess of the performing body. The grotesque body, that which has orifices festering with corporeal growths of growths, comes to be characterized by the “too much.” It becomes described by “both intrinsic characteristics of unacceptable ‘others’ and their proper place on the moral/political gridwork of everyday social life: they are excessive, excluded, superfluous, at best marginal.”<sup>117</sup> In this way, the grotesque body can be understood to be a queer body—the body of the “unacceptable ‘others’”<sup>118</sup> and the always already failed body—and take up a queer positionality in the social order. How then could we connect the formulation of queer failure to this idea of excess? What could the creation and materialization of ontological excess have to do with a utopian longing?

### **Utopian Longing and Queer Failure**

In Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, he makes radical claims concerning utopia and its political potential. For Muñoz, “utopianism represents a failure to be normal.”<sup>119</sup> Excess, as previously worked out, is a certain bubbling over of ontology, of being. Mapping excess onto Muñoz’s construction, excess is both, literally a failure to *be* as

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<sup>116</sup> Braziel and LeBesco, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Braziel and LeBesco, 9.

<sup>118</sup> Braziel and LeBesco, 10.

<sup>119</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 172.

well as a failure to *be normal*. In a social order that privileges the sovereign, singular subject, excess, as Braziel and LeBesco articulate, finds itself on the outskirts of that social order for being too much. Therefore, disidentification is a performative gesture towards utopia, while simultaneously being characterized by a queer failure.

Utopia can never be prescriptive and is always destined to fail. Despite this seeming negativity, a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality . . . Queer failure, as I argue, is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity.<sup>120</sup>

Largely, the claim that Muñoz is making unfolds to seem as parallel to Halberstam's claim concerning queer failure. Failure, though negative at first glance, has a productive potential, what Muñoz calls a "kernel of potentiality." In "Feeling Utopia," the introduction of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz defines his notion of a potentiality as compared to a possibility: "Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense."<sup>121</sup> The point of departure then for possibility and potentiality is that possibility is "I do not know what will happen, but I know something *might*" whereas potentiality is "I do not know what will happen, but I know something *will*." Grippled within a discussion of Muñoz's potentiality is a hope or "a backwards glance that enacts a future vision."<sup>122</sup> Hope maintains a positive, happy-go-lucky approach to failure that allows Muñoz to posit queer failure as an "escape and a certain kind of virtuosity."

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<sup>120</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 173.

<sup>121</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

<sup>122</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

It would appear now that Muñoz and Halberstam's (as well as Sedgwick's) ideas about queer failure and utopia are essentially different. Muñoz and his rhetoric of a positive queer failure seem radically opposed to Halberstam and Sedgwick's queer failure steeped in negativity. However, I am not too interested in these varying affective valences of failure. Whether steeped in positivity or negativity, failure is shown to have a productive potential. In fact, each affective iteration of failure (both the positive and the negative) reaches out for an equally failed utopia; Halberstam says that, "The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in that losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."<sup>123</sup> Queer failure—that is to say black queer failure—then is a way to attain utopia, which, using both Muñoz and Halberstam's definitions, is a mode of escape as well as a reimagination of being.

Why exactly utopia? What kind of potential does utopia have for failed subjects? Precisely, what does a queer utopia have to offer? Now, it is necessary to think through the purpose of a reach towards utopia. Thinking through Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, Muñoz attempts to consider the content of utopia. Bloch lends to Muñoz the distinction of abstract and concrete utopias. For Bloch, abstract utopias are not politically functional because they "are untethered from any historical consciousness;"<sup>124</sup> in other words, they are content-less. A utopia without content becomes a fantasy, a box of good feelings that the failed subject reaches into,

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<sup>123</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011: 88.

<sup>124</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

longing to grasp at “possibility, hope, and political agency.”<sup>125</sup> Muñoz compares abstract utopias to “everyday banal optimism,”<sup>126</sup> which he does not see as politically functional. Although mostly useless, abstract utopias do have one valuable utility: “a critique function that fuels a critical and potentially transformative political imagination.”<sup>127</sup> Utopia without content occasions the criticism of the present temporal moment and notices that there is something about it that is particularly toxic and needs to be moved beyond. At the very least, abstract utopias let us know that there is something else out there. On the other hand, concrete utopias are characterized by historicized content because they “are relational to historically situated struggles.”<sup>128</sup> In contrast to abstract utopias, concrete utopias are connected to some kind of past that needs to be worked on and moved through.

While utopian language leans toward futurity, Jill Dolan’s project of the utopian performative in “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative’” (2001) investigates whether utopia is possible in the present moment. Although she oscillates between theater and performance, it is here that she makes the claim that utopia might be in the present moment:

Perhaps that, already, is utopian, the idea that theatre can do any of those things. Yet that’s the depth of reaction for which I long when I go to the theatre—I don’t think we should expect anything less. Theatre remains, for me, a space of desire, of longing, of loss, in which I’m moved, by a gesture, a word, a glance, in which I’m startled by a confrontation with mortality.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Dolan, Jill. "Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative." *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (2001): 477. doi:10.1353/tj.2001.0068.

<sup>126</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Dolan, 456.



Dolan notices a twinkle of potentiality in the quotidian, in “a gesture, a word, a glance.” It is these small things that can move her and enact, if only a glimpse, of utopia. I would argue that Dolan’s concept of utopia is a concrete utopia. The content of Dolan’s utopia is a “boundless ‘no-place’ where the social scourges that currently plague us . . . might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt us again.”<sup>130</sup> These social scourges—“from poverty, famine, cancer, AIDS, inadequate health care, racial and gender discrimination, hatred of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people, the grossly unequal distribution of wealth and resources globally, religious intolerance, xenophobia expressed in anti-immigrant legislation, lack of access for the disabled, pay inequity, and of course a host of others”<sup>131</sup>—are the historically situated struggles necessary for a concrete utopia. Alas, Dolan believes that this sort of utopia is only one that can be imagined or “embodied . . . fleetingly.”<sup>132</sup>

However, I wish to posit the idea that utopia can be actualized in performance. It does not only have to be imagined, conjured up by the symbolism of the theatrical moment. It is in performance that utopia becomes potential, not only possible. In this way, the queer body in performance—grotesque in nature, excessive in form—lends itself to a utopian project characterized by failure. It is the excess of the queer body and its failure to *be* that enacts utopia because utopia itself is stamped by failure. In performance, it is the very moments of excess that the body achieves Halberstam’s utopia, where it can “think about ways of being and knowing

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<sup>130</sup> Dolan, 456-457.

<sup>131</sup> Dolan, 456-457.

<sup>132</sup> Dolan, 457.

that stand outside of conventional understandings of success.”<sup>133</sup> To say it another way, the ontological failure of the queer body achieves utopia in and through its failure to *be* because it is there that new ways of “being and knowing” can be realized. The queer black body—wrapped up in its double failure, which is both a black queer and excessive failure—actualizes utopia in performance, which I argue happens in my own performance piece, APOSTROPHE TROIZEL.

### **APOSTROPHE TROIZEL**

APOSTROPHE TROIZEL opens with a lone clothed body on the floor, dressed all in black. The room is empty, save for a few black boxes against the far wall and a projection. The projected image is a naked black male that is crouched and appears to be crying; it is an image of the performer. After some moments of rustling from the audience and then silence, the body comes to life. Taking in the space, the performer notices the projected image and, lovingly, approaches it and touches it. He touches the face, chest to chest, hands to hand. Upon contact with the image, the performer begins to walk around the stage and undress. First, a cardigan. Then, a dress shirt, belt, socks, pants, thong. The performer goes to the floor once more in the same spot. He comes to life quicker this time and notices a lipstick near him. He opens it and looks at the projected image; gesturing toward the image, he begins to write words on his body—arms, legs, torso, buttocks: Bitch, Faggot, Pussy, Sissy, Queer, Bottom, Nigger. With each word, he expounds upon the usage of the word: “You’re such a nigger. I know you want to be white, but you’re still a nigger. N-I-G-G-

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<sup>133</sup> Halberstam, 2.

E-R. Nigger.” He rushes to the image and begins to slap at it, punch it, and kick it while screaming these words. The slaps, kicks, and punches get louder and more hectic. He falls away from the wall and rushes to the other side of the room. He tries to get the lipstick off of his body, but it stains his skin and his hands. He wipes at his skin so frantically that in a swoop he collapses to the floor. He lies there breathing heavily and after awhile, he looks up at the image and begins to repeat, “I wanted you to feel love, but I couldn’t.” He gathers himself from the floor and totters around the space. The phrase, starting low, gains intensity and eventually becomes a growling scream. The performer goes to the floor near the image and touches it lovingly once more. When he gets up, he gets redressed, except this time he only retrieves a sock, the thong, and the cardigan. He goes to the black boxes and sits. Staring out at the audience, he looks out into the faces and then retreats to lying on the black boxes, away from the audience’s gaze. The house manager opens the door and after some silence, the audience files out.

Does APOSTROPHE TROIZEL illustrate that black queer failure actualizes utopia in performance? Recalling the discussion of black queer performance in Chapter One, we must first question: can APOSTROPHE TROIZEL be categorized as a black queer performance? The performer participates in self-abstraction and self-objectification as he undresses, stripping himself completely naked, which demonstrates the expression of a black performance: the performer undressing, allowing the audience to see his flesh as a prop within the performance is the breaking down of the dialectic of subjecthood and objecthood. Additionally, then, the audience is invited to participate in the objectification of the performer as he

becomes a prop before their very eyes. Likewise, APOSTROPHE TROIZEL is an example of a queer performance because queer performance is a generative space for the possible to happen transform from subject to object, but also where one can know one's self. It is during the performance that the performer comes in contact with himself, both tangibly and verbally.

As previously worked out, disidentification must begin with identifying. APOSTROPHE TROIZEL demonstrates identification with self. The performer, as he takes in the space initially, recognizes the image on the wall. As he goes to it and touches it, a physical identification with the image takes place: chest to chest, hand to hand. As the identification takes place, almost immediately, the disidentification process begins. Pushing away from the image and going into these moments of undress is the breaking down of the identified body, which, in this case, is the body of the performer. After stripping completely naked, the words written on the performer's body become the excess. The performer is no longer just himself, no longer Troizel, but now, he *is* a bitch, a nigger, a faggot, a queer, and so on. Before the eyes of the audience, these excessive bodies materialize. Interestingly, there is a particular affective slip in this performance. The words written in the performance lend themselves to a depressive, defeated positionality, but they still create excess. In true Braziel and LeBesco fashion, the compounding of each of the words change the ontology of the performer. Toward the end of the performance, the performer gets redressed, but not completely. The breaking down of the body through undress and the recomposition of a new body through the incomplete redressing gestures

toward the disidentification process; the disidentified body incorporates pieces of the body that was initially identified with, though not completely.

The disidentification of APOSTROPHE TROIZEL creates an excessive body that participates in failure. The words that the performer writes on his own body could be interpreted to represent a failed social position: the bitch, the queer, the faggot, the nigger. Each is fraught with failed expectations of racial, sexual, and gendered performance. As previously discussed, the addition of these words to the performer's skin materializes excess in the performance. The corporeal addition of these words, and thus these failed positions, creates an excessively failed body. Following the creation of bodily excess, the performer begins to repeat the phrase, "I wanted you to feel love, but I couldn't." The performer, speaking to the projected image of himself, reassures his projected self that he wanted him to feel love, to be loved, but he failed. He could not make himself feel love. Here is an example of emotional failure, but whether or not that failure is on the part of the performer or the projected is unclear. Additionally, the failure to get completely dressed again adds to this narrative of failure. Perhaps, even black queer failure is present in this performance: in the failed attempts at masculinity and black masculinity (i.e., wearing a thong and applying lipstick). Compounding excess as ontological failure, the failed position of the words written on the performer's body, and the repetition of the failed attempt at love, the stage seems to be set for the actualization of utopia.

The content of the utopia that APOSTROPHE TROIZEL appears to reach for seems to be a world outside of the hurtful words as well as a place where he can finally feel love. If utopia, according to both Muñoz and Halberstam, is a form of

escape, then why doesn't the performer leave the room after the performance? Why does the audience leave him in this failed state? According to Halberstam, "failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness."<sup>134</sup> In this way, the failed state of the performer is the avenue by which to realize utopia. If utopia truly is bound up in failure, then surely utopia is a place where it is okay to have failed. It is acceptable to leave the performer of APOSTROPHE TROIZEL in his failed state because utopia allows for the failure, so that other ways of being and knowing can be recognized. This project then is less about utopian escape from the present moment of failure, but instead inhabiting that failed space and utilizing it as potential for something different, perhaps something better.

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<sup>134</sup> Halberstam, 96.

## Conclusion

Men are born to succeed, not to fail.  
- Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

In the rhetoric of the American dream, success is the way to a better life, a better being. Success is the end goal, but failure is the way to attain that goal. In the contemporary imagination, failing persists as a stepping-stone to great promises of success, of wealth, and of popularity. Success grants, failure stifles. To be more precise, a failed state is not a state to live in, but a transitory mode of being to quietly and quickly escape and traverse. It is the fear of failing—mostly of particular racial, gendered, sexual, ethnic ideals and standards—that petrifies the body from claiming its true potential. Otherwise, one risks the possibility of “becoming” a failure. The fear of many is even the slightest embodiment of a perpetually failed state—a shameful, despondent past collapsing into an even bleaker, blacker future.

How then does a queer body, rife with affects of shame and failure, exist in the contemporary moment? Perhaps, it is in the disavowal of such a negative history that we extinguish the potential power of failure. It might possibly be the opening up and the exposure of that history that materializes political, transformational potentiality. What if, for only a second, we could imagine that our anxiety generated by failure grants us the tools for a utopian worldmaking? Is there a glimpse of utopia spawned by failure in Lawrence Graham-Brown’s *NSA pUmP & dUmP*? Is it not the anxiety and shame of possibly being caught in an excessive orgy of pleasure, of fucking, of failure to be faithful—recall the line, “Wife comes home at 11 or 7 . . .”—

that grants the males in the performance moments of utopian bliss, of ecstasy? Perhaps not. Indeed, *NSA pUmP & dUmP* could remain only a display of aberrant desire coupled with heart-racing shame while attempting to suppress the angst of possibly visible infidelity. However, *if* this performance is utopian in nature as it moves through its failure to behave appropriately (to do sex right, to do marriage right, etc.), then we must constantly question our value of failure.

In turn, our approach to the affective valence of black masculinity's double failure must shift. Though it is married to an anxiety that enacts more pernicious ideals, the double failure of black masculinity enables another mode of being and knowing and doing for the black male subject. As queer black masculinity unravels and exposes black masculinity's double failure and its queer fleshy center appears behind the cold, callous shell of masculinity, we see that black masculinity has always already had utopian potential. The art of queering black masculinity then is like peeling back the many layers of an onion; within those layers, "[there] is an abundance—in abundance—of the present, an abundance of affirmation in abundance of the negative."<sup>135</sup> This abundance—of failure, of potential, of utopian longing—might overwhelm us as the queer peeling takes place again and again. Imaginably, it might bring tears to our eyes; it may stun us. It might even repulse and disgust us to witness such a grotesque and vulnerable opening up, but it will be worth the performance, nonetheless.

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<sup>135</sup> Moten, Fred. "Black Mo'nin'" In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, 65. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.



## Appendix A

### Performance Journal: APOSTROPHE TROIZEL

Show how paradoxes arrest the mind. Scare yourself a bit along the way.  
- Charles Ludlam, *Manifesto, Ridiculous Theater* (1992)

The initial thought of a performance to accompany the thesis seemed perfect to me. I felt I had to do it. I needed to throw myself into the performance process to truly understand where my head really lay with performance. The first part of the process was figuring out *what* it is I was going to do. I knew that I wanted to explore a black queer performative tradition because it was what I was studying, but other than that I wasn't sure where to go.

#### September 18

Images started to come to me ever so often. An image would come and I would store it away. Creatively, I had to learn that only snippets of things come to me and the work I have to do is figure out what order and in what timing all those pieces culminate. I was used to only receiving bits and pieces of text when I wrote poetry, but attempting to find out how to construct a performance was another venture altogether.

The first image that came to me was a nude body. Lawrence Graham-Brown, a black queer performance artist, was obsessed with the nude body and I became obsessed with him. What was it about *the* body? Throughout the fall semester of senior year, theater friends and I would discuss why it was that we do not explore

the nude body in the contemporary theatrical moment. Where did the love for challenging the norm go? These thoughts gave me the idea that there has to be *something* about the nude body. Something that we are afraid of. Hesitant of. Wary of. Even further, I thought that there has to be something about the black body in light of the #BlackLivesMatter movement that was beginning to spark due to the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Trayvon Martin before him and on and on. There was/is something about being in a black body, (and) a queer body.

Following a performance art tradition of nudity (including Lawrence Graham-Brown, Carolee Schneeman, and others), I decided that this *something* that I could not verbally actualize was truly about the nude body in motion. Pornography was a scene of perpetual transgression because it was about bodies in motion. An unmoving, unclothed body was considered fine art (take, for example, any Greek or Roman statue). However, the moment that body began to perform there was something foul about it. Wasn't that what Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964) was all about? The motion, congealing of bodies or Hortense Spillers' notion of the flesh—"a primary narrative . . . its seared, divided, ripped-apartness . . ."<sup>136</sup> At this point, I decided that I would be nude when I performed. I had to be. I needed to explore that *thing* it was about the nude body that prevented us from viewing it as potential or productive.

I started to think about what was my "thing" as a performer. For Lawrence Graham-Brown, it happens to be the black male body. Most, if not all, of his

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<sup>136</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2, Culture and Counteremory: The "American" Connection (1987): 67. JSTOR.

performances involve the nude black male body. It seemed to be his thing. The previous summer I really became interested in gendered objects, especially black lipstick, due to Rashaad Newsome's *Shade Compositions* (2012). In this performance, men have popping lipsticks of red, purple, and black. This caught my attention because 1. *Shade Compositions* is just a dope performance in and of itself and 2. Black lipstick is such a rogue shade of lipstick. Black lipstick makes the person wearing it seem like such a bad ass. I wasn't sure if I was necessarily going for bad-assery, but I wanted a "thing" and black lipstick seemed to be that thing. Men wearing lipstick also lined up with the camp tradition and the transgression of normative gendered performances, so, in my hopes of following that tradition, I decided that I would incorporate black lipstick somehow.

### **October 23**

I have been seeing performance as a creation of fictional selves. What could/does that look like? In performance, there is the performer as himself, but then there is the one that he is performing. There seems to be some sense of virtuality in performance. I am, but I am not. I appear, but I disappear. According to Fred Moten in *The Case of Blackness*, "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay." (177) Although, Moten is talking more so about a material decay—a death—this quotation really got me thinking about a performing black body. Perhaps the performative creation of new selves enacts a cycle of decay and production. This thought took me back to an idea I had in THEA 410: Aesthetics and Criticism: what does performance do to the performer's body? If performance is a

process of decay and production, then a body in performance is always producing and reproducing. The body in performance always becomes more than itself in this process of production, which is the ontological excess—the excess of being.

### **January 27**

Where would this take place? I started to think of what spaces I could see this happening. There are places on campus that have been designated as Safe Spaces by the Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Life. These spaces are labeled for queer students so that they know where it is that they can go to be seen and feel comfortable. Tiny, rectangular rainbows rest in multiple office door windows across campus. The only administrative designated space for black students is the Emory Black Student Union (EBSU), a space that I helped to bring to this campus. Where were the spaces for black queer students? Though, I didn't want my project and performance to be about university institutional spaces, I was interested in what kind of space this performance could happen in. I feel most comfortable in the EBSU. It is a space that I worked alongside other students, faculty and staff to found. It is a place I feel comfortable being myself. The Burlington Road Black Box Theater is a traditionally theatrical space, so it has the ability to become a black queer space if that's what I wanted. What would it be like to have a performance art piece in both a public space like the EBSU and in a more private, traditional performative space?

### **February 3 – Meeting with Danielle Deadwyler**

I had my first meeting with Danielle today. Danielle is a character. She is theater come alive. Honestly, she's who I want to be. A performance artist in her own right, she also pursues theater and hip-hop and anything else her heart desires. She is out here living. Standing about 5 feet 6 inches tall, she is such a fireball with so many energies, almost as if they're compressed and released inside of her at once. A very intense personality, but when I say intense I don't mean anything too overbearing. There's something about its texture that I can't get over. We spoke as if we'd known each other forever. It was comfortable meeting her for the first time. She had just come from rehearsal in her sweats, baseball hat, and hoodie. She was herself, authentically. I love her.

She got me to think about so many things concerning performance. I was telling her how anxious I was because this was my first performance. I'm an actor. I'm used to getting a script and knowing what it is that I have to say and do. Instead, I have to create every part of that. Danielle helped me through that initial anxiety by asking me questions. I did not have an answer to most of the questions she asked, but it was refreshing to just talk about everything that was jumbled up in my head. Danielle started off asking me if I wanted a director: "Do you value eyes? Or can you see what you will do?" I had never considered having a director, but I decided that I wouldn't have one. I was the captain of my soul; I was the master of my fate. I needed to work out what it is that was going to go forth. She then addressed my fears and anxieties by telling me that I had to create with the utmost honesty and attack those fears and anxieties. I had to reveal something "that scared the shit out of me." In that moment, I thought the scariest portion of my thoughts was being in

the nude. It wasn't until later that Danielle told me that it wasn't about that at all, but instead, it was about power—or a lack thereof.

We then began to discuss the structure of the performance. Danielle told me that one of her first performances at Spelman College was performed in a triptych, a set of three. The first triptych idea that came to mind was one of Nude, Semi-Nude, and Clothed. I started to think of each component of the triptych in little boxes (see below).

Nude	Semi-Nude	Clothed
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Danielle reiterated to me that a performance art piece is a journey. To get through each portion of the triptych, I had to realize “what boundaries were being broken.” How did I get from nude to semi-nude to clothed? Besides the obvious action of getting dressed, how did I get from one stage to the next? I needed to find the shapes necessary to get from one to the other. Danielle called the beginning of this shape my “bare bones.” It was a great foundation to put muscle on. Now, it was a matter of deciding: “What are the extremes? Which way do you want to go?” Danielle told me to follow every impulse that came to me. She said, “They may be bullshit and they may be gold. You never know.”

“What’s the realest shit you never spoke?” Danielle asked me. There was something about thoughts of mine that become a reality in other people’s mouths. What would it be like for other people to say the things I was afraid to say? How could I stimulate a participatory atmosphere in performance? After thinking

through this, I decided that I wanted to say the things that I did not want to hear. I had to say them. Issues Troupe, a theatrical group on campus that dealt with issues of identity using personal narrative, helped me to get over the fear of saying things that I was uncomfortable saying, but something about this was different. I felt that what I was going to say in this performance trumped everything that I had ever said in the multiple Issues Troupe performances that I participated in. What words could or could not be said in the nude body? What was silence like in a clothed body?

### **February 10**

As the performance aspect of my thesis unfolded, I was actually trying to figure out whether or not I wanted to use black queer masculinity as a concept as opposed to queer black masculinity. It came to me that I should start to think of it in terms of “queering” black masculinity. “Queering” as a verb. What I was interested in exploring was queer as action. What were some verb words that seemed appropriate for this piece—whatever it happened to be? I wanted this process and the actual performance of it to be always in a moment of “-ING.” I wanted it to be *living, breathing, thinking*. The present-ness of each moment seemed the most important in this process.

While I was thinking about my own performance, I was also directing a production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. The necessity of that text for black women generated thoughts in my mind about the necessity of my own work. How important was it? Who was it for? I was always telling the *for colored girls* cast to raise the stakes, to never get comfortable, and to

always keep pushing. I had to continuously remind myself of those very words. Whoever this performance was for I had to push through to make sure it worked for them. Maybe it was for myself. I had to consider that.

## **February 20**

I had to start making concrete decisions about the performance and that was causing anxiety. The more concrete my decisions became, the more of a reality the process became. I decided to return to the question of space. I was still thinking about having the performance in a public space and in a traditionally theatrical space. Why these spaces? Was there something different happening in these spaces that needed emphasis? I decided that there wasn't anything different happening in the spaces and it all came down to audience participation. I was (and still am) interested in what happens when a performer forces moments onto his audience. If the audience isn't expecting anything wild or confrontational to happen, then what kind of performance does it become? A performance in the EBSU would be forcing my vulnerability upon people in the space that didn't ask to be a part of it. A traditionally theatrical space like the BRB allowed those who wanted to be a part of the process to be just that. So I decided that the BRB was the place for my performance. The BRB also ended up being the perfect space for a performance because it was a relatively blank, black space. It could be molded into whatever I needed it to be. To mirror the kind of public space that the EBSU would have provided, I also decided that I would not use theatrical lighting. The fluorescent



lights in the theater would be the ones that I used because I wanted everyone to be in the same light, on the same page.

#### **March 4**

Today was my first encounter with the space. Improvisationally, I thought about what I wanted or thought I wanted. The triptych that I had conjured helped me decide what should happen. I wanted to walk onto an empty stage, perhaps scattered with articles of clothing. All of the articles of clothing would be black. I was always thinking about the risks that I had to take in order to truly take the leap that I needed to take. I was scared out of my mind. I walked around the space, really feeling the floor, connecting my core to the heart of the space. The performance was about our connection; *we* were performing, the space and I. I contemplated performance as confession and what that meant for me. Did that mean that I was just pouring my soul out before many with no security? I thought about what I told Danielle about not having any text. I reconsidered that choice because text seemed necessary in the space. There needed to be something to fill the space besides my presence.

I remembered an improvisational moment in Theater Emory's Free/Fall rehearsal with Alex Bond. We were doing a waltz-like dance and looking into one another's eyes, establishing a connection so as to dance while feeling the other person's energy. For a moment though, Alex looked into my soul. It seemed cliché, but I saw her really *look* at me. I felt something. I ran off crying and I wasn't sure why. I just knew that I had felt something. She came over to me during a 5-minute

break and asked me if I was okay. I told her I was, but I felt something. Alex said, “I wanted you to feel love. I wanted you to know that you got it.” It was that moment that changed me as a performer. Indeed, it was this moment that the performance was calling for.

### **March 5**

The name. I finally got a name: APOSTROPHE TROIZEL. We were talking in Dr. Bradley’s Black Affect graduate class about the queerness of rhetoric. Lauren Berlant’s first chapter of *Cruel Optimism* talks about the queerness of rhetorical devices such as irony and apostrophe. In class, we discussed how apostrophe is stepping out of reality and referring to someone who is not present that you want to share psychic space with. Speaking to the African Diaspora, Dr. Bradley said apostrophe is like “Speaking to the dead who always will be absent.” This was perfect! This performance was an attempt to share psychic space with myself to speak to myself. What would it be like to speak to myself in this space? To say all of the things I never could say to myself because I’m always absent? It was then that I decided that I would use projection in this piece: a projected image of me somewhere in the space.

I thought about all of the things that I had been called in my life. Bitch. Nigga. Faggot. Sissy. Bottom. Queer. They had to show up in performance. They molded me in various ways to be the person that I am. For a while, I thought that maybe I was looking for narratives to share in hopes of fulfilling the confessional impulse. Would

I have to excavate scars and scabs from the past in order to achieve some kind of authenticity in performance?

The fleshed out triptych came to me in its own form. I turned on a remix of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana that I had recently fallen in love with. The remix didn’t have all of the lyrics in it; it only repeated “Here we are now entertain us, here we are now entertain us.” I started thinking about myself stripped naked and laid on the floor. I waited for my body to tell me what to do. I waited for it to entertain me. Instinctively, I ran to the wall and started beating on it. I was beating and beating and beating. Words followed. With each slap, a word accompanied. *Slap. Bitch. Slap. Nigger. Slap. Faggot. Slap. Sissy.* Some of the words repeated many times over and over. With each slap and word, I became angrier and the slaps meant more to me. It was as if I was slapping the words onto the wall away from me, finally ejecting them from my body. As I tired, I retreated from the wall. My breathing was heavy and I allowed the roughness of it to fill the space. I put on the thong and socks because I didn’t feel right fully naked anymore. The moment of vulnerability had ended. I collapsed to the floor, near the lipstick. I opened it and wrote on my legs, arms, and torso the words I had just screamed. Having the words on my body made them real. I didn’t want them to be real. I needed to be rid of them. I tried to rub them off of my body, thinking that because it was lipstick it would come off. However, there were smudged remnants. So I decided to cover them. I got dressed because if I couldn’t get rid of the smudges then I needed to hide them. It was then that I started to recount the moment with Alex Bond. In spite of all those things said, I wanted to feel love. I wanted to know that I had it. I started to repeat Alex’s phrase

“I wanted you to feel love” over and over. The present-ness of that moment worked through my body. I begin to feel the unadulterated love that was transferred in that Free/Fall rehearsal. That’s when I knew I had the core of my piece.

### **March 6**

I started thinking about how the performance began and I wasn’t sure. Did I come out and walk into the space from the back door or the light lock or the kitchen? For some reason, it didn’t feel right to enter the space once the audience was in. Somehow that felt too cliché and theatrical. I had to already be in the space. Doing what? I didn’t know. I played with some things. Lying on the floor as the beginning of the piece felt natural. I lay nearest the entering door, downstage right. I wanted the audience members to encounter me as soon as they came into the space.

### **March 14**

Now that I had a starting point and a core phrase for the piece, I thought that I was done with the performance. I drafted up a performance description that I was proud to call my performance:

*Audience enters. Already lying on the floor in stillness and completely nude. When the doors shut, music begins to play. During this time, I sit up slowly and grab the lipstick and begin writing words on myself: “Bitch,” “Nigger/Nigga,” “Pussy,” “Faggot,” “Sissy,” “Queer,” “Bottom.” After a moment, I run to the stage left wall and begin beating on it. With each beat, I scream each of the words written on my body. The beating*

*and screaming accelerates until I tire. Breathing heavily and disoriented, I back away from the wall and pick up the thong, grab a sock or two, and put them on. I catch a glimpse of the projected image and stare, facing the image. Starting off quietly, I begin to repeat the phrase, "I wanted you to feel love." Throughout the repetition, the phrase becomes distorted and decomposed. (In the initial rehearsal of this moment, the phrase was muffled by sobs.) After the phrase comes to stillness, I put on the pants, shirt, tie, belt, and cardigan. With each article, I stare out into the audience, looking over the faces and take them in as they take me in. I go to the stage right wall and feel it, push against it, then run to the stage left wall. I go back and forth for a while and then suddenly stop. I look out at the audience one more time and then proceed to the black boxes upstage. I sit there then lie down away from the audience. Doors open. End performance.*

### **March 15**

I was extremely excited about the fact that I felt finished. The word "finished" is used loosely because I felt as if something was missing. Of course, I couldn't quite realize what it is that I thought that something was, so I continued to rehearse. After sending him my performance description, Michael Evenden gave me this critique:

*2. The words you write on yourself and shout are almost entirely about queerness: one refers to blackness; there is no point where you seem to recall expectations associated with being male, the demands of*

*masculinity—or, I would say, of black masculinity. (Except for the male clothing, but I'm not sure how completely they are alienated or ironized.) Think about that. It's reading now as if it's mostly a queer performance piece as such.*

*3. The implicitly hopeful things explored in your chapter—how, if masculinity is always insecure, and black masculinity has always already failed twice, and—by implication—if queerness might be a way out of the double bind, a hopeful thing—they aren't here. It seems to be almost entirely about the pain of being called degrading names. Just an observation—no recommendation implied. Telling you what I see.*

*3. I'm not sure how I feel about the dressing in guy clothes at the end. Where exactly does that leave us? (I wondered what would happen if you began the piece dressed, stripped nude, did the performance as described, and dressed again, in the cardigan—sign of masculine respectability.) Just a question—what will your bearing suggest as you dress? . . .*

In my response, I discussed that a reading of the performance piece as strictly queer was okay with me. I felt as though the ways in which it functioned as a black performance were very subtle, but that was not to its fault. My transformation as performer from subject to object was the exercise of black performance in APOSTROPHE TROIZEL. It was there, but very slight and I loved that fact. As for the seeming “to be almost entirely about the pain of being called degrading names,” I didn't know exactly how to explain how it was more than just degradation. For me,

it was totally about the failure, the excess and composition of those terrible terms all over my body. There was hope there—although implicit—but it came to fruition by way of that degradation, that shame. Even if I was the only one who understood that it was more than the degraded status of blackness, would that be enough?

I discovered that Michael's last point was what was missing in the performance. I didn't already start off vulnerable. That was the journey. I had to get there. I started rehearsing the piece fully dressed and then getting undressed. I went through the piece as previously described and I felt *it*. This was *it*. I had found closure. The piece was done. I had found what I was missing.

*Piece starts as I am clothed and in silence on the floor. I sit up and slowly take in the theater. I stop at the photo, which captivates my vision. I take the time to establish a moment with the photo and take in myself. I go to the photo and touch it, try to feel me in the photo. I go away from the photo and start to undress, moving about the stage, until the last piece (which is the thong) falls. I take in everything once more and go back to my original place on the floor. I changed the "I wanted you to feel love" to "I wanted you to feel love but I couldn't" because I am really interested in failure and the potential that failure has. After the core phrase (with its revisions), I decided that as I redressed I wouldn't completely redress. The failure to be fully dressed at the end was important to me. I also felt something regarding starting the piece off very close to the audience and then ending as far away as possible.*

*Maybe I was distancing the very individuals that I had opened up to from my failure? I don't know.*

What drew me to failure was the inexplicit claim of Eve Sedgwick. There was something about shame and failure's potential that was beckoning to me. Sedgwick seems to suggest in her reading of shame that there is no way to divorce queerness, queer politics, and queer life from shame. Muñoz then suggests that queer politics are little too happy-go-lucky and reaching towards a utopia without content, a utopia that has vacuumed out its shame. Can that shame and failure ever be vacuumed out? I'm not sure. I would say that it can't, according to Sedgwick, but it can be avoided. The anxiety of failure is uncomfortable and disconcerting, but this was precisely what I wished to explore. What was it like to stay in a failed state and to embody that anxiety instead of try to escape it?

### **March 16 - Show Night**

In preparation for the two performances, I tried my best to relax the anxieties I felt ever rising. I finally realized that I was about to reveal myself to friends and strangers alike. I wasn't sure if I was ready for the gravity of the situation that I had created. Everyone I saw would ask, "Are you ready?" throughout the day. It was interesting to be asked such a thing when no one knew what to expect. No one knew what was coming, but they were ready to see what was going to be offered up. Which was me. I was the sacrifice. And no one knew.



## **Before**

I arrived at the theater earlier than normal. I had two and a half hours to prepare, to rehearse, to center. I started off by lying on the ground and meditating. I really wanted to feel the space tonight. I needed to. During my final rehearsal, I decided not to perform full out because I wanted to preserve my physical energy as well as not lose the psychic energy that I had accumulated throughout the day. Expectedly, I felt anxiety-ridden and nervousness. However, I also felt a sense of regret and indecisiveness. Where did those emotions come from? I might have felt regret because I had decided to expose myself in more ways than one and I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready to be open just yet. It wasn't my time. I felt that the regret and indecisiveness went hand-in-hand because I didn't know if I wanted to continue on. I had come this far, but I wanted to cancel the event and go home. I couldn't do this. My whole being was wrapped up in apprehension.

## **During**

I felt lost. I had lost myself in the performance of the thing. There were parts of the performance that I don't even remember because they just seemed to happen. I couldn't quite explain it. As I beat on the wall, it wasn't me that was there. It really felt like an out of body experience, which—in retrospect—might have contributed to the overall apostrophic purpose of the piece. I was, in fact, not there so that I could talk to myself. It was interesting to see people look at me as I looked at myself and then feel their inclination to look at the projected image of myself instead of the actual me. Likewise, as I undressed feeling the audience's energy shift contributed to

my own internal energy shift. Due to this energy shift, improvisation took hold. So many things that I hadn't necessarily rehearsed came out of my body. For example, I added the word "Pussy" to the list of words written on my body. I started screaming and ranting and raving during the performance, which was something I had never rehearsed as well.

### **After**

I felt exhausted, both physically and emotionally. I had given all that I had on that stage twice in a row and my body wanted no more. In spite of the drainage, there was also a relief present that said, 'I did this. It is finished and it was a work of art.' Relief came because I was able to get through such difficult vulnerability without feeling like I wasn't doing my own self justice. Also, I felt scared. Because I had the audience leave immediately without getting to see me again or ask me questions, I was afraid of what people would say when they saw me. What were people thinking about me? People that I had known for years, but had never seen me naked before. What did they think of my body, of my being, of my naked vulnerability?

I do recall during the first performance that I burst into tears during the "I wanted you to feel love, but I couldn't" repetition. I couldn't stop the tears though. I felt in such a sense of present-ness and flow that the tears came organically. I truly wanted myself to feel love and the power of that moment washed over me in performance. I remember thinking, 'I hope people don't think that I'm acting this.' I hoped that the audience felt the organic quality of that moment.

**Reflection**

Was it all worth it? I'm continuing to ask myself this question even days and weeks after the performance. Did I actually achieve (or even come close to) what I intended to do? Or—in the spirit of this theoretical project—did I fail? In several ways, I did fail. I failed to properly inhabit a traditionally theatrical space, using no technical aspects of the theater whatsoever. In performance, I discovered that failure was uncomfortable to sit in, but that the sitting in it was the performance itself. It was not only uncomfortable for myself, but also for the audience. Those who attended also said that there was a sense of discomfort in watching me fail and not knowing what to do after that fact. There was no way to help me and that was unnerving. As my theory unfolded, I also found myself mirroring those very theoretical notions in the development of the performance as it was performed. I truly had the thoughts of Halberstam, of Muñoz, of Sedgwick washing over me in performance. In my eyes, APOSTROPHE TROIZEL was excavating a utopia characterized by a new way of being and knowing—even if that being and knowing was a new position to failure.

I am still deciding whether this performance was explicitly about black masculinity at all. Besides being influenced by the black masculine ideal my entire life, I wondered if there was any part of the performance where I specify black masculinity as one of those compounded failures. It was interesting to think that audience members might have implicitly picked up on black masculinity within the

performance because I am in fact a black male. In trying to get away from politics of identity, I might have re-inscribed them in my performance of the thing.

Though this performance and thesis was most interested in utopian possibility, I have been interested in dystopia and theorizing some kind of potentiality in a dystopia upon seeing Theater Emory's *Marisol*. The dread in an apocalyptic world full of dying, death, struggle, and resistance beckoned to me. If utopia, according to Dolan, can be theorized as some future place that is free of social ills, then what kind of possibility does dystopia, characterized by social death, have?

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