

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

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

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7339p06j>

Author

Fitzgerald, Thomas Howard

Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

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

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

by

Thomas Howard Fitzgerald

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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

by

Thomas Howard Fitzgerald

Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Sue Ellen Case, Chair

This dissertation will examine black gay theatre/ performance in the United States from 1970 to 2010. My intent is to establish a genealogy of black gay performance by situating performance strategies of visibility employed by black gay men in the late 20th century utilizing Y D U L R X V S H U I R U P D Q F H J H Q U H V V X F K Q W U H Y Q X H K M W W H R D U W U S L C. Specifically, I am interested that this writing act as a discursive in interrogating the historiography of the tactics of black gay visibility in contrast to and in concert with traditional heterosexual black masculinities where the overall effort was to distinguish a queer black aesthetic separate from the white gay project. My research is necessarily involved with both gay and black performances in this period, since a study of black gay performance practices cannot be pulled away from the black experience in America. Identity politics is the conduit to self-empowerment for black and gay liberation movements, for similar reasons. Accordingly, the project study will concentrate on three areas: (1) social trends and historiography, (2) select black gay performances in this period, and (3) theories of queer and racial identification.

The dissertation of Thomas Howard Fitzgerald is approved.

Shelley Salamensky

Arthur Little

Gary Gardner

Sue Ellen Case, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction « 1-11

&KDSWHU 1RUPDQ LV 7KDW <RX" \$ % ODFI 10-62 D\ 0DQ LQ ([I

&KDSWHU 3RVWPRGHUQ \$IULFDQ +RPRVH[XD 10 V LQ 5HYXH

Chapter 3: Documenting Black G D\) R O N V L Q (3 D S W e a t F e x « R 1 0 0 7 3 R Q ¶ V

Chapter 4: **bonded** Masculinities, Slave Narratives

DQ G W K H 0 H O R G U D P D R I 3 H U I R U . P 7 0 2 4 F H « « « « « « « «

Many thanks of gratitude to my committee: Professor Shelley Salamenksy took me ³ K R P H D Q G to her seminar where I discovered the intriguing mystery of historiography and the motivation to keep digging through archives for more questions and answers. I am beholden to Professor Arthur Little who steered me toward excellence in my writing eccentricities. He also provided me with many resources of the Afro-queer experience outside of the theatre. Professor Gary Gardner gave me encouragement and support and a warm smile.

I acknowledge my breakfast club buddies, who provided spiritual sustenance, strength and hope. They inquired about my progress at every turn of the road and helped me to understand that they would be present for me no matter what the outcome. I must single out friends such as Kiké Adedeji, Sandra Mandel, Dana Simmons and Belinda Vidaurri who gave me encouragement and the ability to see the positive in the challenges.

Finally, it is my family that I am forever indebted to for their unwavering support, generosity and encouragement. I could not have accomplished getting through the years of doctoral seminars and the dissertation writing had it not been for their palpable unconditional love and affection. It is to them that I owe my humanity.

Thomas Fitzgerald

Education

California State University, Los Angeles

Master of Arts in Theatre Arts, 2005

California State University, Los Angeles

Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts, 1996

Awards/Distinctions:

- ◁ University Fellowship, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010
- ◁ Fred Thorp Fellowship, , Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of California, Los Angeles 2010
- ◁ Executive Board Award, Department of Theater, Film and Television, University of California, Los Angeles, 2009
- ◁ Edward Cota Robles Fellowship, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008

Courses Taught

Introduction to Theatre (Theatre 10)

Teaching Associate Lectured on introductory undergrad course in Theatre practices, history and theory. Lectured on Suzan Lori Parks/ *The America Play* Graded quizzes, mid-term and final exams and term papers. One quarter. (Spring 2013) University of California, Los Angeles

Introduction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies (Gender Studies M114)

Teaching Associate Led weekly discussion sections on LGBTQ history, gender, race and queer theory. Graded quizzes, and term papers. One quarter. (Fall 2012) University of California, Los Angeles

Making Traditions, (Theatre 101 B)

Teaching Associate Lectured on Race and Reconstruction in *Othello* Led weekly discussion sections, wrote quizzes based on assigned readings, graded quizzes, final papers and final presentations. Collaborated with the course professor on mid-term and final presentations themes. One quarter. (Winter 2011) University of California, Los Angeles

Reconstructing the Theatrical Past (Theatre 101 A)

Teaching Associate Lectured on Classical Japanese Theatre Same as above. One quarter. (Fall 2010) University of California, Los Angeles

Deconstructing Theatre (Theatre 101 C)

Teaching AssistantLectured on Porcelainandthe Performativity of Masculinity
Same as above. One quarter (Spring 2010) University of California, Los Angeles

Reconstructing the Theatrical Past (Theatre 101 B)

Teaching AssistantLectured on The Ethnic Other in Shakespeareas
above. One quarter (Winter 2010) University of California, Los Angeles

Making Traditions (Theatre 101 A)

Teaching AssistantLectured on Blackface Minstrelsy: An American Theatre
ConventionSame as above. One quarter (Fall 2009) University of California, Los
Angeles

Publications

3 \$ U W D Q G - W a k e H C I ' D W i l ' B Q G W K H 3 H U I R U P D Q F H R I 9 L H W Q D P H V \ I
Interview with Khai-Thu Nguyen, Extensions, On-line Theatre/Performance Studies Graduate
Journal, UCLA Fall 2010

Editor, John Lion New Plays Anthology, published by California State University, Los Angeles,
2005

Presentation

3 & L Y L O 6 H [7 K H / L I H R I 0 R G H U Q % O D F N * D \ \$ F W L Y L V W % D \ D
3 0 L Q V W U H O \ V H G - / R D L H 3 W L Q N 6 K I D Q ö Comparative Literature
Conference, sponsored by Loyola Marymount- 3 D Q H O 7 R S L F 3 : R P H Q r i 3 0 0 6 \ Z U L J K W

Professional and Related Experience

Dramaturg- The Cloud Gatherer, selected for the 2008 American College Theatre Festival
(KCACTF Region VIII Festival 40)

Dramaturg- Liberty Oregon (2004), The Cloud Gatherer (2006) and The Houseguest from Xinjiang
(2007) at CSULA.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

the conduit through which black gay representation could be interred into the wider conversation surrounding identifications and mis-identifications of black male sexual variance. I assert these events are built on a foundation that Harry Elam calls the traumatic moments in the history of black lives galvanize the community into taking action in visible acts of resistance in a demonstration akin to an ensemble acting tr Till and Rodney King to illustrate his theory for the homogenous black community. I would

¹ = : ' k # Critical Theory and Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 173.

submit AIDS as the example of the reality check for the black gay community as well as the larger black community. I contend as the black community responds to events so does the black JD\ FRPPXQLW\ ,W LV LQ WKH QH[XV RI WKH WZR LGHQWLIL describing a commonality in the work against the injustice of invisibility. As the theatricality of the protest in its performativity constructs and instructs an assembly of the like minded resulting either in the momentary skirmish or organized procession, the aim of the event performed as reality check for the black and black and gay communities in its synchronicity finds an instructive outlet in cultural genres such as poetry, film and theatre.

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

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

to think of themselves as citizens and artists. Extrapolated from this analysis is the traditional reaction from the black community to black gay theatre projects. The playwrights have opted for four contemporary dramaturgical genres in which to present their narratives: melodrama, solo performance, event and the revue. The plays that I have chosen to illustrate the black gay experience have been written by black gay men except for one, *Norman is that You* a gay play written by white playwrights. ³ *SURGXFW* ~~le Family This been~~ ~~W~~ ~~st~~ with black actors. Even though the black gay plays written by openly black gay playwrights are not well known, I chose these particular plays because they emphasize a possibility for future black gay playwrights (I want to emphasize this because I think the stories of black gay men need to be told by openly black gay men to break this cycle of silence). The reason behind their obscurity is that the sexually variant black character has yet to make a significant impact on a mainstream theatre audience. The responsibility must fall on successful black playwrights (straight and gay) who continue to re-circulate the familiar heteronormative paradigm to the black community and as a consequence, the commodification of the black gay play remains at bay.

The first chapter looks at an early 1970s play, *Norman is that You*. The play began its production life as a story about a white gay man suddenly confronted with coming out to his family. *SDUHQWV \$IWHU D OHVV WKDQ WHSLG UHVSRQVH LQ LWV* found a venue in Los Angeles where the family was changed from white to black and suddenly a black gay man. *PDQ ZDV RQ GLVSOD\ LQ ZKDW EHFDPH DQ* ³ *HYHQW* ⁴ *IF* Angeles is the signifier of the city as theatre of protest. What happens to the play as it is produced for the next seven years is dependent on a translocal mobility where the redlined boundaries of Los Angeles become the opening for blacks to travel from the south side known as

the ghetto into the more white establishment of the west side of the city. It is here I contend a community that had never seen a black gay man in a mostly positive portrayal discovered pre AIDS that they could sit in a theatre and watch a conformist representation of a black homosexual with a sissy white lover confront his parents in what was essentially a Jewish comedy and find commonality in the humor and perhaps most importantly the sense of a family (always a major theme in black dramaturgy) finding if not acceptance tolerance for the situation. Even though the play itself is minor in the archive of gay plays of the 1970s what it did for this par W L F X O D U F R P P X Q L W \ Z D V R I I H U D ³ U H D O L W \ F K H F N ´ L Q W short time to move beyond the legal and self imposed boundaries to gain another perspective on a swiftly changing society. The black community had been so influenced by the hetropatriarchy of both the Civil Rights Movement and then the Black Power movement which elicited a certain black male performance in theatre where the black homosexual was essentially denounced. As a reaction to the fraught status of African Americans in American culture since the days of slavery, D V H [X D O O \ Y D U L D Q W E O D F N P D O H Z D V L Q Y L V L E O H D Q G I R U black male. The discourse became more complicated and homophobic in the 1970s and not until the traumatic event of AIDS did the black community begins to engage with their homosexual children and spouses. So Norman offered a way into the subject through humor where the parents actually win the argument over their gay son but at the same time seem to understand him and love him even when he identifies as a homosexual.

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

written and performed by openly black gay men. It is visibility that makes the difference in moving the discourse from assumptions and sophomoric renderings of the real lives of the marginalized that distort the spectators view. What the Pomos did was a revolutionary act in that a black gay life was the *tckuqp"fgvtg* for their public activism. Beginning with **Fierce Love** and then **Dark Fruit**, these plays gave a wide range of black male performativity where masculinities can be seen as complicated by historic racism and bigotry from without the community and homophobia within the community. The Pomos did not seek validation because the black homosexual had always been a part of the consanguinity of the black family in America. These gay men were sutured to the legacy of being an African American. It is their absence in the cultural life of black Americans that needed to be amended by acknowledgement. If the epistemology of the closet prevailed in the black gay community as was the case in the homosexual community as a whole, the tacit was no longer workable particularly as the AIDS epidemic established a firm grip on the many black men and women who contracted the virus.) R X Q G L Q J 3 R P R P H P E H Civil Sex (L D Q) about Home Bait W in completes the chapter.

E 3 D W U L F N S R E K T E A R O J V ~~Rek Teas R O J V~~ documentary theatre piece that takes the lives of black gay men in the American South as another example of genealogy of black male performativity.

- R K Q V R Q ¶ V S U R M H F W H P H U J H G R X W R I D V H U L H V R I L Q W H U

their narratives into book form. Following the ethnography theories of Soyini Madison, Johnson

G H V F U L E H G K L V Z R U N D V ³ S H U I R U P D Q F H H W K Q R J U D S K \ ´ +

giving an overall rendering of the Southern black gay men. The narratives then became a

U H D G H U ¶ V W K H D W U H Z K H U H K H E Z R X O G U H S U H H M H Q

experiential. Incorporating history (black and gay), sociocultural observances and sexual

practice, the monologues were then adapted into a stage presentation where Johnson performed the men in their own words. The play is representative of the documentary genre made popular

E \ W K H Z R U N R I \$ Q Q D ' H Y H D U H 6 P L W K % X W L Q 6 P L W K ¶ V F D
color, in *Sweet Tea*, the audience sees a range of black gay men whose commonality is their sexual identity and regionalism. It is an illustration of the technologies of self as the men who give accounts of life in the Jim Crow South as well as Post Stonewall life, where the tacit acknowledgement of their families is one strategic move for survival. O ¶ V V D N H 7 K H O D Q J X D
closet insinuates itself into their acceptance of their homosexuality and the incremental openness as the American society slowly shifts its attitude of intolerance to a middling discourse. The play attempts to find a the varying degrees of black male performance as suddenly gaining a visibility and a voice building on what the marginalized have use as tactic: tell your own story. There is a conversation between the men and then the black and white communities, gay and strai J K W 7 K H F R P S O L F D W L R Q V R I W K H G R F X P H Q W D U \ I R U P D W
the tendency to lose their realness as the men are seen as characters over a period of time.

& K D S W H U I R X U H [D P L Q H V ' R O D D I G s a r e c e n t p r o d u c t i o n
where Jolly has expounded on the slave narrative to include same sex relationships. The play relies on a melodramatic format that sees all of the characters in a complicated situation in Manichean terms. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous. Q W D J H R X V - R O O \ ¶ V K R P R H U F
Southern plantation is a welcome addition to the black gay drama archive but the play illustrates what may happen when the two black men, Sonny and Asa, who act on their attraction as they compete with the conformist paradigm at a time when sexual variance was seen as something unnatural and evil. The men have been written as the iconic top/bottom where the somewhat effeminate and educated young man from the North is kidnapped and brought back to the South

as a slave. He finds himself powerfully attracted to the masculine top whose back story reveals a past same sex relationship that ended when the love interests was killed during their attempted escape. In the meanwhile, the lone black woman on the plantation is set on ³ M X P S L Q J W K H E U R I with Sony. The situation becomes more and more wrought with emotion as Asa the young slave declares his love for Sonny too. Jolly being a playwright of a younger generation makes the bold assumption of same sex relationships but reveals his own post Stonewall, post AIDS, homonormative understanding and perhaps sympathies as he writes the idea of traditional marriage for his gay male characters. Even if they manage to escape the plantation, what lies beyond for them? Knowing the laws are decidedly against anything remotely resembling same V H [U H O D W L R Q V K L S V \$ V D ¶ V G H V S H U D W L R Q V S H D N V W R W K is particular to the period of the abolitionist movement to free the slaves adopted the strategy of blacks being more virtuous than whites (read more Christian and thus family oriented). However, P H O R G U D P D L V H O H P H Q W D O W R W K H S O D \ ¶ V R Y H U D O O H I I H the most frantic of actions as is typical of the melodrama. Still it is the desired conclusion because it allows the gay audience heroes, more significantly heroes in love with each other.

I position the black gay men represented in these chapters as exiles and nomads, in many L Q V W D Q F H V ³ G H D G ´ W R W K H S O D \ ¶ V R Y H U D O O H I I H the times of great traumatic events such as AIDS or the outlandishly unequal incarceration rates amongst black men. Binaries of white/black, straight/gay and rich/poor have the power to define the sightings of black gay men in American culture. The idea had always to allow a certain amount of publicity when the times called for an opposite representation of a certain image of black men at once inferior in their intellect and sexual prowess. The reaction in the community is to safeguard a knowledge power connection in order to control the public discourse surrounding

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

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

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

Furthermore, while the research has altered my understanding of the sudden appearance of black gay men, I affirm there is more to be done. Even when the ³ SUR Jumps a gradual movement, what at first appeared as erasure was actually a strategic pause for political alignment. Black gay men have had to bide their time. I am reminded that for the marginalized in America, when the most liberal of allies advocated for the gradual, it has been to their credit that a vision of the luminal space was enough for the transformative to be present and active. It is a gesture toward modernity when black gay men feel that they can truly come out without the self-recriminating language of the closet. If the reflexivity of coming out prepares for the next one coming out then momentum builds. This can be seen in so many identity politics movements where one bold action weds itself to another until there is a torrent of alteration. In the process WKH FRPPXQLWLHV EODFN DQG JD\ HYRQY don'te YHQ LI WKH L VWDELOLW\ DQG , PHDQ D FRQVLVWHQW DFW RI DFFHSWDQI as an opening for possibility. (YHQ \$QWRQLR *UDPVFL D WKHRULVW PRVW a deceptive political chimera, sees agency in SRVVLELOLW\ +H WHOOV XV ³3RVV ³I UHH GRRP might seem that that freedom is still subject to a host of regulations by the majoritarian but from what these black gay men have demonstrated their agency derives from a sense of shared oppression and condemnation with the straight counterparts. But my sense is that here was never capitulation. The black sissy joined with the good Negroes (not that they could never be one in the same) in times of tumult a common sense of survival and ultimately coming to terms with their situation, possibility found its way into their strategic planning.

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

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

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

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

Verifiable, with protagonistic social actors--also poses problems of verification, who emerges as the hero, and how that vision of the past gets archived is determined by performance and/as history

As reality checks induce a series of performances, they also produce new audiences and audiences within audiences. They function in dichotomous, symbiotic inversions of witnessing and participation, impotence and agency

It is the process of identity formation that occurs when one is in transit that forms the basis of political space

Norman is that You?

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

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

Writing about re-imagining the shape of black political spaces, Michelle Stephens says,
³ « LW LV WKH SURFHVV RI LGHQWLW\ IRUPDWLRQ WKDW RFF
 VWDUWLQJ SRLQW IRU DIDDOWLY
 I would go even further than Stephens and say that when one is in transit, it does not matter if one moves ten miles or one hundred, if a place once forbidden
 EHFRPHV DFFHVVLEOH WR WKH PDUJLQDOLJHG VR GRHV WK
 status. This is particularly true within the social geography of Los Angeles where a black

⁴ Stephens, Michelle. Re-Imagining th o " " h o [Radical History Review](#) 87 (Fall 2003) 172.

playhouse, not located in the ghettoized environs of South Los Angeles but on the white Westside, presented a gay play that the black community supported for more than seven years. I

Z R X O G D U J X H W K D W W K L V S O D \ S U R Y L G H G D ³ U H D O L W \ F K H

quotation above, which offered the community the possibility for a re-evaluation of what had been the traditional response to sexual variance and for the moment allowed them to perceive it differently.

Norman is that You is a relatively obscure gay comedy from the early 1970s that stages a re-imagining of sexual taboos through a shifting social and cultural geography of the black

F R P P X Q L W \ 7 K H F R P P X Q L W \ ¶ V H P E U D F H R I W K H S O D \ L V X Q

addressed homosexuality in the black arts movement did so in homophobic renderings such as \$ P L U L % The Baptism (1966)⁵. Although Norman is that You offers an innocuous portrayal of homosexual relationships, it unwittingly brought a new awareness to the community

W K U R X J K L W V ³ H Y H Q W ´ V W D W X V 7 K H S O D \ ¶ V O R Q J U X Q G H I

understanding its popularity. The play itself can be understood as a useful artifact to unpack the political representation of black and gay subjectivity in period that required the inhibition of sexual variance and black male performativity within the movement. Thus in an historical moment in which black communal openness to change was celebrated, the play offers a pedagogical potential for perceiving a performance of black masculinity apart from the hyper masculine norm set by the movements. Forming a space for change, the play offers a migration from the ghetto homeland of seemingly fixed identifications. The play might help the audience to recall not that homeland, but the identificatory adaptability forced upon black peoples through

⁵ " The Baptism (written when he was LeRoi Jones) is an acerbic comedic look at the hypocrisy in the African American community using religion, social institutions and homosexuality a its primary targets.

WKH WLP H DV WKH ³JKHWR R ´ \$V ZLWK RWKHU GLDVS RULF V

designated space and their political agency could be exercised while they adhered to this racist notion of separate but equal. However, this community of exiles was able to traverse these redlined boundaries to witness a play about a character whose choices are revelatory to his

DXGLHQFH \HVRUDHPDWQRVWKRHQ DQG WR IKURVHOI)RU UH D VR

throughout this chapter, the idea of an exiled audience who can relate to the nomadic life even though they have never considered their circumstances to be so named, is the intriguing premise of this obscure play and its impact on a community at large. Considering the play in this manner is significant because it is in the transformative power of a localized system of knowledge that results in a consciousness of recognition even if a totalized inclusivity is not achieved still the discourse changes.

Hence, my project serves two purposes: 1) thematically it introduces the community to a same sex relationship through comedy and 2) the play provides the ingress out of the confined space of the ghetto and into parts of the city unknown. The combination frames my interrogation of a question of how a cultural artifact provided a progressive movement into other environs of body and mind that ironically had always been the transformative agent in the historiography of African Americans. Moreover, both result in a transformative engagement with what Saba

ODKPRRG FDOOV ³DXWRQRPRRGG V UHHGRPH QFH LV WKH IHPL

UHDGLQJ RI ZRPHQ ¶V RSSUHV VLRQ LQ ~~ex beyond this~~ WUDGLWLRQ

premise in the same way I would propose this newfound self-empowerment amongst the ghettoized blacks of Los Angeles acquired a consciousness of its own agency. Some in the black community found the autonomy to go beyond the traditional limits, those set by the civic law and

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

those imposed by the community itself to venture beyond the predefined borders to what had been deemed a kind of forbidden zone. But more concisely this spatial practice or habitus⁸ of this community created the opening for an intervention into normative African American male performance.

7 K X V W K H ³ H Y H Q W ´ S H U I R U P D Q F H W K D W S U R P S W V D F W I
awareness of venues that initiates a conversation dealing with the black gay subject even when it
appears t R E H S U H V H Q W H G L Q D P D Q Q H U W K D W L P S O L H V D O D F U
positionality raises it to the level of serious contextualization as genealogy in black gay
performance. Having recovered its historic uniqueness offers an opening into a different
conversation in the black community about male gender representation and most specifically the
bridge between the performatively hyper masculine black male image as staple black male
representation from the late 1960s black cultural movements that echoes contemporaneously. As
an archival object the play assumes an unusual positioning in the repertoire of black gay
S H U I R U P D Q F H I L W W L Q J L Q S H U I H F W O \ Z L W K + D \ G H I Q : K L W H V
my research I found the initial enthu V L D V P I R U W K H S O D \ Z D V Q R W U H S H D W H
because of the rapid changes in the LGBT community from 1979 to a newly published 1997
version of the play. Lost in the wilderness of those intervening years the play gained very little
notoriety while its venue acclaimed at the time of its heyday went into decline to the extent
where it was erased from the Los Angeles landscape. As a student of Performance Studies, it is
not the profundity or banality of what comprises the event but rather that it took place and its

⁸ = groups that @

⁹ u) Performance and/as History Drama Review (50.1) 69.

L P S D F W R Q W K H F R P P X Q L W \ , W L V H Y H Q P R U H L Q W H U H V W L

event provided solvency through which a community theatre was able to stay operative while other little theatres came and went.

Unequivocally, the black community made this play an event through their unflagging support and attendance for over seven years. The experience of the collaborators and audience defined the adapted play to their own needs and levels of comfort. In so doing, certain imbalances

E H F R P H F R Q V H T X H Q W L D O 7 K H 3 H Y H Q W ' G R H V F O D V V L I \ W K

unpacked. Diana Taylor argues ³ 7 K H ³ H Y H Q W ' H Y H Q W ' Verifiable, with protagonistic social actors--also poses problems of objectivity because what gets constituted and recognized as an

³ H Y H Q W ' Z K D W T X D O L I L H V D V Y H U L I L F D W L R Q Z K R H P H U J H V

J H W V D U F K L Y H G L V G H W I N P O L C P O U H A S E , T H E B L A C K C O M M U N I T Y B E C O M E S

the verifier of the piece. The problems of objectivity surfaces when this audience decides the hero is not the black gay man but his father. Furthermore, beyond the recognition of the city as

W K H Y H Q X H E H F R P H V D S O D F H R I K R P D J H W R L W V I R X Q G H U

relationships is along with the venue is almost entirely erased.

7 D \ O R T H I N G L V F D X W L R Q D U \ E X W Q R W G L V P L V V L Y H R I W K H 3 H Y

the verifier, it is incumbent upon the historian to seek for further documentation. Taylor adds,

³ 3 h a p s this is where performance studies, as post disciplinary methodology comes in ²

¹⁰Taylor 69. u

logocentric nature of the artifact. Her easy is sign

repertoire. I use her example to the extent that *Norman is That You?* had no precedent as a phenomenon with the black community considering its sexually variant themes.

LOOXPLQDWLQJ WKDW GLVFLSOLQDU\ EOLQAGHVSARW WKDW K

examination of the play is from a performances studies lens, I would suggest in this case the black community found the performance acceptable enough to assert their agency to 'LQYDGH' D Westside location and attend a play that entertained them, spoke to them if you will, at a site they made a part of their community even though it was actually miles away. Thus the incredible

VRFLRFXOWXUDO PRYHPHQW V KJLHARXIQGHQJWKHSD\TV H[L

WKH ZULWWHQ GRFXPHQWDWLRQ WR DFFRPSDQ\ LW \$V WK

the event remains illustrative of an othered black male performance. As other historic immediacies began to unfold and overtake the black community such as the drug war and increasing incarceration rates amongst young black men, the introduction of the hip hop culture, the transiting community found ways to re-imagine their political space and cultural sensibilities according to their own autonomy.

If the civic leaders were not wholly ready to honor the production and its venue benefactors as heroes of the city, it says a great deal about civic aims in opposition to demographic designs. The play should have been seen to be WKH SLYRWDO RIIHULQJ DV DQ DGGLWLRQ

conversation around same sex attraction but more importantly in the midst of intense social movements, another perspective of black male performativity. Given its prescribed event status the play builds, reinforce and possibly redefined (even if it was momentary) black masculine images different from the image that emerged out of the 1960s. In addition to being an event, the play also acts as a civic marker of homecoming for marginalized communities of blacks and black gays. In looking at Norman I find a layered existence of exiles both in the actual text of the play and for the audience. It is a historic object perhaps invented for the black gay archive but it

¹¹ Taylor 71.

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

Norman is that You? in Nomadic Stages

Norman is that You¹² L V D E R X W 1 R U P D Q & K D P E H U V 1 R U P D Q K D V P R in Dayton Ohio to New York City, presumably to find other gay men, takes a job as a window dresser, and moves into an apartment in the Village with his boyfriend Garson. One day he receives an unexpected visit from his father, Ben Chambers, a dry cleaning business owner whose wife Beatrice has run off with his brother Julian. In the ensuing action, Ben discovers his son is gay, tries to hire a prostitute to prove his son is straight which offends Norman whereby Norman leaves his apartment. While Norman is away, Garson tries to get to know Ben. Soon Beatrice arrives at the apartment having left the brother-in-law. Ben delights in telling Beatrice their son is gay. She is predictably astonished. Norman returns to tell his parents and Garson that K H K D V M R L Q H G W K H 1 D Y \ W R 3 F O H D U K L V K H D G 7 K H S D U H no hard feelings, offer to take Garson back to Dayton with them (he accepts) but their true motive is to marry him off to some of the homosexual boys in their Dayton neighborhood and then find Norman (if he is still a homosexual after his stint in the Navy) a more suitable mate like a doctor or a lawyer.

* D U V R Q ¶ V O L Q H 3 3 , ¶ Y H Q H Y H U E H H Q W R ¶ is W K H in 0 L G Z H V W H D U Q H V W R I K L V O R Y H U ¶ V S D U H Q W V : H D U H Q H Y H U W R O G

¹² Sam Bobick, Norman is that You? Samuel French, Inc. (1969): 81.

RGG WKDW D JD\ ZKLWH PDQ KDV QR LGHD LI KH ZLOO ³OLN

the time of its writing in 1970 (later revised in 1997). In addition to his ignorance of the mid west

DQG LWV WUHDWPHQW RI KRPRMHL[XDOVWKHQ DQG QRZ *D

PDQLSXODWLRQ RI KLV ORYHU¶V SDUHQWV WR UHPRYH KLP

ODXJKDEOH *DUVRQ GRHVQ¶W NQRZ KH LV EHLQJ GXSHG E

their son, Norman. It may seem unbelievable to a contemporary audience the line is supposed to

UHIOHFW KLV FOXHOHVQHV DV VLVV\ FLUFD 2I FRXU

DDFFHSWDQFH DQG UHMFWLRQ RI KRPRVH[XDOLW\ LPSO\LQ

a guide to parents experiencing this dilemma. As an artifact representative of theatre with a gay theme, the play is meant o be exploitive and commercial. An insouciant manner adopted by some

playwrights post Stonewall relegates the play to the lesser known gay themed plays illustrate its

SOD\ZULJKWV¶ VWUXJJOH ZLWK KRZ WR LQWURGXFH KRPRV

was to define gay men for a straight audience using humor as a conscious tactic in the politically charged coming out process. Some plays have a way of insinuating themselves into the fabric of

a community. How this entity becomes a place of commonalities is the subject of many of many different disciplines. Whether it is through a cultural, sociological, historical lens, the

substant LDWLRQ RI WKH GLVSDUDWH HOHPHQWV WKDW XOWLPD

effectively difficult to strictly define. But the performance and performativity of identities within the communal experience can be located in its mediated identifications: art, film and theatre.

7KH ZKLWH SOD\ZULJKWV WRRN DGYDQWDJH RI WKH \$PH

sexual mores stemming from the Sexual Revolution and the emerging gay rights movement (not to mention the sudden introduction of gay themes on the off Broadway stage) to bring together a diverse grouping of Los Angeles into a small theatre venue that provided an expanded pedagogy

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

The play opened on Broadway in January of 1970. The characters were a white family

EXW PRUH VSHFLILFDOO\ D ZKLWH -HZLVK IDPLO\ , PHQWLF

humor is derived by many other shows of its kinds with a similar different situation where the

family has to accept the sudden change in their traditional OLYLQJ 7KH SOD\µV FRPHGL

reminiscent of Neil Simon except unlike Simon, the humor is more situational than character

GULYHQ /RX -DFREL FDVW DV 1RUPDQ¶V IDWKHU %HQ &KD

father roles in such plays as TheDiary of Anne Frank 1RUPDQ¶V PRWKHU %HDWULF

E\ 0DXUHHQ 6WDSOHWRQ DQRWKHU %URDGZD\ OXPLQDU\ N

PRWKHU´ UROHV DW WKLW SHULRG RI KHU DFWLQJ FDUHHU

actors DQG , DVVXPH FRPIRUWDEOH ZLWK WKHLU DFWLQJ FKRL

Besides this was not TheBoys in the Bandr Hair therefore the sensibilities of a middle class

theatre subscriber would not be offended to the extent where they would not re-subscribe.

However Norman closed after 12 performances. Clive Barnes of the NY Times wrote,

³It is strange how tastes and standards change. It seems only yesterday that we had plays such

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

As I researched the history of Showcase Theatre, the theatre was probably one of the first black-owned theatres in Los Angeles that produced plays that were not solely restricted to black issues. *Norman* was the most successful production during its 50 year operation. It is the story of what happens to the theatre when it is taken over by a city agency in tandem with a city elected official lends the narrative history of this less than outstanding comedy more weight than it could have ever dreamed.

¹⁴ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065276/?ref=fn_al_tt_3

7KH SOD\ XVHV WKH LGHD RI WKH ³PDUULDJH´ VROXWLR
quite prescient in its innocent plot ploy; utilizing a heterosexual tradition to basically break up
his relationship with their son. Further irony attests to Norman joining the Navy, probably the
gayest of all of the American military branches. Of course, this is from hindsight and it cannot be
confirmed if the audience caught on to any of this nuance. But if there were gay members of the
audience the irony would not be lost on them.

7KH SOD\¶V DXWKRUV 5RQ & ODUN DQG 6DP %UREULFN EH
VLWFRPHW OLN DQG ³7KH 3DXO /\QGH 6KRZ ´)URP WKH VLPS
clear f the playwrights intended to capitalize on the shifting societal views on homosexuality yet
the play really belongs to the father and his adjustment to the sexual revolution. I have no idea
what the playwrights know about gay men but the gay men in the play resemble the prevailing
stereotype typical of the era. The gay men are out but not particularly activist in their approach to
WKH IDWKHU¶V XQDSIRORUHV forwar in society. Of the reality
RI KLV VRQ¶V OLN EHFRPH
ZD\V ZKLFK ZHDNHQV WKH DFWXDO PRPHQW RI KLV SDUHQRW
VHHQ DV D WUXH XQGHUVDQGLQJ UDWKHU and W gevin PDQLSX
DZD\ IURP KLV VZLVK\ ER\IULHQG 6R WKH SOD\¶V XQGHUO\
parents. Coming on the heels of the Stonewall Rebellion and the Boys in the Band Norman is
that You?only smirked at gays, which is probably why the New York audiences rejected it.

The play might have gone the way of many a bad New York play but it was revived in Paris,
Spain and Scandinavia. If the play suffered in translation, it is not known but its political
stumbling apparently was not as offen VLYH WR D (XURSHDQ DXGLHQFH 7KH S
it to the attention of Nick Stewart. Stewart was given permission by the playwrights to produce

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

Norman is that You received new life in its new skin. The idea to change a casts color in order to revive a play that had limited appeal at its debut was a gambit the theatre and film would

X W L O L] H 7 K H D O O E O D F N - L P U V I L R Q Q R J I 2 W % A C J H M ¶ V I R C S J H U

would become Carmen Jones a starring vehicle for black singer Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte. The all black version of Hello Dolly with Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway would prove a tremendous success spawning a Dolly franchise. Thus the idea to stage a play with a

homosexual as the main character and then to have the character played by a black actor was part inspiration and part gimmick. What is unique in the case of Norman is that the family was cast as

E O D F N Z K L O H W K H O R Y H U U H P D L Q H G Z K L W H 7 K L V Z D V S U R

W K H Z D \ 1 R U P D r o n ¶ w o r t e n N o r m a n c o u l d r e m a i n c l o s e t e d a n d b u t c h w h i l e Garson would be openly gay and effete. The black audience would come only if Norman was

seen as masculine and not seen as having a true relationship with an equal. Besides, the effeminate queen Z D V E H W W H U I R U F R P H G \ 7 K H S O D \ ¶ V H D U Q H V W X

not acceptance could be marginalized by the production because the potential for a successful farce remained very high.

During its extensive stay at the Ebony, the mainstream critics came to see what all of the fuss was about. Los Angeles Times reviewed the play twice. Dan Sullivan thought the black cast gave

W K H S O D \ ³ V S H F L D O F K D U P ´ 6 X O O L Y D Q & U L W L F - R K Q 0 D K

³ Z D U P W K D Q L W I S O R E D E O \ G R H V Q ¶ W G H V H U Y H ´ 0 D K R Q H \ 2

D E R X W W K H S O D \ ¶ V K R P R V H [X D O W K H P H V % R W K F U L W L F V U

As with the New York Times review of the play, the editorial policy of the early 70s was not to

OLQJHU RQ KRPRVH[XDO WKHPHV LI WKH SOD\ GLGQ¶W ZDU

the New York and Los Angeles Times critics was the play was not worth delving too deeply into

1RUPDQ¶V SUHGLFDPHQW

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

ORUH LPSRUWDQWO\ LW JDYH WKH EODFN FRPPXQLW\ D C

The subject of black homosexuality remains a taboo in the black family. The devastating impact of blackface minstrelsy on black manhood was countered with a hyper-masculinity. The celebrity of Mohammed Ali and the Black Panther Party reinforced the performativity of masculinity. Of course there had always been gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender in the black family but the generally it was an assumption that was not discussed. Unlike the closet paradigm was not an option in the black community because of a pervasive religious influence.

A dis- LGHQWLILFDWLRQ ZLWK RQH¶V WUHQHWHGPHQW. With a hostile public sphere. ZDV VW

(YHQ WKRXJK WKH (ERQ\ 6KRZFDVH GLG QRW UHFRJQLJH LW

space became a counter public space, a space out of the normative.

Thus the audience saw a masculine gay black man with a nelly white boyfriend. The juxtaposition did not act a pedagogy for a better understanding of homosexuality but reified some of the prejudices against white homosexuals; white homosexuals seduced black men into their lifestyle, and could not be trusted. The play offered a good role model for a strong black father and just enough of a feminist statement for the independent spirit of the mother. Beatrice

RQ OHDUQLQJ RI KHU VRQ EHLQJ JD\ VD\V ³, DFFHSW LW EX

have been the sentiment the black audience took home.

There would be plenty of effete black gay men Post Stonewall in theater, television and film but at this juncture, black men even gay black men had to be seen as masculine, the top. Why? The end of the 60s saw the accomplishment of blacks through their strenuous efforts in civil

rights activism. Blacks changed their vernacular. It was about power. To be seen as ineffectual

PHDQW \RX ZHUH ZHDN DQ 8QFOH 7RP DQG WKHUHIRUH XVH

LQHIIHFWXDO LV WKH PRVW GDPDJLQJ WKDW RQH FDQ EH L

to be masculine. The performativity of black masculinity was epitomized by the image of the members of the Black Panther Party. If there was any experimenting it was kept very discreet.

Being on the ³GRZQ ORZ´ LV D VDIH SODFH IRU EODFN PHQ EHFDX

on their masculinity. Norman is representative of the down low lifestyle. On FH WKH SOD\¶V ZKL

characters become black, even though not originally written as such, they assume an aura of hyper-masculinity recognized by the black community. However, this does not mean the

LQHYLWDEOH FRQIURQWDWLRQ EHWZHHQ WKH ³ and the PRSKRELF

emergent homosexual movement (Norman and his white lover Garson) can be avoided. Norman is not only gay but in a live-in relationship with a white queen. The play steps around any soul searching for Norman and transfers the anguish to his father. It is not made clear if this inversion

LV WKH SOD\ZULJKW¶V ZD\ RI GLVWDQFLQJ KLPVHOI IURP D

RU LI WKH IDWKHU¶V LQQHU VWUXJJOHV MXVW PDGH IRU EH

coming out process could be defused by exchanging one interior examination for another. The decision to write Norman and the father this way though, does ask the parents in the audience to identify with one or the other. Instead of the father just leaving, he chooses to stay to confront his

VRQ¶V JD\QHVV

Being a closeted black gay men is the central tension in the relationship between Norman and his father. Metaphorically the uneasy relationship is extended into the black audience as the

3 WHDFKDEOH PRPHQW HYLQDWHWKH more Norman pretends he

is straight, the more absurd the situations become and the more relaxed the black audience feels.

In his essay on coming out as a universal strategy for the LGBT movement, Marlon Ross

troubles the idea that the the closeted black gay man is somehow inherently self-hating. Ross¹⁵

argues for black gays and lesbians, the coming out process does not necessarily provide the

agency theorized by white queer activists. The process can be more complicated. Sometimes

within the black family, gay identity is assumed but not discussed. Announcing one is gay would

QRW QHFHVVDULO\FKDQJH RQH¶V LRHQZULWHLRDFWFORVHW

the closet paradigm normalizes one mode of same-sexual identity by marginalizing other

experiences and representation. 7KH TXHVWLRQ WKDW FRPHV WR PLQG WK

WKH JD\ ORYHUV"´ 1RUPDQ DQG *DUVRQ DUH VHW DGULIW D

¹⁵ Marlon Ross, "Coming Out as a Universal Strategy for the LGBT Movement," *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 161.

an intrusive heteronormativity. 1 RUPDQ ¶ V S RHOHG H[LOH SURPLVHV D URRW
FRPH WR « DFFHSW " +LV UDWKHU IOLS GHFLVLRQ WR MRLQ W
the window dresser within him. Garson is being taken away from the safe gay friendly
environment of New York City. When Garson wonders aloud ³: KDW ZLOO , GR LQ 'D\W
Mid-West gays in the audience must have shuddered. Indeed what will he do in Dayton?
Unwittingly, the playwright V ¶ ³ KDSS \ HQ G Locularity P S R M H returns the play
to the its opening scenes of homeless themes but this time it is not the parents who must adjust, it
is the gay men. The two gay men have not won a sense of identity and pride but have been duped
into OHDYLQJ ³ KRPH ' 1RUPDQ WR WAK H DUPE DOG D DUVRQ WR
8QD & KDXGKDXUL VD\V H[LOH F R Q W I D D W V Z L W K KRPH DV ³ E
SV\FKRORJLFD¹⁶ On other words, the film's a further distancing from their gay
LGHQWLW\ WKHQ ZKLFK ZDV WKHLU UHODWLRQVKLS ZLWK
gay man will be erased by the military. Ironically his black identity will be re-enforced by the
racism within the military establishment. 1 RUPDQ ¶ V S D U H Q W I D W K H O N
and companionship with the gay boys in the neighborhood. There is no evidence that the
SOD\ZULJKW ¶ V HYHU FRQVLGHUHG WKRVH ³ ER\ V ' DUH SURE
Dayton. Garson will find himself alone, isolated and away from an established gay community.

Since the play ran for so long, it can be assumed word of mouth was exceptionally
positive. There must have been many spectators who came back again and again. The play ran
congruently with a popular black situation comedy ³ * RRG 7LPHV ' D VSLQRII RI WKH
popular and at times controversial, ³ \$OO LQ WKH)DPLO\ ' ³ * RRG 7LPHV ' GHD
in the black ghetto. The father was played by John Amos who also originated the role of the

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

father in Norman is that You in the re-imagined Los Angeles production. It is perhaps due to

1 R U P D Q ¶ V V X F F H V V W K D W S U R G X F H U 1 R U P D Q / H D U V D Z \$ P R

situation comedy structure, a 1970s Los Angeles audience was comfortable with its unreality.

Indeed this enduring format would catapult many situation comedies into ratings paradise

because the American audience was somehow entranced with serious issues in their own lives

being lampooned with mediated images. However, the reality check was already occurring about

them.

The Ebony Showcase Theatre

There is a video on YouTube profiling a Los Angeles cultural landmark where black theatre history was made. The founder of the Ebony Showcase Theatre, Nick Stewart, looks out

at the camera in 1997 America as the interviewer questions him about a space that meant so

much to so many theater practitioners but in particular, black theatre artists, in a weary voice as

if recalling glory days that seem to be dreamlike and yet very real.¹⁷ 7 K H F L W \ ¶ V G L V U H J D U G

disrespect insinuates itself into his short monologue on the theatre as a place of where black

actors could work but also a school of acting training for young people of color as well as a

venue for live musical performances.

Part of the success of the 1960s Black Arts Movement was in securing funding for black theatre. Though this would be a two edged sword in that the funding would be generous only for

a period of a few years. Establishing these theatres in black communities was inspired by black

cultural activists. Writing in the early 1970s about the number of black theatres in California,

Margaret Wilkerson tells us, "W.E.B. DuBois' insistence that a black theatre must be "near us"

¹⁷ - O
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgAnRIGCy7A>>

YouTube 10 Apr 2013 <

has become an important tenet of these groups. The transformation of the drab, deteriorating buildings of the inner cities into functional and attractive theatres is basic to the theatre experience and is part of its magic. The building itself becomes a symbol of resourcefulness, ingenuity, a place of contact, of reinforcement and hope-in themselves, significant images to project ¹⁸ Many black arts groups took advantage of federal funding and were able to secure space for their ambitions. Sometimes there were dance academies, art studios or acting workshops where theatre pieces were put together. It is out of this atmosphere of change and solidarity within the black arts community that the Ebony theatre was able to thrive. Outside of the immediate black community where the Watts Theatre project flourished, the Ebony became the outlying space dedicated to black theatre practitioners. The major element that defined the play as an event derives from its longevity in active production. This means that the play excited enough of an enthusiastic response to support the theatre space monetarily. This is not as insignificant as it might seem as the funding for small venues that had seen federal funding in the late 1960s saw that funding evaporate by the mid 1970s.¹⁹ Nick and Edna Stewart were able to EX\ WKH SURSHUW\ WKDW EHFDPH WKH (ERQ\ 6KRZFDVH 7KH celebrity and money, in 1950.

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

¹⁸ U... # TDR 16.4 (Dec 1972):28

¹⁹ U... African American Performance and Theater History (Oxford University Press, 2001).63.

building a theatre company let alone sustain the company with the required equity pay. However,

6 WHZDUW ¶ V ILOP FDUHHU SURYLGHG HQWXULKs Rneds VDODU\ I
to realize his dreams. His business acumen provided the foundation for a focused effort to start a
black performance venue. When his film career seemed that it had ebbed, he pursued work in
television where he hit his stride in a controversial radio show adapted for television called Amos
and Andy.

Stewart was part of the cast of Amos and Andy which ran from 1951-1953. Originally the
VKRZ ¶ V WLWOH FKDUDFWHU V ZKR ZHUH VXSSRVHG WR EH E
voice. Once aired the show was roundly denounced by member of the black community and
NAACP as racist. Yet, Stewart was able to earn more money than he had ever made in his movie
roles. He began to look for property where he could start a theater in the black community. At
that time, the few black theaters in Los Angeles produced strictly black dramas and comedies.
Black theater producers could not always VHF XUH WKH ULJKWV WR SOD\ V RXW V
category. Stewart opened the Ebony Showcase Theater with the aim of breaking through that
barrier to bring a wide array of nontraditional drama and comedy to the black community. In an
RQOLQH OHWWHU ODXGLQJ KHU KXVEDG ¶ V VHULRXV LQWHQ
community, Edna Stewart says:

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

Bricuse) and "Lost of the Stars," the author, Maxwell Anderson, visited their production in 1955.²⁰

Stewart was able to get the rights to these diverse plays by going directly to the playwright for their permission. Interesting in their winter season of 1955, *Tea and Sympathy* was included with *A Streetcar Named Desire* the Stewarts were not hesitant to produce plays with a homosexual subtext. Despite the ecumenical repertoire the playhouse became a staple in the black community adding jazz evenings featuring prominent music artists of the day. With the help of his wife, Edna, Stewart started a dramatic academy for black youngsters. The success of the academy received Y H G Q D W L R Q D O D W W H Q W L R Q 7 K H D F D G H P \ ¶ V J U D Q W P R black community during turbulent times of the Civil Rights Movement.

Of course, Norman ¶ V V X F F H V V K D V W R E H S D U W L D O O \ F U H G L W H C property buying laws for minorities in Los Angeles after World War II. The city was notoriously U H G O L Q H G L Q W K H V D Q G V V X E M H F W W e r y S R Z H U I X O ethnic group had their own neighborhood which they confined. In *City of Quartz* Mike Davis Z U L W H V 3 8 Q W L O W K H 6 X S U H P H & R X U W I L Q D O O \ U X O H G D J D K R P H R Z Q H U V J U R X S V K D G D P S O H W D O F W L R O L Q W K H O D Z ' surrounding the theater was the perfect blend of liberal Jewish white and black bourgeoisie. Washington Boulevard is one of those long stretches of street that runs east and west, from the ocean through downtown Los Angeles and beyond to the oldest part of the city. As one travels from the east to the west, the neighborhoods become increasingly affluent. To the south is Addams Boulevard which had been the home of many famous black Angelinos who owned

²⁰ <http://www.amosandy.com/Review%20Articles/Letter%20by%20Edna%20Stewart.htm>

²¹ Davis 182.

Craftsman homes. The theatre sat amidst a Q X P E H U R I μ E O D F N E X V L Q H V V H V L Q
Washington Boulevard. The neighborhood might have been called Crenshaw adjacent which
would ultimately become the locus of the upper and middle class black community. Set in the
Y R U W H [R I W K H o u s e a n d W a t t s p o p u l a t i o n s , t h e E b o n y a t t r a c t e d a d e m o g r a p h i c t h a t
was had been heal at arms length from each other by cultural and social and racist politics so that
their fraternization would ultimately form allies. A black policeman who ran for mayor in the
early 1970s Tom Bradley would use this coalition to his advantage and would re-elected mayor
R Y H U W K H Q H [W W Z H Q W \ \ H D U V 6 X F K Z D V W K H V L J Q L I L F D Q

Fragmentation of the narrative marking boundaries becomes more important in the
evolution of the environs that facilitated a racial and cultural mixing at the theatrical venue is
Z K D W ' H & H U W H D X Z R X O G U H I H U W R D V ³ D Q D U U D W L Y H D F W
unitary, thus continues to develop where frontiers and relations with space abroad are
F R Q F H ²² U R O H G
This diversity of ethnicities, a disguised seemingly heterogeneous space
allowed for a number of new narrations to emerge. Unlike the Watts space which held strictly to
the guidelines of the Black Arts Movement, one of the tenets being their art was strictly for the
black audience, location put the exiles in a collective space where the reality check could play
itself out to a polyvalent outcome. The Ebony provided a space for blacks with a new freedom of
mobility. It was tantamount to going uptown. The possibilities of expanding culturally were now
available to some members of the black community. The neighborhood was in a comfortable
location for blacks and whites to mix. So if there were gays in the mix so much the better.

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

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

SOD\¶V UHGXFwLYH ~~Deaf~~ ~~the~~ ~~black~~ ~~community~~ ~~to~~ ~~date~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~well~~ XWVL
contradictory nature of the black community embrace and rejection of the homosexual subject.

(YHQ WKRXJK WKH SOD\¶V VHWwLQJ DFWV DV KRPH IRU 1RU
without of his own identified community. There is a resemblance that extrapolates in a post

FRORQLDO UHGGLQJ RI EODFNV LQ WKH GLDVSRUD)DQRQ
whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have

become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little sustenance. At
ODVW , KDG EHHQ UHFRJQL²³ H)GQRQ¶V QR[ORQJWHDUJRURWL

black existence in their marginalized positionality is an apt a QDORJ\ WR 1RUPDQ¶V VXGG
visibility. Though it may be reductive in its approach, the double casting creates a hybrid of

heterosexual representation. His blackness, homosexuality and I would venture to say a
conservative attachment to his upbringing which decides more in favor of commonality with his

black audience than the play originally intended.

Furthermore, as the audience had to travel outside of their designated Los Angeles
cityscape boundaries to participate in yet another show of solidarity while sitting in a Westside
theatre albeit a small theatre. The idea of movement beyond their borders is an exhilarating and
terrifying venture for any marginalized group. So the power of oneness and the poetic idea of the

H[LOH¶V DPELHQW XQRQLDVO¶QGLQDWR IKDKH WRH OHJDO SR
the ghetto is a momentary escape. The theatre becomes their theatre, their home away from

KRPH ,W GRHVQ¶W PDWwHU WKH GLVWDQFH RU LQ WKLV F
that the play becomes the *tckuqp"fovgvtg* that undergirds a liberatory gesture. It is a

phenomemological movement of emotion, timing and aesthetic ideal.

²³ Fanon, Frantz. Black

Besides the fact that Norman is gay, his conformist representation would have been acceptable to the black audience. It would allow them to feel comfortable in his presence and to relate to the closeted situation as the pragmatic choice for black men who were not effeminate. That his SDUWQHU ZKRP KH VHHPV WR ³OLNH´ LV DV P~~ix~~FEK DQ RGGLW would have been as equally comfortable. There had been some engagement with the homosexual ³OLIH VW\OH´ LQ ZULWLQJV E\ (OGULGJH &OHDYHU DQG WKH familiar trope in the black community. The likes of James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin and their effete mannerisms had been cause for homophobic alarm and warranted straight black meant to comment. Their commentary was more than not often to disapprove to disparage the black homosexual as being seduced by white western decadence. Among their arguments was that WKHUH ZDV QR ZRUG LQ WKH \$IU³⁴LFQG W~~B~~QV XZDUH DRZK E~~M~~HP R disease. So the idea of Norman being with an obvious fairy was both humorous and something to avoid. As long as the white homosexual remained the source of the joke, the black audience could relax.

Lastly, but maybe most important was the element of humor that made the play an enjoyable respite from the tense quotidian existence of ghetto life. That might seem to be facile but the laughter elicited by a simple play that asked for the black family to remain together even in the face of homosexual choices was again a new experience for the black audience. As the urban drams had reached satiation, the lightness that Norman proffered was welcomed. The SOD\¶V KXPRU WKRXJK LW PD\ QRW VHHP WR EH ³EODFN´ KX originary Jewish family. The humor comes out of marginalization and despair. But it is also

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

forthright in its approach, telling like it is ² a catchphrase in the black community in the 1960s.

6 R W K H W K H V H H P L Q J O \ D E V X U G G p F R U * D U V R Q ¶ V T X H H Q \

man who is discovered by his parents (particularly his father) sets in motion a theatrical experience for black people that they obviously reveled in.

Los Angeles Black/Gay

Neighborhoods around the location of the Ebony theatre on Washington Boulevard had a nascent black gay community. Within a 5 mile radius of the theatre the black gay disco Jewels Catch One would become a major black gay community center on Pico Boulevard and almost around the corner from the Ebony on Jefferson Boulevard, the Minority AIDS Project²⁵ would be established a block away on Jefferson Boulevard to answer the needs of the black and Latino communities and the AIDS epidemic. It was at the height of the disco era where gay men and particularly black gay men found a unique opening into a reality check of their own. Proximity becomes vital in the comfort zone of the marginalized. As with the more formal boundaries of the ghetto in South Los Angeles, the black gay community removing itself from these strict red lining realities and additionally from the white gay community of West Hollywood where the discrimination against them was more pronounced than in the black community, Norman's unique placement would find itself within a few years of its popularity, a black constituency in its midst.

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

²⁵ @ · U k · · · · · # " · · · @ " · · † u · · · · ·
become a gay anthem. Later Car Bean would be ordained a bishop in the Episcopal Church and founded the Minority AIDS Project in 1985.

prominent in the early 20th century.²⁶ It is on the backdrop of shifting neighborhoods at the intersection of feminist and LGBT movements on the heels of racialized boundaries that a black couple from the edges of the entertainment business took a chance and debuts a work with the concerted effort was initiated to organize against LAPD harassment. The crusade was mostly organized around white gays. Gays of color were present but communities discouraged traversing community boundaries. The common problem for all gays would be in the area of meeting other members of their persuasion outside of their homes.

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

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

²⁶ In their *Gay L. A.* references to parties given by black gay entertainment agents as early as the 1930s. pp 45-46

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

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

However, in 1972, when Jewel Thais- : L O O L D P V R S H Q H G W K H F L W \ ¶ V I L U V W E disco, Jewel ¶ Catch One. The subaltern black gay and lesbian community now had their own place to congregate. The Catch One is located on Pico Boulevard to the east of Crenshaw Boulevard; the dividing line between eastside and Westside. So while a play about a closeted black gay man plays to sell out audiences to the west of Crenshaw, a black gay disco thrives to the east.

, Q V W D J L Q J W K H S O D \ D W W K L V S D U W L F X O D U L Q W H U V H F W L home and exile dichotomy placement of black identity politics at the end of the Black Power Era. It might be assumed the radicalized approach to living in America was the paradigm guide left as the legacy of that movement but I would differ in that the theatre of black America became more black identified as it sought answers to quest L R Q V R I D K R P H D V G H U L Y H G I U R P 3 conflict with this desire was a real outside knowledge of American history (a history that would

cherry pick amongst its more outstanding events to emphasize a growing homogenization) while the theatre retained much of its African American cultural identity from the Black Arts Movement. The subsequent rise of the play has much in common with its demise of the Black Power movement. A different lens on the black community offering empowerment but in the course of events the power is stripped away and the displacement or exile provides an intersecting commonality. Una Chaudhuri reflects on exile in the poeticized 19th century sense as the plays of Chekhov and Strindberg provide. Norman offers a contemporized illustration of

H[LOH DV WKH SODFH RI IXUWKHU NQRZOHGJH DQG NQRZLQ
FDQRQ ZHUH XQDEOH WR DFFHVV &KDXGKXUL TXRWHV (GZD

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

Nomad Norman and Exiles as Audience

, ZHLJK WKH ³QR Egidio the inerrant RUPDQ normative black male image and even the very few black gay male characters on stage during this period. There are some important differences that stand out. For sure the play is stereotypical in its portrayals of gay men but unlike another black gay character of the same era, namely Bernard IURP 0DUW & URZOH\¶ The Boys in the Band 1RUPDQ LV LQ D UHODWLRQVKLS ~~ZbrWk~~ D ZKLW is That You?²⁷ sought to capitalize on a lifestyle that was suddenly in conversation. The play he wrote though failed in one venue and for one demographic oddly found renewed vitality and resilience in another, once it was WUDQVIRUPHG WR 'IDNEDYDNNH? VlnW XDWLRQ

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

resonance with a community that had been redlined into a ghetto that was for all intent and purposes viewed as hostile territory by most white Angelenos. However, with the playhouse where Norman was produced was the space between and betwixt ethnic and cultural and sexual orientation differences. In fact this area of Los Angeles was on the verge of becoming an extended black neighborhood ZKHUH EODFN JD\V ZRXOG ILQG D SODFH W proximity of the play and the disco Catch One.

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

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

as new strategies of assimilation from the black and black gay communities, This chapter on hyper masculine performativity and black gay performance asks if the past notions of black masculinities was altered by this communal theatre experience and if so how was this newfound understanding of Afro queerness as reality check.²⁸

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

²⁸ Harry Elam, k # Critical Theory and Performance. (University of Michigan Press, 2007) 173.

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

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

Black and white humor did manifest as black comedy in the 1970s. Norman Macdonald's comedy went beyond what could be accomplished by a black comedian in the 1960s. His brand of comedy became the envy and epitome of what every comedian, regardless of ethnicity wanted to achieve.

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

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

Power movements as the nation-state manipulated its way back into the control of black live. As their exiled existence re-established itself, the black comedian found material in the waywardness and acted as the wayfarer during this pivotal ear. Boundaries were redrawn. In a sense the absolute rejection of the Western aesthetic manifested by the Black Arts movement which sought to liberate black artists for the black community had opened a debate amongst African American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status performativity gained a distinct examination and judgment of homosexuality from black humor that was strictly at odds with the humor of deception from Norman is That You?

The producers of Norman were not allowed to make changes to the script. The black cast was acquiescence of mouth of the black actor. The play could not celebrate being gay as many of the gay comedies of black audience that transported them into an atmosphere of the forbidden where they could laugh at the unimagined reality the play actually did purport.

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

²⁹ U . . . 'h 'K . . . " gayness, *Manifest Faggotry*. He cites Harper in an interrogation of black homophobia particularly as black subjectivity becomes more and more mediatized. (p. 50)

the narrative is over the top and not to be seen as realistic, the premise asserts a plausible

V F H Q D U L R J L Y H Q W K H S O D \ ¶ V O L P L W H G R E M H F W L Y H V D Q G

coming out play representative of the period that focuses not on the closeted gay man coming out but his parents. Norman concerns itself with the destruction of the family through homosexual

relationship and the introduction of adultery as counterpart. In creating a once Jewish son, now played as a black gay son, the play is a response to the only other high profile gay play namely

The Boys in the Band 7 K H D Q J V W R I W K H K R P R V H [X D O ³ O L I H V W \ O H Z

scene in 1971, Norman becoming a black family makes for a combination of sexualized themes

D Q G D X G L H Q F H D N L Q W R W K H G H I L Q L W L R Q R I W K H ³ U H D O L V

Reality Check and the Black Community

What elements would could there be in a relation to the event and the reality check? The

L G H D R I D ³ U H D O L W \ F K H F N ' D V S U R S R V H G E \ \$ U A L F D Q \$ P H U

continuity in African American experience through pivotal historic events that galvanized the black community into a confrontation with its past, a confrontation that leads to an active

transformation in social and civic status. These events were so shocking in nature that the

response though initially resonated with the black community cause a chain reaction amongst

other populations. Elam describes a realit \ F K H F N D V ³ D t r a u m a t i c a l y u p t w e K t e W

E D O D Q F H E H W Z H H Q W K H U H ³⁰ D i o n p Q G [W R S i g n i f i c a n t i n t h e Q W D W L R Q

electronic age roughly beginning in the 1950s with the widespread use of television as images became repeatable at a much more accelerated rate than the culture was accustomed to.

Addressing the enduring injustice for blacks in America, he begins his thesis on reality check

with the murder of fourteen year old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955. Till was kidnapped by

³⁰ Elam 173.

white men while visiting relatives in Mississippi. A northern boy who knew nothing of the strict white/black social codes of the South, he was made to answer to the naively uttered endearment to a white woman at a local store. His horrendous torture and death prompt his mother to leave his casket open at his funeral so those who wished to pay their respects could see the

XQLPDJLQDEOH YLROHQFH RI KLV PXUGHU \$ EODFN PDJDJL
shocked and horrifie G WKR VH ZKR VDZ LW 7KLV NLQG RI HOHFWURQL
premise. It was the reality check for black people in the moment where the racial conversation was on the brink of becoming much more expanded beyond the bounds of decorum and formality in its traditional strategy for a more assertive activism in the black community.

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

An act of senseless violence, this reality check was seen as the final straw in a lawless treatment of black men, leading to a heightened sense of the erosive societal bombardment against black maleness which in turn found a prescriptive antidote in the proliferation of the virtuous black male spearheaded by the Ci YLO 5LJKWV PRYHPHQW¶V DFFHOHUDWHG PR
church and its leaders. As the 1970s opened upon new possibilities of assimilationism, the black community sought ways to improve their lives as promised by the anew attitude of black pride. As the tactical movement of visibility became more and more embedded in a mainstream American culture, the idea amongst blacks was to take full advantage of this new found

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

The question is, what could a play like *Norman is that You?* offer the black community considering its themes of sexual variance were still an unexplored area of early 1970s mainstream black theatre? Elam says, ³¹As reality checks induce a series of performances, they also produce new audiences and audiences within audiences. They function in dichotomous,

V \ P E L R W L F L Q Y H U V L R Q V R I Z L W Q H V V L Q J ³¹ D I C C S I D U F W L F L S D W
an advantage P L J K W E H I R X Q G L Q T H W K H S Q D I T V M L H W W H O J
the case of *Norman* and *Garson*, it is an apartment assumed W R E H I X U Q L V K H G E \ * D U V R
stereotypical white gay aesthetic but something the black audience would have found familiar
being their homes were either decorated in a subdued manner but decorated with the aesthetic
tastes of a emerging middle class sensibility. I mean the overly decorated gay home shared by
the two gay men is scripted this way as being comedic but black homes with the money to
decorate w shared a common need to be effusive in their new found wealth. The dandyish
approach then is something to laugh at but holds a familiar setting for those who thought of
themselves as able to have these things too. It would not have escaped a black man gay or
straight as their home represented a step up in class even though theatrically the audience can see
the tasteless decor as probably white and gay. I cannot emphasize this enough as *Norman* is a
play about the middle class whether performed by a white or black cast: middle class status had
been so disparaged by black playwrights of the 1960s as being bourgeois that seeing a black man
in a setting that represented his progress which surrogated the progress of all blacks was an asset.

The 1960s Impact on Black Gay Male Image

³¹ Elam 179.

The arc of black masculinities from the early 1960s to the late 1960s is a remarkable study in transformation. If the decade began with the s probing but still sanitized portrayals of black men sought more nuanced renderings but were firmly rooted in the normative. Differences in urban settings were generally the interested memes pervasive throughout the period. The confrontation between old and new image was immediate and dominated the dramaturgy of black playwright (mostly black men) until the end of the decade. However, the impression was intense and reverberant. The plays themselves U D Q J L Q J I U R P / R U A B A I S Q in the Q V E H U U Sun(1959) where the black male assertiveness is seen to be corrosive from within the heavily matriarch S D U D G L J P W R A P e r o n i e s i n O a k C o u n t y M e n (1965) where again the audience is confront e with generations of black men who are seen to experience their lves circumscribed by a need for solidarity are repetitive themes that teleologically claim this new paradigm.

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

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

Consequently, the Black Arts Movement had a pronounced and resilient effect on the black male image particularly the place of the black sissy in black theatre. It appeared at the time of the convergent Black Civil Right and Black Power movements. Its aim was to found a new black theatre with a consciousness of race pride and a look to the black liberation projects in the African diaspora. However in keeping with the aims of this chapter, there are significant difference between the black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. The main element of the Black Power meant to exploit the white media while the Black Arts Movement meant to disengage with the while media entirely. This is to say, the black Arts movement was to reject European Western aestheticism for black aesthetics³². Amongst its aims was to fashion a black theatre dramaturgy for a black audience where the rejection of European ideas was basis by which to deem the new black theatre endeavors as authentic or lacking in its capaciousness. The works of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins are prominent voices in the movements. Their plays such as the *Dutchman*(1964) and *I qkpø"C"Dwhhcnq* (1966) respectively were innovative in that they replaced the 3assimilationist 1 H J UCRW'1950s black drama with an assertive black male, sexually confident bordering on the hyper masculine, a hero for the Black Power movement. The plays themselves were urban in setting and delved into the real life experiences of blacks who had been subject to generations of discrimination and racism. These plays were decidedly male orientated and heteropatriarcal in their subjectivity. A performativity of masculinity was the dominant image and anything other than heternormative was either ridiculed or shown to be the

³² Sell: 56.

ZHDNHU FKRLFH ZLWK GHYD The Dwell (1964). U% D X D M/D V X S F O D % D B R D

homosexual behavior amongst young black men even more homophobic than his play The

Baptism Z K L F K I H D W X U H V D F K D U D F W H U V L P S O \ F D O O H G ³ + R P R

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

This kind of politically identified and intrapersonal plays focused on the black experience was applicable to comedies as well. In the early 1970s the black comedian was just beginning to find exposure on television. But as with the relatively small number of black actors working in any frequency or high visibility, the recognizable black comedians were as limited. However in the early 1970s there were popular black comedies in the theatre such as Charlie / 5 X V V F I V O ¶ V on the Black Hand Side³³ 5 X V V H G O D I V E S O I D b. A black father saw a change in the black family dynamic where the wife is outspoken and the teen age children are rebelling against

³³ k humor in depicting a dysfunctional black family.

tradition. Though the play was not a huge success outside of the black community, the black audience found themselves in the changing structure of their family where the old tropes of the 3 IDPLO\` EHLQJ WKH YLUWXR XV GRPDLQ IRU WKH EODFN PD and problematic but presented with humor could be the conduit through which their community could thrive. Again the idea of seeing RQH VHOI RQ VWDJH VSHDNLQJ RQH ¶V understanding the irony and absurdity in transgressive behavior within the black family structure was new and vital at this juncture.

But in the theatre of color, patronage is responsible for a production ¶V ER[RIILFH 7KH black community overwhelmingly VXSSRUWHG that 1RUPDQ even years. In their obvious fascination with the subject matter, the black audience found no aversion to promoting the new ideas espoused by this simplistic comedy. In the case of a mediated performance what becomes acceptable might depend on the community as a whole to absorb and then adapt to the change thus making the experience transformational or the community can accept a faction of the change and slowly allow it to seep into its DNA. With theatrical performance and the black community the situation becomes much more representative of the latter than the former.

There is an artifact held at the Los Angeles Library in downtown Los Angeles that is evidence of a play that was the longest running play in the history of the city. Norman is that you came to Los Angeles. The artifact is a program from the play. It is light blue in color, probably printed at a local printing shop in different colors over its seven year run. It is nothing detailed, not withering with age as might benefit an ancient portfolio that requires gloves for handling.

1R WKH SURJUDP LV IXQFWLRQDO WKHDWUH QDPH SOD\ W name. The completely non ornamental approach is adopted so as not to call attention to the

SOD\ ¶V VXEMHFW RI D 1RUPDQ EHLQJ D EODFN JD\ PDOH 7H

curiosity circa the early 1970s with theater that cast black actors in conjunction with a new awareness

Norman on Film

, I 1 R U P D Q ¶ V U H D O L V W L F V W D J H U H Q G H U L Q J R I Z K D W Z I lifestyle, then its film version solidified and reified the in inauthenticity. 1 R U P D Q ¶ V I L O P K L V W should be put into historic context. The early 1970s was a bleak time for Hollywood. Television had taken brought a devastating end to eh V W X G n o p q r s t u v w x y z of \$ P H U L e r t y u i o p q r s t u v w x y z life. But with the end of the 1960s and a black audience entering the middle class, there was now another demographic that could provide the wealth the studios were lacking. Thus, the studios found that black themed films could fill the lacunae in their profits, So with the first black film that revolved around urban life, the super black cop was born with the film Superfly The film was a unqualified success with blacks and white. There followed a stream of blaxploitation films that featured black men winning in a white society. If drama did so well at the box office, why not comedies? In 1976 the black comedy Car Wash featured a black gay man as one of the characters. Norman is that You was produced in the same year. Judging from the a openly black sissy in the Car Wash as a character that brought no backlash, the white sissy in a relationship with a closeted black man would be twice as funny.

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

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

7KH ILOP LV GLUHFWHG E\ WHOHYLVLRQ FRPHG\ YHWHU
3/DXJK ,Q´ ZRXOG FKDQJH WHOHYLVLRQ FRPHG
1RUPDQ V VFULSW ZDV DOZD\ V WKLQ EXW WKH LPSRUWDQF
Stonewall films representing gay men albeit a stereotypical depiction. However, like the play, the film retains its homophobic stance. There is no hint of sex between Norman and his lover, not even a kiss. At one point they put their arms around each other like buddies. Critics found the movie unfunny and lacking, leering in its knowingness. In his 1976 review of the film, New York Times film critic Pauline Kael, substitutes a black family for a Jewish family. It helps matters not at all. It is a series of bad jokes about homosexuality, strung upon trite situation comedy and collapsing into what is
PHDQW WR EH DQ XSOLIWLQJ PHVVDJH DERXW SHRSOH EHL
1HZ <RUN 7LPHV IHHOV LW KDV WR IXUWKHU HGLWRULDOLJH
"Norman is rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"). It is all talk and no action, but the film's message is that if your children grow up to be homosexuals, don't worry; and presumably this is
ZKDW WKH JXLGDQF The warning seems particularly undeni
supposedly liberal newspaper. The UHYLHZV WHQG WR PHQWLRQ WKH SURGX
shortcomings rather than a film which treats homosexuals fairly.

This begs the question is any kind of visibility even to the point of misrepresentation is more desirable than invisibility? Tactical decisions such as visibility at any cost leading to agency have been adopted by minoritarian groups in their struggle for recognition and equality. De Certeau
VD\ V D WDFWLF´ « KDV QR SRZHU WR NHHS WR LW VHOI DW

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

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

³ 1 R U P D Q ' W K H E O D F N V D Q H V W Z K L W H U O R R Y M H D Q G D U R U R Q D L V W K

³⁴ De Certeau. 37

repertoire of effete mannerisms. So the film is progressive and retrogressive at the same time. But its transgressive nature cannot be shunted aside. Through the medium of film comedy, gays are definitely seen as Other in contrast to the films heterosexuals but their otherness makes them a curiosity. The film even includes Tamara Dobson, the star of a very popular blaxpoitation film *Soothe My Soul* (1972). Her performances in the movie. Dobson is made to look like a pre- RuPaul drag queen. She is never condescending to either Norman or Garson. As a prostitute, the ultimate outsider, she seems to understand the complications. Ironically, she is the moral center of the movie, telling each of the characters implicitly in order to be happy one must be true to oneself. But it is to Wayland and Madam that the film belongs.

Wayland retained some of the prejudices of his Midwestern upbringing. By objecting to Garson staying with Flowers while he bides his time in telling his father that he is gay. Here show business is through his main puppet/alter ego Madame, a forerunner of Dame Edna, a grand old girl in the tradition of larger than life movie divas such as Bette Davis but with a raucous sense of humor and the temerity to say what many other will not. The two steal the picture. Why? It is there in the movie. Garson takes Ben Chambers to see their nightclub act and he thoroughly enjoys it. It is important to note Redd Foxx came from the Chitlin Circuit, the string of available clubs for blacks during the segregated nightclubs days of the 40s and 50s. His act was never the lovable curmudgeon.

E\ PDQ\ EODFN FRPLFV GXULQJ WKL V SHULRG 6R WR VHH K

Madam routine is a filmic moment of black humor meeting gay humor. The movie says the two are compatible. Without these scenes the film would have very little real humor at all. It is this universal laughter that gave blacks a way in into the American society, gays would utilize the same strategy.

' HVSLWH WKH KXPRU a clear adherence to the signification of

masculinity. The film collaborators use the military as the sign of masculine stability to return

WKH ZRUOG WR QRUPDOF\ KDV 1RUPDQ HQOLVWLQJ LQ WKH

drafted, presuming o Q KLV ZD\ WR 9LHWQDP WR 3FOHDU' KLV KHDG

RI WKH PLOLWDU\ QRW DFFHSWLQJ KRPRVH[XDOV EXW 1RUP

HYHU\WKLQJ ' ,V WKL V WKH ILUVV PHQWLRQ RI D IXWXUH P

not have felt unsure about their orientation could have taken that message to mean they could

H[SXQJH WKDW IHHOLQJ E\ PLOLWDD\ ' GQV\ KHRKIPDQ O H PXULV

distances himself from any gay life by joining an organization that will never let him forget who

he really is if he steps outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity. Homosexuality was just

EHFRPLQJ D VXEMHFW WKDW FRXOG EH GLVFXVVHG RSHQO\

leaves very little discussion for anything approaching agency for either black gay men or the gay community as a whole.

It is never quite clear if the film is merely a vehicle for Redd Foxx or has any other deeper social issues on its mind. The real and the representational are more pronounced on screen because of the proximity. As we look at the film, the comfortable ambiguity of it all

VHGXFHV XV 3/LNH WKHDWUH PHPRU\ LV FRQVWUXFWHG ' .

of selecting, repeating, forgetting² willfully as well as unconsciously² and reassembling

QDUUD³⁵WLYHJHIRUH ZHGRQ¶W DVN DQG ZHGRQ¶W WHOO :

film is that it is testament to a society ambivalent about homosexuals and the gay movement.

Norman is that You² archives a moment in pre-AIDS gay history. In writing the historic narrative of the play, the film defines a specific place gays occupied in pop culture in 1976. It is as if in the trajectory, some things must happen first in order to have other things happen.

Therefore it is not a stretch to say Norman is that you² anticipates Brokeback MountainAs the profile of the GLBT movement rose, so did the art that represented them

Decline of the Ebony

7KH XQVXFFHVVI XO ILOP YHUVLRQ RI ³1RUPDQ´ DOV

though the play would last another two years. But it would be the last profitable play for Nick

DQG (GQD 6WHZDUW :KLOH UHVHDFKLQJ ³1RUPDQ¶V WUDM

(GQD 6WHZDUW GHVFULELQJ KHU KXWEDG¶V FDUHHU DQG

7KHDWUH 7KH OHWWHU ZDV ZULWWFKHDWFKHDW¶W HGLVWED

WKH HSLFHQWHU RI WKH :DWW¶V 5LRW RI NHSW LW IUR

community was burned down in the rage of the rebellion and thus property was confiscated by

WKH FLW¶V 5HGHHORSPHQW \$JHQF\ /\QGRQ -RKQVRQ¶V D

community to rebuild the area. Stewart could not partake of the money that flowed into the community at this time yet he could procure funds for the youth academy. The Ebony Showcase building is thus one of the cultural touchstones of Los Angeles that where the landscape was rapidly changing.

³⁵ Richards, Sandra. What is to be Remebered?: u ' 8 'o '# le-) Critical Theory and Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 85.

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

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

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

Los Angeles is home to many equity houses. All of the theatres scramble for city funding. It is clear what happened to the Stewarts is not unique. There is precedence for sweeping away the old. The city has a reputation for a concerted absorption of property if there is not a great deal of funding to keep the property maintained and intact. The Stewarts had the renown but not the

PRQH\ 7KH FLW\ UHPRYHG WKH ³EDG´ EXLOI³⁶ QH LQ VSLWH
FRXOG ERDVW D IRUPHU FRXQFLO PHPEHU¶V QDPH ,W LV D
E\ %HQMDPLQ DV D ³«PHDQV WR VHL]H KROG RI D P HPRU\ D

Those in power control the narrative from that point on. It is why the Stewarts have been erased

IURP WKH FLW\¶V P HPRU\ EDQNV

In Praise of Exiles

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

Not incidentally but the next high profile black gay character I became aware of occurred

LQ WKH SURGXFWL³⁷ The Character ¶ Was Miss Rog,
D VLVV\ EODFN PDQ ZKR ZDV WKH PRUH LQ OLQH ZLWK 1RU

iconographic butch gay man. The play is a series of sketches that parody black theatre tropes

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *U* h = Illuminations: Essays and Reflections. (Schocken, 1969) 255.

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

VXFK DV WKH EODFN PDWULDUFK\ LV VHHQ DV WKH IRXQG DWL
ZKHUH WKH EODFN PDWULDUFK\ LV VHHQ DV WKH IRXQG DWL
WR 0LVV 5RM´ LV :ROIH JLYLQJ YRLFH WR WKH EODFN JD\ P

apologize for being black and queer. I recall the audience reaction (mostly black audience members) rustling their programs and tampering down their jovial responses to Miss Roj while they are confronted with the reality check in a very different way than Norman. This is a real black gay man who is telling secrets about being his experiences in the black community and the white gay community. To give some context to the performance, the AIDS epidemic was well into its fifth year. The devastation was a daily encounter with very little to be done medically or financially. The toll on the black gay community was just being acknowledged by the white press. As the number of infected and dying black men exposed the number of black men who had been on the down low or not identifying as homosexual, AIDS now confronted the black

IDPLO\¶V GHQLDOV ZLWK XQFRPIRUWDEOH WUXWKV 3HUKDS
UHFDOO WKH ³HYHQW´ EHFDXVH LW ZDV P\ ILUVW HQFRXQW

back to power and the internalized open secret of my own sexuality exposed. I was also fearful that I had contracted the virus and was suddenly faced with many internalized emotions even while Wolfe eased me through the lengthy monologue with humor and pathos. The audible sigh of relief (or maybe it was just my imagination) as Miss Roj ended her gospel in retrospect was the black audience wrestling with what would become a pivotal event in our collective reaction to our homosexual family members whose death from the AIDS transformed our preferred tacit acknowledgement to an open secret.

As for black gay men on stage, the next event was *Angels in America* DW /RV \$QJHOHV¶
Mark Taper Forum in 1992. The black gay man in this play was Belize who was fiercely out,

and proud to be a sissy. He was also written by a white male playwright. Like Norman, his lover was also white.

Diana Taylor reminds me ³ + L V a W R d i p l i n e presents itself in part, as an archival project; if the object of analysis is indeed out there, separate from the knower (a characteristic that I maintain defines the archive), then other historians might return to a past event or figure

the analysis of a marginal work in the context of its impact on a city

Though the play did not offer much in the way of black gay history, its existence, brought a diverse audience together that might have seen each other in later years in a AIDS Project LA walk-a-thon to raise funds for those suffering with AIDS. The Catch One is just on the other side of Crenshaw Boulevard, not far from where the Ebony Showcase Theatre once stood. This is the place where the black LGBT community congregates to this day. The significance of one inconsequential theatre work might have been responsible for mobilizing hundreds of gay people

of color to

³⁸ Taylor 69.

Chapter 2 Postmodern African Homosexuals in Revue

homecoming survives and allows playwrights to dramatize a postnostalgic condition, enforced
Place: The Geography of Modern Drama

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

We are numerous and varied, flamboyant and dull, + R P *Fire Love*

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

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

American performance space for its time even though as early as the 1970s the rapidly changing dimensions of American culture and politics had resulted in the politically progressive

³⁹ Brian Freeman, personal interview, 9 June 2011.

environment of San Francisco generating a number of theatres representing diverse cultures, ethnicities and sexual orientation.⁴⁰ For example, in 1977 Theatre Rhinoceros established itself as the primary theatre for the gay community. In addition, because of newly federal redevelopment funding for black community projects, a number of small black theatres sprang up in the Bay area structured solely around black themed productions meant to address the

DQ[LHWLHV DQG IUXVWUDWLRQV LQ WKH EODFN FRPPXQLW\

However, similar to the larger American society, the two communities rarely converged, separated by lingering racial tensions within the gay community toward people of color on the one hand and homophobia in the black community on the other hand. Therefore bringing together black and gay sensibilities into a performance mode took a much longer and circuitous route. However, it cannot be overdetermined that the permissive political atmosphere of San Francisco allowed for the possible; the timing and space were crucial in tracing the trajectory of black gay men onto the contemporary stage from relative obscurity. In this productive era of experimental theatre mirroring experimental politics, a discourse on black masculinities was played out.

,W LV ZLWKLQ WKL V KLVWRULF JHLWJHLVW ZKHUH WKH

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

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

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

Comparatively, these performances by openly black gay men uncovered the tensions between black masculinity which until this time had been the championed and acceptable portrayal of black men on stage. What the Pomos dramaturgy introduced into the equation of racial and gender authenticity was complexity. The idea of the black gay performers was not to provide an alternative to the traditional black and gay and lesbian themes, but to challenge the authenticity of both. We would find thematically there is commonality with the so called traditional black dramatic themes: family, class and cultural unity. To be clear there were reasons why contested authenticity from the heteronormative black artists was at issue. Due to an historic political and cultural erasure, the homophobic reaction within the black community was first to dismiss and then ridicule significant contributions to the community welfare of black gays and lesbians.

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

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

The 3 R P R V ¶ H P H U I H Q W describes an aesthetic informed by black gay sensibilities and thus the visibility of black homosexuality is at last apparent in the mainstream. More importantly perhaps, the discussion of black masculinities as performed in popular culture in this case the cultural medium of theatre, describes a rupture between the hyper masculine depictions of black males in the 60s black theatre and the re-imagined portrayal of the masculine possibilities e [W U D S R O D W H G I U R P W K H 3 R P R ¶ V Z R U N N h i s t o r i c a l W K H U P R survey tracing the beginning of an openly black gay representation beginning with the genre of performance art (an experimental performance style emerging from the 70s era of identity politics) to group performances such as the Pomos where the theme of collective action is introduced as a tactile unifying strategy for the black gay community.

Since it is difficult to identify specific roles within the entire canon of black drama where D 3 J D \ ' F K D U D F W H U P L research focuses on the late 19th and early 21st century as it offers the most in the way of dramaturgical material focused singularly on life in the black gay community. Black gay dramaturgy emerges that is distinctly dualistic; homosexual and black. Due to a new sexual openness in the American culture, themes of sexual variance are suddenly visible on the mainstream stage. Like white dramas and comedies that featured a homosexual character, the portrayal of black gay men had been stereotypical, circumscribed by the familiar trope of the homosexual as effeminate and amusing. Black and gay performance began to initiate a new orality asking questions and making protestations heretofore unvoiced. 7 K L V L V Z K H U H W K H 3 R P R ¶ V Z R U N E H F R P H V h e n e s a n d O D V S U R J characters on a mainstream American stage. It is through their work that a dialogue begins, laying the ground work for the debate in the black community as to whether or not black gays and lesbians should even be thought of as part of the historic struggle of the black community.

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

Work that articulates a range of black masculinities possible within the black community is central to the conflict constructed for the interjection of the black gay perspective on their erroneously perceived docile bodies. The dynamics of two groups of marginalized males, both of the same skin color, need to be considered radical and revolutionary in their own right and within the context of their historic marginalization and demonization. The theatre space is where the drama of these opposing subjects find a level playing field. In other words an intertextual

U H O D W L R Q V K L S L V D W W H P S W H G I N G O D F N J D P H Q T V D H V W K H
of black men saw the similarities without the ideology of heteronormativity as its guiding philosophy. If straight black dramatists had allowed this perception to filter into their understanding of the other in their midst, they would have realized they were both advocates for the radical re-thinking of their image. The effeminate black male or sissy would not appear as the threat to their self-identified fixed heteronormativity. In fact, as Marlon Riggs, black gay

I L O P P D N H U D Q G D F W L Y L V W Z R X O G V W D W H 3 % O D F N P H Q O R

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

What is the distinction between the performativity of masculinity and the performance of the sissy in relation to specific black gay theatre work of the 1980s through the 1990s? The plays *The Love*, *Dark Fruit* and *Civil Sex* are plays that exemplify aspects of this question through the performance of lived experience where the narrative of the sometimes seen but never heard. Agency is meant to replace the sense of shame projected onto black homosexuals by a collective happening. The conformity is inverted and those on the bottom become those on top, pun intended. Their discursive plays mixture of race and sexuality illustrate the transformative where the rhetoric of black masculinities raises questions as to urgency, pedagogy, performativity and possibility.

Black Masculinities

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

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

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

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

⁴¹ Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952) 110.

Black Skin, White Masks. Markmann, Charles Lam, trans. (New York:

would threaten the perceived ontology of black masculinity, setting up an argument or dialectic

WKDW VRFLHWDO FRQVWUDLQWV PHUHO\ KHOSHG WR REIXV

)DQRQ ¶ LQWRLWQHRIRPAQIGDIHGRP GULY:KWHUPH)DXMRQR¶VPLQVCH

treatise of self-examination is the consequence of much anguish and frustration, being black and

subjected to the immense injustice by whites, so does the black gay male share the anguish, only

WKH LQMXVWLFH LV PDJQLILHG E\ UHMHFWRQR ZLWKLQ RQH

GHVFULSWLRQ RI WKH ZKLWH HQFRXQW⁴² HULZLWIKR EODFNV XW

LQ D FRPSOHWHO\ GLIIHUHQW VRFLDORQWQWDFNDVHQRZRNR

identify as gay invite a close reading where before there was an elaborate visceral response to

dismiss them as ineffective and therefore inconsequential in service to the heteropatriarcal

paradigm.

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

Pomos and Home

⁴² Fanon 135

⁴³ Fanon 112.

Timing and space are crucial elements in staging performance. How the performance is seen, where and ZKHQ DQG PRUH LPSRUWDQWO\ ZKDW HIIHFW GRH delivers a specific audience response to their work. In the Pomos case, the relative closeness of the stage (as described by Freeman) and the direct proximity of performer and spectator made for a blurring of lines representative of this type of experimental theatre. Borrowing from his SDUWLFLSDWLRQ ZLWK WKH 6DQ)UDQFLVFR 0LPH 7URXSH 3RPRV¶ RWKHU WZR PHPEHUV (UBlaner) saw the troupe as the example of the site specific project that put the politics of black gayness into the laps of the spectator. In such a setting, the acting space and audience space could be experienced as coterminous, a circular narrative where each aspect of the performance would be sensed on the body and the mind.

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

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded in 1967. The company sought to explore themes of class and politics in an atmosphere of FRPLF LQYHUVLRQ XVLQJ %DNKWLRQ¶V Bakhtin saw the festival period in medieval Europe as the period of time when the political pyramid was inverted and for the length of the carnival; those on the bottom were recognized as the top of the social order. Claudia Orenstein, writing about the Mime Troupe, explicates:

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

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

) U H H P D Q F O D U L I L H V W K R X J K W K H U H Z H U H V R P H H O H P H

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

Where would the audience response toward this new performance troupe be the most affective? If we look at the three plays, we will find that each play is set in the American urban landscape. I will detail later in the chapter specific examples for each play but for now, thinking

R I W K H S O D \ V F R O O H F W L Y H O \ D V D ³ K R P H F R P L Q J ´ 7 R E H F

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

relative out into the public sphere. This metaphysic DO DIILUPDWLRQ RI ³KRPHFRPLQ into a commonality experienced between the Pomos and their audience.

:ULWLQJ DERXW WKH VFHQRJUDSK\ WKDW UHFDSLWXOD &KDXGXUL VD\V ³\$OWKR XJK WCK ID UFFKWH RI SULHF W O Q UQIJ UKHRPVHL used in the later modern drama not to recuperate identity but rather to stage the difficulties, even LPSRVVLELOLW\ RI ⁴⁵VXV W KIH F3RSPHUVJ WGLURQ PDWXUJ\ LQ WKHLU are autobiographical in structure where the characters voice the exact sentiments and longings of the actors, illustrate the complicated notion of recuperability. Chaudhuri elaborates:

Beyond sentimental fixing and grounding of agitated and alienated selves, the figure of homecoming survives and allows playwrights to dramatize a postnostalgic condition, HQIRUFHG E\ WKRVH UHWKHRUL]DWLRQV ⁴⁶RI VRFLDO DQQ

Homecoming is a time of exultant feelings generally used to re-bond characters in the most sentimentalized plots, and this was certainly the celebratory atmosphere meant for Pomo performer and their audience. But, as Chaudhuri points out, the modern versus the traditional understanding of social experience, allowed for a multi-interpretation, the audience response was DOORZHG DQG HQFRXUDJHG WR EH GHHSO\ SHUVRQDO ZKHU SUHFLVHO\ NQRZLQJ WKH FORVHG ³XQLYHUVDO´ H[SHULHQ PDUJLQDOLJHG ,Q HVVHQFH WKH 3RPHV GHODUHG ³,W PD , QHYHU OHIW ´ +HUH LV ZKHUH WKH ORQJ RYHUGXH FRQYH power; the Pomos prepare a literal and figurative queered space for their audience to participate in their own liberatory experience.

⁴⁵ Chaudhuri, Una. Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) 92.

Essentially, adapting to a temporal space, the Pomos work was generative of an atmosphere of reciprocity. In that their audience would find the performances familiar, relating their experience growing up black and gay. Narrations of their hidden life suddenly exposed predominantly white Castro so to the white gay population the sense that something exotic and Otherly was appearing in their neighborhood but white gays were, according to Freeman, the last communities had in common emanated from a sense of queer displacement. More pointedly, the had inscribed within its varied sketches of black gay life the revolutionary pedagogy it hoped to disseminate to ill-informed spectators.

instrumental music, ostensibly organ
 their work is satirical but only in the sense of using humor as a conduit to understanding their marginalization. Their idea of the revue as an accessible form of theatre for a mainly gay audience was meant to be exclusive and inclusive at the same time. Utilizing the comedic aspects saw humor as a coping mechanism in the midst of traumatic events such as coming out and AIDS. Injecting seriousness into the revue definition forged a pathway toward the unstable

⁴⁷ @ 'o ' k The Cambridge Guide to Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 823.

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

: K D W L V P R V W V L J Q L I L F D Q W L Q W K H L P E U L F D W L R Q V R I
projects is the performance/performativity of black gay men. Having been pushed into the far reaches of t acknowledgment within the normative realm of the black community or dismissed as being of no consequence to the political activism of civil injustice, the genre of revue is used to build ident L I L F D W L R Q , I W K H 3 R P R V ¶ H I I R U W V U H Y H D O D V X E D O V X E V W D Q W L D W H W K H L U S U H V H Q F H D V Z H O O D V m E n H O H E U D W H loving black men is the true revolutionary act ⁴⁸ 7 K H 3 R P R V ¶ interpretation D O U H traditional black dramaturgy implicitly averred what was missing but what was possible in portraying black life in contemporary theatre.

Fierce Love

I viewed only a videotaped performance of *Fierce Love*⁴⁹ It appears the play was presented on a bare stage in a small theatre (judging from the clearly audible audience responses) L Q 6 D Q) U D Q F L V F R L Q Z K D W L V U H I H U U H G W R L Q W K H D W U H smallest of enclosed theatre spaces where all of the walls have been black to make the space appear as a void to be filled in by illuminated by lighting and the imagination of the spectator. Therefore the empty space paradoxically adds dimension to the witnessing of an event, where total visibility secures the symbiotic relationship between the performers and the spectator, allowing for the consideration of the black/ gay body. In a sense the lines of the space move in

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

⁴⁹*Fierce Love*, Pomo Afro Homos, videotape, Sue Ellen Case collection, 2010.

an endless continuum. Or is this just illusion? Does the confined space also remind one of prison? The idea of male queers in the carceral harkens back to the writings of Jean Genet. Even if it is a stretch to conflate the *mise en scene* engaged with that of a prison cell, the statistics of black men in prison is conjured. The seeming historicity of black gay men (a postcolonialist reading) and adumbrates within its vexed dramaturgy a deeper sense of struggle, complexity, resilience and survival. The spectator is close enough to survey the queer black body without fear of being politically incorrect. In a 1994 interview, Gupton said, "They are on display and we are obliged to look and are free to inspect.

Pomos are aware of all of the racialized and sexualized images of black men. The confined space is metaphor for a closet paradigm that is gradually giving way to syncretism. Except the urgency here is the context of an epidemic where the gay black body is being destroyed by silence. If the pout of the closet paradigm was to be the tactical move for the black queer then it had to begin with a sudden and dramatic visibility. In a 1994 interview, Freeman says:

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

will use details of the black church and black art, not as recognition to inform agency, as well as

⁵⁰ K " " " " h " " u " # " " [Los Angeles Times](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035_1_black-gay-life). Aug 13 1994 http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035_1_black-gay-life

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

⁵² Breslauer, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-08-14/entertainment/ca-27035_1_black-gay-life

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

Comingling the personal and political, *Fierce Love* lends itself to the revue as a signature theatrical formatting. Revues have been utilized as starting place to build a performance piece that usually does not involve a great deal of backing and brings to the fore a message of activism combined with theatre conventions that allows a seeming unfettered roundelay of song, dance and mostly comedy but a celebratory insistence on a marginalized community sudden vocal declaration of being. Moreover, the play is episodic in structure.

Whereas an incident in a course of events. The eventful nature cannot be overdetermined. Having black gay characters on stage played by self-identified black gay men was an event in 1994. The play is really a series of installations portraying black gay life in the 1970s and 1980s.

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

Bodies Suki Ali tells us

raced bodies have to be learned and discursively reproduced, it is in the so called ruptures and

GLVMXQFWXUH†V EHWZHHG WKH GRPLQDQW DQG FRXQWHU

FKDQJH FDQ⁵³ EH FUHDWVHG. It is the visibility of their black bodies as they aver their

TXHHUQHVV WKDW WKH 3RPR \$IUR +RPRV† WUDQVJUHVVLVH

UHFLWDWLRQ LQFOXGHV OLQHV VXFK DV³:H DUH WKH ZKR†

silence and millisecond of sound. We are young, gifted, black and gay. Our love must be as

VWURQJ DV RXU DQFHVWRUV DQG WZLFH DV ILHUFH´ 7KH L

affirming the black homo within the black heteronormative paradigm is shock enough to the

sensibilities, Hallelujah is never said but it resonates around the small space.

In fact, the episode following the open directly addresses the black sissy and the black drag queen. The QVC (Queer Value Channel), introduces two obvious sissies, Bernard and Louis, who are parodies of another parody, Men on Film form the then popular In Living Color

television comedy series. In Men on Film, Antoine and Blaine are movie reviewers, played by two straight actors, who re-

LQWURGXFHG WKH³VQDS´ WKH TXLQWHVVHQ

as response to their viability. The sketch itself, though not entirely without humor, accentuates

WKH XQPDQOLQHVV RI \$QWRLQH DQG %ODLQH DV MRNHV , C

costumed in flower-print shirts. They are most comfortable with their identity and sexuality.

'DYLG 5RPDQ ZULWHV³%ODFN JD\ PHQ WKHVH 3RPRV VKRZ

pilferage of black gay codes by heterosexual performers for the amusement of their equally

LJQRUDQW KHWHURVHV†⁵⁴IVH†XDPDQWQRIKX³FH WKH³\$OLFH :DON

EROGQHVV WR SROLWLFL]H WKH LQIHUHG KRPRSKRELD RI

⁵³ Suki ... Cultural Bodies: Ethnography and Theory (Blackwell Publishers, 2008) 24..

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

% ODFN 'UDJ 4XHHQ ³ NLW VR DV WR UHLI\ WKH LPDJH RI WK

the stage enters a six foot black body on roller skates, with a huge Afro, sequined bra and short

shorts. She declares, ³ ,I WKL V LV OLEHUDWLRQ ZKHUH LV WKH PXVLF

and applause.

Brian Freeman takes on the next character, a black man on the DL. The charter says I

GRQ¶W JR JD\ , GRQ¶W NQRZ JD\«'R , ORRN OLNH VRPHERG

OLWWOH WDVWH RI WKH RWKHU VLGH QRZ DQGLDWH WKHQ 7KDW

scene is reminiscent of the melancholic constructed by internalized homophobia. E Patrick John

VRQ SRLQWV RXW ³EODFN DXWKHQWLF\ KDV EHFRPH OLC

VLJQLILF DWLHQWV the soliloquy in deep tones of constructed masculinity as he

relates the story of h LV PDUULDJH ZKHUH KLP DQGLDWH JZLHWHKDYHDDQ

VD\ V KH JRHV RXW WR ³WDNH FDUH RI D PDQ¶V EXVLQHVV

with the opening episodes seeks to show the mediatized image of both the black sissy and the

black man on the down low. The Pomos link the two episodes with the liminal black queer

ERG\)UHHPDQ¶V SRUWUD\DO LV WKDW R³ D UFDQ IRWQKWKYH[W

of black macho has had to do with the absence caused by AIDS, shifting gender identities and

VWUDWHJLHV Freeman offers the piece as both critique and empathetic response to the

UHVLVWDQW VWUXJJOH WR RQH¶V VH[XDOLW\ IRVSRVHG E\ J

hyper-masculinity of the black male will rub up against the effeminate black male throughout the

play.

⁵⁵ E Patrick Johnson, Manifest Faggotry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 48.

⁵⁶ Cheryl Clark 7

Freeman performs the middle class gay black man caught betwixt and between

PRYHPHQWV DV KH VWUXJJOHV ZLWK KLSad YoungMan DOLWQ 7KH S

this episode, Freeman ¶ V IDPLO\ LMe F KRGNHO)DPLQ\` ZKR KDV WKHLU S

printed on the cover of ebony magazine. To his surprise, Freeman finds he has been erased from

WKH SLFWXUH :K\" +H EHOLHYHV EHFDXVH KH LV QRW ³EOD

scene is a journey of self-discovery as he experiments with women and then men but comes to

rest in his gay identity. He is trying to find himself amidst the confusion of the 70s, settling on

running away with Johnny Mathis. The story is one that a middle class audience can understand.

Fierce Love is at time a lesson to be learned, when a gay black speaks thereby a discourse begins

and discourse can be disruptive. It is in this episode that we find the issue of class debated The

confused young man who must EH ³VDG´ H[SUHVVHV WKH PHODQFKROLF Z

EODFN UDJH RU KLV JD\ UDJH IRU WKDW PDWWHU ,Q -XGLW

VXEMHFW OLWHUODOO\ VZDÖ (Brix) Those in the audience who are not WKHLU OF

black or gay are brought into the conversation, but it asks the spectators to witness what it is like

WR JURZ XS JD\ LQ D EODFN IDPLO\ 'DYLQ 5RPDQ ZULWHV

in Six Degrees of Separation, pulls liberal heartstrings but goes further in holding its audience

FRPSOLFLW LQ VXFK Z⁵⁸HOE BHDG QP SRO LHW EV

for freedom without really knowing the subject of their advocacy.

7KH REOLJDWRU\ UDS VRQJ LQ JF DQO HWK MW KH E D Q GF % D QXG

before liberation when homosexuals wanted to identify each without asking, a colorful bandana

ZDV SODFHG LQ D Q DSSURSULDWH EDFN SRFNHW RI RQH ¶ V

(red), water sports (yellow) and anything goes (orange). The three men become rappers in the

⁵⁷ Judith Butler

⁵⁸ Román 168.

VFHQH EXW WKH O\ULFV DUH EXW WKH O\ULFV ³, ZH DU PLQH
DQFHVWRUV ´ 6R WKH IXFNLQJ WDNHV RQ WKH IXFNLQJ RI D

personal in that it indicates a racial history of debasement and racism. But even then the conversation is two-sided. The resonance around rap as commodified music for a generation in relation to the legacy of exploitation of American blacks is a moment of pedagogy.

The characters have names like Peaches, Popcorn and Pepper are part of the 3Just Us Club. ´ +HUH ZH KDYH WKH H[FOXGHG IURP PDLQVWUHDJ JD\ O effeminate and ugly. This group finds no support among the more established black gay FRPPXQLW\ µ6LQFH QR RQH HOVH ZLOO KDYH WKHP WKH\¶C SRVLWLRQ LQ ⁵⁹WKH XQGHIHQDEWVA clear metaphor for a neglected narrative of gay black life. Spectacularized, their life has to be seen as metonym for the larger EODFN FRPPXQLW\¶V VWUXOHG paradigms of dominant gay life. WKH Judith Butler says that gender performance outside of the theatrical context is political. She says, ³LQ WKH WKHDWUJH RQH (FDQ) D\WKLP political theatre, the trio moves in synchronicity. These are not gay men in their twenties who have lived through the taunts of their own community and the prejudices of the wider white gay community. So the talking back and calling out is essential to agency. <HW WKH 3RPRV GRQ¶W VLQJOH OHVELDQ RU QRQ EODFN JD\V DQG OHVELDQV ,QVWHDG WK process ² for all audiences ² involves a certain self- SRVLWLF force that forces viewers to ORFDWH WKHLU RZQ SRVLWLRQ⁶⁰ The thrust of the work with open the conversation to no one particular group yet each spectator must decide for himself/herself what their position is for each new episode.

⁵⁹ Román 168.
⁶⁰ Roman 169.

There is one scene where positionality is most evident. Eric Gupton is the actor in this piece. In it two men are having sex in a backroom. At first, Gupton is the only black man in the

room. Not being a snow queen (gay black vernacular for a black man who will only have sex

ZLWK ZKLWH PHQ WKH RSSRVLWH LV D ³GLQJH TXHHQ´ VXF

suddenly a beautiful black man enters the space. Gupton delivers a lengthy description of the

PDQ¶V ERG\ OLQJH Ullis the ad of pechaWdhaOmves the hW to ecstasy

EXW LW LV D JRRG ³KDQG MRE´ WKDW VDWLVLHV ERWK SDU

the man tells Gupton:

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

The stranger in the backroom is nothing less than yet another Pomo Afro Homo ² defined at least in the scene, gay black man who cares about the brothers, eroticizes men of color, and

recognized the necessity of AIDS awareness. The number of black gay men dying of AIDS in

1994 was all but ignored by the media. The black gay community took it upon themselves to

educate black men about safe sex practices. Including the scene within the performance is further

LOOXVWUDWLRQ RI ³GLVLGHQWLILFDWLRQ¶ ZKHUH D FRPPX

resistance manifest.

'DYL G 5RPIQ¶V HVVD\ RQ WKH SOD\ LV XVHIXO EHFDXVH

He sees this as the pivotal moment in the play because the scene directly addresses the sexuality

of black men. He says this scene drew the most response from the black gay men in the audience.

6KRXWV RI ³*R DKHDG JLUO´ DQG ³*LW DW WKDW´ FOHDU

⁶¹ Fierce Love. Pomo Afro Homos, videotape, 1997.

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

Oddly many whites sometimes respond by applauding the gay men of color in the audience who are engaging in the performance. In this regard, the spectacle on the stage is expanded to include gay men of color in the audience who are participating in the shared fantasy. The risk, hers as in *Six Degrees*,⁶² is that the realities of gay men of color may be experienced by some whites as anecdotal fodder. Liberal white spectators, in this sense, get two shows for their money; an entertaining performance on stage and equally entreatingly side show from the gay men of color in the audience. And yet this risk of appropriation is worth taking since the gay men of color² regardless of the potential for white voyeurism² K D Y H V K D U H G L Q D S R Z H U I X O W U D Q V D F W L R Q

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

7 K H Q H [W H S L V R G H ³ 6 L O H Q W O \ L Q W R W K H 1 L J K W ' L V W
Aman, a young man dies of AIDS and his funeral arranged by his relatives is used to spew homophobia. This is where the black church is taken to task because of its silence on the H S L G H P L F \$ P D Q ↑ V I U L H Q G V R U J D Q L J H W K H L U R Z Q P H P R U L D
devastating period), to honor the life of their friend. A gospel song that I know well from my childhood plays in the background *Take My Hand Precious Lord*. The scene is dignified and V R E H U L Q J \$ F W R U % D Q Q H U D V N V ³ : K \ G R V R P D Q \ R I R X U E
V L O H Q W O \ L Q W R W K H Q L J K W " ' "

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

K D Y H P D G H W K H V S D F H V R P H Z K D W H D V L H U I R U W K R V H O H I V

⁶² Roman 170.

LQ LWV HYRFDWLRQ RI D EODFN JD\ PDOH KLVWRU⁶³ VLJQDO
5 R P i Q If this³ is liberation whe UH LV WKH PXVLF " ' 6 R ves drag queen 3 H D F K H

from the opening of the show. Her exclamation echoes that of a real life incident when 80s drag-

SHUIRUPHU 6\OYHVWHU ZHQW LQWR D '- ERWK DW RQH RI 6

over. Sylvester is invoked more than once in the play.

Sylvester began life a child gospel star. He was born in Los Angeles and began singing in the choir of a South Los Angele church. He moved to San Francisco in the early 70s and became involved with the performance troupe called the Cockettes. He dressed in drag and sang Bessie Smith songs. He is even seen in the Cockettes short film, *Vtkekçou" Ygf fki* spoofing President

1 L [R Q ¶ V G D X J K W H U 7 U L F L D ¶ V U H D O Z H G G L Q J & K H U \ O & O D

Sylvester helped us negoti D W H W K D W W E K L W Z H D O G R S I D F L I Q R I D P E L J X F
difference; which disrupted our longing for a grounded racial and sharply gendered
sexuality. Sylvester was the first² and so far the only² E O D F N J D \ V L Q R J Y H U U W R ³ F U
D Q G E H ³ R X W ' 1 R W V R I Q \ J D D V K G ⁶⁴ Z Y V D T X H H Q '

Sylvester was a gay black celebrity who performed in drag . His distinctive falsetto got him a recording contract where he had a few hits such as ³< R X O D N H P H) H H O 0 L J K W \ 5 H D O

You Wanna Funk " ' D G H I L D Q W G L V F R V D O Y R I L U H G L Q W R W K H F U R

signifiers. The gender bending Sylvester is a specter in the play. She glides in like a deusa ex machine to rescue gay black liberation from the normative assimilationism of 80s mainstream

gay politics. 7 K X V D X Q L Y H U V D O O D Q J X D J H R I G U D J L V I R U P X O D V

is understood by the spectator to be at the creative center of the performance. It is no longer the artifice that is masks a survival strategy only to be experienced in the safe environment of the

⁶³ Roman 172.

⁶⁴ Clark 6.

proscenium stage or for this matter on television. As drag queens became the visible face of the

* D \ ULJKW ¶ V P RYHPHQW LQ WKH O D d n t r y o f f e r s t h e s i n k e W K H G U D J T X H
revolutionary approach to the continual performativity of liberation. The language can be
adopted as a transnational tactic for use in speaking back to power. In solidarity the black and
gay projects move with to their own rhythms on the queer sonic landscape.

What does 'Fierce' mean? It has its etymological start as violently hostile or aggressive in
W H P S H U D P H Q W ' , Q E O D F N Y H U Q D F X O D U W K H Z R U G K D V F K
G H V F U L E L Q J W K H S H U I R U P D Q F H R I 3 R P R \$ I U R + R P R V 3 W K H
a narrative of sudden visibility where up to that point lagged behind the majority gay rights
movement. **Fierce Love** is then orature. It is testimony. It is a confessional. It is the talking cure.
In black vernacular the men 3 W H V W L I \ ' 0 R p e r f o r m a n c e s u e r e e s s e n t i a l l y a ' t a l k
back 'to the assimilationist politics of early gay liberation. The carnivalesque atmosphere of drag
as display of the grotesque body was an acknowledgement of a deliberate transgression against
the normative. Sylvester, a drag celebrity in the gay culture of San Francisco in the 70s embodied
the transgendered, the gay and the black body in total.

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

The storytelling is the curative here. A larger narrative of post colonial struggle and identity politics converge into micro narratives of black gay experience. Interjected into these narratives are identities of black gay life. The S O D \ H Q G V R Q W K H V D P H O L Q H D V P X V W E H D V V W U R Q J D V R X U D O F H V W R U W D O G W I Z L F H D V I L has replaced the grand narrative. It is clear that *Fierce Love* is a postmodern piece that looks backward and forward as it illustrates the number of identities within the black community and the contradictions within the black gay and lesbian community. The larger black community has been instrumental in the use of disidenification to weather the abuses of discriminatory practices. Subversively the black gay man, lesbian, transgender and bisexual have used the same to strategy to survive the homophobia of the black community. In performance as part elaboration of the differences among gay black men and a curative calling out, speaking the name that has gone unspoken, in the their visibility and is agency. Still, it is a worrisome revelation to concede the visibility was due to horrific epidemic. I say this because of the space number of gay black chatters in dramaturgy post Stonewall.

Dark Fruit

If *Fierce Love* is an introduction to the lived experience of black gay men, then *Dark Fruit* is an exploration of the exploitation and complications of being an openly black gay man. The stereotypical black gay character i.e. the black sissy became de rigueur amongst certain white gay playwrights in the 1990s. This character is featured in prominent gay plays of the 80s and 90s namely *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Six Degrees of Separation* and *Angels in America*. The S L H F H L V W L W O H G ³ \$ X Q W L H V L Q \$ P H U L F D ´ E H F D X V H W K H W V L P L O D U W R W K H L F R Q L F E O D F N P D P P \ I U R P E O D F N I D F H P I Pomos expose the operations of whiteness by talking back to the rules scripted for gay black men

of Black gay men in service to the white gay men in the respective dramas; in *Six Degrees* the subservience is figurative and in *Angles* and *La Cage* the connection is literal.

La Cage aux Folles was adapted from the French film of the same name. Fierstein had made a name for himself as the author of an earlier gay play, *Torch Song Trilogy*. *Torch Song* might share with *La Cage* the same gender crossing themes in that the central characters of both gay couple where one of the partners pretends to be a woman in the zany complications of the plot) in is a very sissified black male (also pretending to be a woman) is at once homage and a reification of the comical and absurd and therefore dismissive black homosexual on stage.

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

⁶⁵ Kushner, *Dark Fruit: African American Performance and Theater History* (Oxford University Press, 2001) 238.

⁶⁶ Plum 324.

V D L G 3 7 K L V S O D \ L V D E R X W E H L Q J J D \ D Q G , W K L Q N L W ¶ V
U H F R J Q L J H L W L Q W K I D a r k Z D u t , J a y , P o m K w i t e s : H V V D \ R Q

« W K H L P D J H R I A n g e l s F i n A n t i W i t e s a t t h e e x p e n s e o f t h e
O t h e r . K u s h n e r m a y b e c o r r e c t i n c l a i m i n g M i l l e n n i u m A p p r o a c h e s L V D 3 S O D \ D E R X W I
J D \ ' % X W W K H 3 R P R V V X J J H V W W K I D a n d G a y 67 P R U H D F F

In an effort not to impugn the integrity of the plays themselves, but what needs to be clearly identified is the sameness of the black characters in relation to the white characters, where the historic imprint of submissiveness and comfortable blackness circumscribe the black gay FK D U D F W H U V 7 K H 3 D X Q W L H V ' S U R W H V W D W L R Q V D Q G G L V D once again being written by those in power.

Moreover, the plays were written in the historic context of the AIDS crises even though La Cage does not specifically address the disease, the specter of AIDS haunts gay drama of the period. It is the historical absence and sudden appearance of black gay characters that elicit a reaction of curiosity and familiarity from the spectator as the visibility of these black gay body is on display as the named subject comes before us for our scrutiny. If the historical concept of blacks on stage is bothersome to an authentic discernment of the diversity within the black community, a competing image of the emerging threatening black rapper is there to place beside W K H E O D F N V L V V \ , W D S S H D U V W K H D V V L P L O D W L R Q L V W P the black gay voice be heard as luxuriantly polyvocal resonance rather than a tinny echo from the past. The politics of identity whether black or gay, to the extreme deemed its very existence was H Y L G H Q F H R I D Q L Q F O X V I D a r k Z D u t « I S R D O Q W H S G W H W R i Z H a c k H U 3 cultural polices found in authenticating claims of masculinity that deny differences within the

⁶⁷ Plum 236.

UDF⁶⁸ Kushner, Guare and Fierstein cannot be excused because they themselves are gay. Their portraiture of black gay men perpetuates and preserves the same misguided argument used against black gay men prevalent in the black community.

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

The psycho sex therapist appears to give some structure to the fragmented and confusing image of the black gay post Stonewall. It is as if the demons warned about in their upbringing, the demons of exposure have made the freed from to be themselves has made black gay men more anxious and more representative of the sexual variance more often ascribed to the white KRPRVH[XDO FRPPXQLW\ 7KH SLHFH LV FDOOHG 3%ODFN DGO of the sex therapist where the prevailing notion of the black gay man is notionless, in that there has been few studies that anyone could cite about the black gayness other than survey of their behavior in prison, the Pomos turn their attention to the psychological analysis of the black gay male beginning with a subject who is urban and lower class who seems to prefer white men sexually over b ODFN PHQ 7KH 3SV\FKR WKHUDSLVW' XVHV WKLV F about black men who prefer white men as well as the invert. But the psychologist adds there is GLVFULPLQDWLRQ ZLWKLQ WKH KRPRVH[XDO Society FRPPXQLW\ FF

⁶⁸ Plum 239.

frowns upon homosexuality and discriminates against the Negro one might assume the Negro

K R P R V H [X D O O D E R U V X Q ⁶⁹ E r e m o d e r n p s y c h o l o g y s t r u g g l e s w i t h t h e

definition and categorization of black homosexual. The language they adopt is antiquated by the

P H U H U H I H U H Q W W R ³ 1 H J U R ' 7 K H U H I H U H Q F H L P S O L H V D Q

based in a past where homosexuality was considered a mental illness. So like rats in a laboratory,

the probing and prodding of the subject to be studied generates scenarios that are at once

instructive to those unfamiliar with the subject and absurd to those who are black and gay. The

therapist does bring a certain understanding of homosexuality in the black community to some

historical context, telling the spectator that homosexuality existed in Africa where male-male

U L W X D O V Z H U H K R Q R U H G 7 K H U H I R U H W K H S U R P L V H R I W K H

to find the black gay male as neurotic and self-hating.

The young black man, Cliff, in the short case study turned into a short playlet is working

towards med school with all of the support of his high school teach. Once she sees him

intimately entangled with another classmate (a white boy named Paul) her support is withdrawn.

She expresses dismay, shame and disappointment. Cliff (as on the edge of) cannot find the

V X S S R U W Z L W K L Q K L P V H O I W R F R Q W L Q X H W R S X U V X H K L V C

is the beginning of the syndrome within the black gay homosexual where an intimate connection

becomes a very complicated, tortuous and yes, self-sabotaging scenario. Paul leaves his home

W R Z Q D I W H U K L J K V F K R R O D Q G S X U S R U W H G O \ K H ⁷⁰ D G V I R U ³

where utopia (of a kind) awaits. In this episode, the spectator is introduced to the notion of

S H G D J R J \ L Q W K H P L J U D W R U \ H [S H U L H Q F H Z K L F K S R V L W L R C

⁶⁹ Dark Fruit 327.

⁷⁰ h " " = ") ' 7 ' Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater (Westview Press, 1996) 332.

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

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

³ & K R F R O D W H & L W \ ' V H W V W K H D F W L R Q D W W K H W L P H R
for equality in Washington DC. Here the Pomos search for their own space within the dominant white gay march. The narrator searches for the black gay contingent as his thoughts wander over

the historic and the psychological wounds of his lived experience as a black gay man in America in 1993. The crowd of 650,000 is metaphor for the number of adverse voices against the rights of gay people at the time of the march. Whoopie Goldberg is seen as the megaphone for the

YRLFHOHV V FKDOOHQJLQJ WKH FURZG ³, ZDYQWWR KH DU Z

³ + R Z O R Q How long will the abuse and humiliation and degradation and violence persist?

It is the question the narrator internally debates with a host of street thugs, churchmen and black

LQWHOOFWXDOV ZKR WDXQWZLWKWKHWHWRLW ³ + R Z O R

from?⁷² 7KH VKDPH JXLOW DQG GLVJXVW LQKHUHQW LQ WKH

amongst itself as how to approach the reality of black homosexuality. Obviously, with the larger gay movement now embedded in the public consciousness, the silent treatment was no longer as workable as in the past. But the idea to push the gay subject back into the closet was preferable.

³ + R Z PDQ \ RUJDQLVWV ZLOO \RX JR WKURXJK IEHIRUH \R

WKH QDUUDWRU LQ ³⁷² & KRFRDWH & LW 186\$

This is a great reference to the institution of the black church its homosexual congregants. It may be stereotypical to think of gay men as having an affinity for musicals but in the black church where one was raised and if one had that particular ability to lead the choir, it became a good job and a place of familiarity even though the messages sent from the pulpit was in keeping the fundamentalist Christina view of sin i.e. homosexuality as well as a host of other vices prevalent in any American urban setting.

& KRFRDWH FLW \ LV \$PHULFD \ V QHROLEHUDO SROLWLFV

determines cultural practice.

⁷¹ Pomos 340.

⁷² Pomos 340.

⁷³ Pomos 342.

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

Dear Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Dear Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, Dear Minister Farrakhan, Dear CIA Conspiracy Theorists, Dear FBI Conspiracy Theorists, Dear CDC and all Afro-FHQWULFV « . LQWH FORWKORUJBYDNDJES. IDEXORXYV GUDJ EXW LJQRUDQFH EXW KH\ ZHDU DOO WKH FURZQV \RX OLNH

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

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

⁷⁴ Pomos 341.

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

% ODFN WKHDWUH SURIHVVHG WR EH H[HPSODU\ RI EODN
slant leaned toward the upwardly mobile and sublimates the unacceptable consequences of the
lives of some lower class blacks into what they deem is acceptable as far as outward appearances
DUH FRQFHUQHG , Q 3'RLQ¶ \$OULJKW' WKH 3RPRV DGGUHV
gay men who were estranged from the families and fell into the underclass of American life. The
narrator, Brian, speaks of his adolescence where his best friend who was gay also moved away
IURP KLV ZRUNLQJ FODVV QHLJKERUKRRG LQ %RVWRQ WR D
S U H W W H J R R G
He loses contact with his friend until many years later when he is in a bar in
Boston. The bar is described as a working class Boston bar but the bar itself is racially and
ethnically divided. He sees his boyhood friend who had been Dennis but is now Denise. She is
WKH KHDG RI KR XVH NHHS LQJ DW WKH ORFDO +RZDUG -RKQV
few years later, the narrator hears from his cousin about a funeral she attended for a young man
named Dennis who had been the victim of the leading cause of death of young black men namely
RWKHU EODFN PHQ 7KH QDUUDWRU UHODWHV 30LQLVWHU
WKH ZURQJ WLPH EXW ZKHQ \RX¶UH SRRU EODFN HIIHPLQ
W L ⁷⁵ See the undertaker had dressed the young man in death as he had lived in life which
FDXVHG KLV PRWKHU H[WUHPH GLVFRPIRUW 7KH QDUUDWR
Dennis/Denise but what he does know is that there are many transgender black men who get lost
in the VKXIIOH RI EXUHDXFUDF\ DQG IDPLO\ VKDPH 7KH FDWFK

⁷⁵ Pomos 327

DZD\ LQ EODFN SDUODQFH RI ³GRLQJ SUHW\ JRRG ´ 7KH IF

particularities are irrelevant whereas the latter connotative of an ability to breathe easier where

VHOI UHIOH[LYLW\ LV XWLOL]HG WR UHWDLQ FRQWURO RI R

7KH SHUIRUPDQFH RI VHOI LV QRW D SHUIRUPDQFH RI L
HYHQ PHUHO\ DQ DWWDFKPHQW ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~recursively contingent~~ ^{recursively contingent} XS¶ RI D S
identity. It is also a performance of self for the self in moment of self-reflexivity that has
the potential to transform ones views of self in relation to the world⁷⁶.

Including the transgender in their performance opens up yet another conversation on the silenced

ZLWKLQ WKH FDQRQ RI EODFN WKHDWUH)RU 'HQQLV 'HQLV

condemnation of her and her family because her son turned out to be of another gender raise the
question of where is the education of the modern black family and why does it appear to remain

PLUHG LQ WKH WUDGLWLRQDO" ³7KHVH ORQJ URRWV ´ DFFI

a social field of values and are simultaneously lied about, cherished, spurned, held in secret, or

VDFULILFHG IRU ⁷⁷In St. E. O. L. F., the Pomos are ³struggling against a tradition that

decrees the other must not come out of the closet but must remain secreted where the community
will maintain your shameful identification.

For Dark Fruit is intended more for the black community as a heterogeneous group than

IRU WKH KRPRJHQRXV EODFN JD\ FRPPXQLW\ 7KH UHYXH¶V

point to the roots of the problem in that self acceptance and dis-identification cannot be
reconciled. If the Pomos are telling the dominant straight black community (who unfortunately
will not make up most of their audience) that their adherence to and allegiance with a narrow
understanding of sexual variance within their community then the strength of the entire
community ebbs.

⁷⁶ E Patrick Johnson, Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology (Durham: Duke University, 2005) 137-138.
⁷⁷ Kathryn Stockton Bond, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame ((Durham: Duke University, 2006) 23.

As we can see the overlap of identity and identification is the conflict between the black drama of the 1960s and what was to follow in the makings of black gay drama. The former saw the struggle to be against a dominant white culture that had devised and manipulated the status of black people (mostly black men) from the time of slavery. The acute elemental destruction of the black community therefore began with identification with anything that white culture might be accepting of. Of course homosexuality was a mystery to whites as well as blacks but the very

LGHD RI LWV ³QRUPDOLW\´ EHFDPH DQDWKHPD WR WKH EOD

Power movement. What they deemed appropriate was to identify with this radical venture rather

WKDQ WKH PRUH SDVVLYH QRQ UHVLVWDQFH PRGH RI .LQJ

suspect to expulsion. The black patriarchy then was meant to replace the white patriarchy where the family structure and heteronormativity was the sole priority of black liberation. Working within the system seemed in the language of materialism, bourgeois and decadent.

Civil Sex, Civil Rights and Sex

After leaving the Pomos in 1997, Freeman began research on a non collaborative piece focused on the

OLIH RI V SROLWLFDO DFWLYLVW DQG RSHQO\ EOD

play is interested in the intersection of sex and politics in American mainstream liberation movements. *Civil Sex*⁷⁸ negotiates cultural relativism with an emergent ideology of racialized and sexualized identity politics embodied by Rustin. In the canon of black gay theatre, it is a unique study in revealing the interstices where complex strategies of race and queer politics disrupt fixed masculinities and heteronormativity. For the black community a performativity of the hyper masculine is deemed standard as it offers a counter narrative against an historic

⁷⁸ " 7 # 'o The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21st Century (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004)101-141.

misrepresentation of African Americans males fostered and nurtured by racism, sex and class.

Consequently ³QRUPDOF\` DQG LPDJLQHG FRPPXQLW\ FRQVSLUH W nonstandard within the community acting as the double edge sword aimed at the throat of the sexually variant within the black FRPPXQLW\ 5XVWLQ¶V UHVLVWDQFH WR W homophobia from blacks and whites in addition to his well known participation and valuable contribution to the black Civil Rights movement is the praxis of identity politics and grassroots organizing. My work investigates a historiographical reading of the complex interrelationships, SHUVRQDO DQG SXEOLF FDXVHG E\ 5XVWLQ¶V SUHVHQFH D work.

The 2[IRUG (QJOLVK GLFWLRQDU\ VD\ from Kate Hill PRORJ\ RI English: via old French from Latin *civilis*, from *civis* meaning μFLWL]HQV¶¶ZKbuH KDV D GXDO GHILQLWLRQ VH[XDO DFWLYLW\ DV LQ VH[XDO IHPD⁷⁹Of course gender variations as identificatory markers are not explicitly included in its definition; still I would suggest the spectrum of sexuality is implicit and therefore very much DSSURSULDWH LQ GLVFXVVLQJ VRFLHWDO SUHVXUHV WR F legitimate striving toward full citizenship and a freedom to explore his same sex attraction in a society that denied him both privileges.

)UHHPDQ¶V WLWOH ³FLYLO VH[´ IRUJHV D FRPSDQLRQVK intimacy and political sites of power. Along with every type of civic engagement in the American community witnessed in the struggles of blacks and gays simultaneously where the strategies and tactics of the former marginalized group would inform those strategies and tactics

⁷⁹ \) # U <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/civil?q=civil>

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

Thus the notions of bifurcation situate the play, mapping a recurrent theme as the State would categorize him would seem to be the primary shaming agent that would seek to control his transgressive behavior. Freeman infuses an antithetical approach by illustrating through mise en scene to the point of erasing this part of his authentic self. Rustin engages with a panoply of masculine identities throughout his life, sexual and non sexual, the play explores purposefully perplexities of masculinity, traditional to the hyper, finding the complex power relations and constructions of identity in a period of conflicting and confrontational political strategies of civil rights, translocal and transnational.

Uguzo "Masculinist Dramaturgy"

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

FRQVHUYDWLYH KRPRSKRELF UHDFWLRQDU\)UHHPDQ FRQ

freedoms represent the transgressive, whose freedoms represent the tradition DO " ´ IUDPLQJ WKHF
 WKH JHQHUDOO\ LQQRFXRXV VHWWLQJ RI &RQJUHVV ZKHUH
 UHFRUG RI WKH 86 6HQDWH 7KXUPRQG¶V MRE LV WR GLVF
 his intimate personal life, mockingly referring t R KLP DV ³0LVWHU 0DUFK RQ :DVKI
 the scene, A Philip Randolph, black civil rights leader, socialist and trade unionist responds to
 WKH DWWDFN RQ 5XVWLQ ´7KH ²PRIUZDQLW HJQ DQG DEODHF R V WFKI
 members and labor groups marching together ² will be to stress the great struggle for human
 GLJQLWVSLWH 7KXUPRQG¶V ILQDO VDOYR DLPHG DW 5XVWL
 SHUYHUVLRQ´ WKH H[FKDQJH EHWZHHQ FRQVHUYDWLYH DQQ
 political agendas that sound familiar to our 21st century sensibilities where similarities and the
 repetitious political machinations were not lost on the fraught sociopolitical arena of the Civil
 5LJKWV HUD 0RUH LPSRUWDQWO\ iLW sacriVice, Used by Loti V EODFN
 sides in the politics of assimilation and separation.

Civil Sex XVHV FKDUDFWHUV FHQWUDO DQG SHULSKHUDO W
 \$ - 0XVWH D SURPLQH QW ZKLWH FLYLO UHSHKWHV DFWLYLVW
 Asian American assistant, his lover Davis Platt, James Baldwin, Malcolm X and assorted
 acquaintances who encounter Rustin in various locations from gay bars to political protests. It is
 effectively a meta-narrative which drives this kind of documentary theatre expressing a number
 RI DGYDQWDJHV DQG GLVDGYDQWDJHV YUWRP)DQ¶HP DQSVU RWFOK
 advantageous in theatricalizing biography in that verbatim theatre essentially gives a holistic
 view of the subject.. Complicating the various biographical and historical narrations where
 KRPRJHQHLW\ LV FKDOOHQJHG WKH DQHFGRWHV RIIHUG E

⁸⁰ " ´7 ´ # ´ o ´ The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21st Century (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004) 102.

movements form their own discourse. Freeman uses Rustin to act as conduit for two civil rights project: black and gay. In *Civil Rights and Black Sexuality* Maddeus Russell writes ³⁷ [however] a striking way in which the two movements have been strikingly similar: both have demanded that in order to gain acceptance as full citizens, their constituents adopt the cultural norms of what they believe to be the idealized American citizen---productivity, selflessness, responsibility, sexual restraint, and the restraint of homosexuality in particular. ⁸² In the world of play, Rustin embodies both movements. As a plot point, Rustin would prefer to remain in the closet. Yet throughout the play, he utters a plaintive and P H O D Q F K R to become of X V⁸³ indicating a complex reading of ambivalence and interiority. Ultimately his arrest on a morals charge is the moment where the nation-state actually acts for him in determining his status and it will from this point on where his homosexuality becomes the lens through which his life is examined.

% H J L Q Q L Q J L Q W K H -historical context of the debate in the field of psychiatry where most doctors were advancing the unfounded notion of homosexuality as a mental illness; the volatility of sociality would produce a sustained resistance against transgressive behavior, be it black or gay. It is here where Alexander explores the idea of W U D G L W L R Q D Q G E D U E D U L V P \$ O H [D Q G H U V D I W ³ « Z K H Q W I doomed to remain tradition, caught in a perennial struggle to beat back the modern in its unbounded desire for fixity and stasis. ⁸⁴ So, it is no stretch of the imagination to discover a F O R V H J X D U G L Q J R I W K H S D W U L D I F K R Z K H U H S R V L W L R Q

⁸² U 'k ' The Color of Discipline: Ci 'k ' " 'o ' American Quarterly 60.1 (Mar 2008) 101.

⁸³ Freeman 116.

⁸⁴ Alexander 220.

XQGR WKH VHF XUH ER⁸⁵ UGHU Rla WkH QDWL R Qnc

³ UHQGHULQJ KHWHURVH[XDOLW\ FRQVXPHU⁸⁶UHP DQG FLWL]H

transgressive Rustin was fully aware of the limitations of the movement and yet was not without hope that the endeavor would change the thinking of the majoritarian to the extent where

American society would become in time (Alexander would still argue that linear time is a

patriarchal trap) women, gays, Latinos would also find their way into the mainstream. It really

was a fight to move out of the lower class LQWR WKH PLGGOH FODVV \$OH[DQG

about these geopolitical histories of colonization, neocolonialism and neo imperialism together is

also a way of thinking about the various ways in which racialization and colonization are being

FRQVWDQWO\ ZULWWHQ LQWR PRGHUQLW\¶V GLIIHUHQW SU

the uneven class relations and differentiations produced by neo- OLEHUDOV FDS⁸⁷WDO GLVS

Civil Sex GHIWO\ LQFRUSRUDWHV LQWR LWV GUDPDWXUJ\ 5XVWL

encompassing a number of political identifications that suited the environs of the moment. As a

symbol of the rend between the traditional and modernity, Rustin embodied the modern political

operative.

)UHHPDQ LQFOXGHV DQRWKHU aDQW KkPination⁸⁷KkH +RXVH , /L

5XVWLQ¶V SDWULRWLV P America to me? Unlary a Dap, or a flag I see/a

certain word, democracy/What is America to me?⁸⁸ , W LV ZKDW +RPL %KDEKD FDOO

VSDFH´ DQG LWV FRQVWUXFWHG QDUUDWLRQ +H VD\ WKD

end of the national narrative: they represent the cutting edge and the totalizing powers of the

µVRFLDO¶ DV KRPRJHQHRXV FRQVHQVXDO FRPPXQLW\ DQG

⁸⁵ Alexander 195.

⁸⁶ Alexander 196.

⁸⁷ Alexander 194.

⁸⁸ Freeman 129.

D G G U H V V W R F R Q W H Q W L R X V X Q H T X D O L Q W H U H V W V D Q G L O

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

When the *White Paper Club* permeates what had been up to that time been considered normative. It is the linear that is relied on to control what is seen as a

W U D Q V J U H V V L R Q D J D L Q V W H V W D E O L V K H G O D Z D Q G W U D G L V

enemy to see you as a person who wants the same things he wants; love, a family, a job,

U H V ⁸⁹ F W W K H U P R U H ³ + H L V K X P D Q + H F D Q W U H D W \ R X E D

you show him love, you take away the reason for his fear, and make it harder for him to go on

K D W L Q ⁹⁰ R U S T I N expresses an earnest belief in the tenet of non-violence does allow him to

play different roles in the organization, masking him even more. It is said King recognized his intelligence and enthusiasm as it reminded him of his own. King and Rustin are seen to be merely two sides of the same coin. Freeman is gesturing toward an ideology that both men had

E H H Q W U D L Q H G W R L Q Q D P H O \ O D K D W P D * D Q G K L \ V \ ³ V D W \

reconciliation between disputes was founded through teleological means.

⁸⁹ Freeman 130.
⁹⁰ Freeman 130.

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

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

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

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

appointment as titular leader of bus boycott, Rustin had been a community organizer from the

V μ , W LV RXU EHOLHI WKDW ZLWKRXW GLUHFV DFWLRQ
& URZ SDWWHUQ LQ WKH⁹² V R X W W K G F D Q R W E H E U R N H Q
WKH FRUH RI . L Q J ¶ V V W U D W H J \ % X L O G L Q J R Q K L V F O R V H U

ideologies, Rustin exemplifies a phenomenological approach to breaking down racial barriers and in the process confronts the discourse surrounding sexual variance at the same time.

\$ P H U L F D Q K H J H P R Q \ ¶ V G H W H U P L Q D W L R Q W R L Q F O X G H

adhering to a fiercely held nationalistic resistance to ant-racist policies provides a context for

) U H H P D Q ¶ V S O D \ 7 K H L Q W H H H W W V R W W K H Q D W L R Q

movement. American nationalism have always exclude those not in the mainstream of its society i.e. white, Christian and heterosexual. The black movement for equal rights was a move into the middle class; it was a movement rooted in the same elements of nationalism and pan nationalism as many of the emerging liberation movements post WWII. Some of the answer must be found in the displays of power constructed by what M Jacqui Alexander would call heterosexual

hegemony. Rustin being an open homosexual signified the complexity of not only black lives in America but American life. Nationalism is built upon the traditional family unit yet this is a

U H F H Q W G H Y H O R S P H Q W D V % H Q H G L F W \$ Q G H U V R Q Z U L W H V
V R F L D O V F L H Q W L V W V D U H T X L W H D W H D V H Z L W K W K H L G H D

whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can

D V N I R U V D Y E U L L A F H V W D W H H V F R I Q

not of the others indicates a concerted investment in withholding equal rights. Blacks were told

⁹² Freeman 120.

⁹³ Anderson 144.

Q R W W R D J L W D W H F K D Q U H Z R X O G W R F F X J U V ³ Q H D Q W H U B R O M L P H Z

match the urgency of its interested subjects.

5 X V W L Q J V S R O L W L F V Z H U H S U R E O H P D W L F W R W K H . L Q J

charges and his past involvement with the communist party (something many Americans black and white were known to participate in during the Depression) the civil rights movement though mediatized by the 1950s, the pact with the federal government had been to reject communism

D Q G V X S S R U W \$ P H U L F D Q I R U H L J Q S R O L F \ ³ 7 H Q Q D Q W V D \ V

and vibrant black internationalism and Pan African of the Council on African Affairs but also for

W K H P R V W S D U W G L V D U W L F X O D W H G ⁸ ⁹⁴ T H E C I V I L R I G H T S M O V E M E N T J O R E D O V W U X

movement then was a translocal organization utilizing tactics of boycotts and politics of respectability as its calling card. The overarching strategy of the non violent resistance was its primary tool to interface with white hegemony. Even though Rustin remained an activist his

abilities were more and more minimized. Michelle Stephens sa \ V ³ \$ Q \ D W W H P S W V R Q W K

black subjects to step outside of the national struggle and yoke themselves to the idea of the internationalist revolution has immediately crossed the border into a world where race constitutes a shaping force in the worlds system, in our notion of empire, civilization, and political economic

G H Y H O R S ⁹⁵ P O R W K H U Z R U G V W K H W U D Q V J U H V V L Y H Q D W X U H

Z L W K R X W . L Q J J D V R Z H D Q L D V W L R Q \$ P H U L F D Q J R Y H U Q P H Q W J V

organization.

⁹⁴ Evelyn Tennant, *Deciphering the Global: Its Spaces, Scales and Subjects* (Routledge, 2007), 119-138.

⁹⁵ Stephens 178.

The heterosexualization of the black civil rights movement saw the upper stratum of the organization dominated by straight men. In fact, even though the movement was indeed launched

by the arrest of a black woman, black women remained in the background. M Jacqui Alexander

VD\ V WKH 3 « KHWHURVH[XDOL]DWLRQ LV RQH RI WKH SURF

DOLJQ⁹⁶HIGs in this atmosphere of post McCarthyism and the witch-hunt for communists

and homosexuals that Rustin must negotiate. Political pressure to LQWHUQDOO\ H[DPLQH R

organization before the national media performed that task for you was as prevalent then as

WRGD\ 7KH VWRULHV FLUFXODWHG DERXW 5XVWLQV KRPF

Other was in keeping with the what Alexander calls the neo imperialist managers.

.LQJ FDPH WR HPERG\ WKH KHWHURQRUPDWLYH PRGHO

construction of King himself as the masculine symbol of the movement was a deliberate attempt

to remove the image of black deviancy and show that African Americans could be good

FLWL⁹⁷HQWLOO 5XVWLQV LQFOLQDWLRQ ZDV WR PRYH DKHDC

hetero-dominated movement. Russell writes:

In his personal life, Martin Luther king Jr. demonstrated no hostility toward homosexuality, nor did he live according to the codes of heterosexual propriety. He allowed the homosexual Bayard Rustin to be one of his closest advisors during the formative years of the civil rights movement, and in 1957, when James Baldwin was one of the most famous gay men in the United States,

.LQJ ZDUPO\ ZHOFRPHG WKH DXWKRU WR \$WODQWD .LQJ¶V documented by the FBI, are now well known. Yet, in his public life, King launched a comprehensive attack on black queerness and did more than any other black leader of the twentieth century to efface the deviance of African American culture.⁹⁸

7KXV GHVSLWH .LQJ¶V XQGHUSLQQLQJV RI EHQHYROHQ

of black clergy could not contain its homophobic reactions toward homosexuals inside or outside

⁹⁶ Alexander 246.

⁹⁷ Russell 118.

⁹⁸ Russell 116.

of the movement. One of the characters in the play, 5HYHUHQG 6KXWVOHVZRUK V D
 SHRSOH EDFN LQ WKRVH GD\ VLVVLHV ZH ZLGOQW XVH WK
 as Rustin remained closeted, he was tolerated. Rustin was ostracized and then faded away from
 .LQJ\ V LQQHU FLUFOH RI DGYLVRUV 38OWLPDWHO\ KRZHY
 morality, law, Judea-Christian religion, the natural, and the heterosexual are multi-constitutive,
 policing various texts through various forms of masculinity and respectability while purporting
 WR VLJQDO OHVELDQV JD\ PHQ 100 DQG PDUJLQDO DQ LFJHG FRQVW
 silence surrounding black gayness was seen as upholding a religious conviction that the act was
 against religious and heteropatriarchal dogma, thus a protective shell was formed to resist
 variance as part of the overarching civil injustice projects.

Freeman does not avoid the question of the splintered black community. There is an
 HODERUDWH EXUOHVTXH RI WKH 3, QWHUUDFLDO 3ULPHU' ZK
 nation-state, eager to entertain as itself as well as control, explicates a number of rules of
 etiquette WR KHOS HDVH WKH ZKLWH SRSXODWLRQ LQWR WKH F
 include:

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

The primer is an actual artifact of the civil rights movement manner in which this section
 RI WKH SURGXFWLRQ LV SURMHFWHG RQWR D VFUHHQ ZLWK

⁹⁹ Freeman 134.
¹⁰⁰ Alexander 207.
¹⁰¹ Freeman 111-112.

whites. Theatricalizing tenets of the civil rights era as pedagogy of interracial relations, illustrates the very absurdist nature of the racialization in American culture. The nation- obsession with ordered behavior played out in commonsensical notions of mutual respect displays a gay man understanding of the power of negotiated respect. Rustin strategy that proved teachable to the movement he was most intimately connected to and to the looming movement of gay liberation.

Although he is mentioned frequently, Martin Luther King does not appear in the play.

himself as the masculine symbol of the movement was a deliberate attempt to remove the image despite the roadblocks erected by the hetero-dominated movement. Russell goes on to say:

In his personal life, Martin Luther king Jr. demonstrated no hostility toward homosexuality, nor did he live according to the codes of heterosexual propriety. He allowed the homosexual Bayard Rustin to be one of his closest advisors during the formative years of the civil rights movement, and in 1957, when James Baldwin was one of the most famous gay men in the United States, documented by the FBI, are now well known. Yet, in his public life, King launched a comprehensive attack on black queerness and did more than any other black leader of the twentieth century to efface the deviance of African American culture. (116)

of clergy could not contain its homophobic reactions toward homosexuals inside or outside of the movement. One of the characters in the play,

¹⁰² Russell 118

As long as Rustin remained closeted, he was tolerated. Rustin was ostracized and then faded

DZD\ IURP .LQJ¶V LQQHU FLUFOH RI DGYLVRUV ³8OWLPDWH

³WUDGLWLRQ P RCU DQ LWJON, QDZ XGHH Deterosexual are multi-

constitutive, policing various texts through various forms of masculinity and respectability while

SXUSRUWLQJ WR VLJQDO OHVELDQV JD RPHQ DQG G PDUJLQD

enormous forces of church and state to testify on behalf of the marginalized through

reconciliation and pragmatism seeming in the last analysis very much King-like.

In another scene, the language of the closet is seen to be mediated through pop culture

guardians of the black middle FODVV VXFK DV ³2XU :RUOG ´ DQ \$IULFDQ \$

magazine whose 1954 issue addresses the subject of black homosexuality. The scene opens with

a black Ozzie and Harriet at the breakfast table discussing homosexuality over their morning

coffee: Sh H VD\ V ³:KDW FDXVHV KRPRVH[XDOLW\ " 'R WKH VHHGV

HPRWLRQDO PDNH XS RI WKH IDPLO\ " ´ 7KH DQVZHUV WR ER

RI KRXLQJ EURNHQ KRPHV DQG ³VWUHHW FRUHQHU ´ VH[HG

³:KDW LV WKH PRWKHU¶V DWWLWXGH WRZDUG WRLOHW WUD

Him: In simpler language--- KRPRVH[XDOV DUH¹⁰⁴ PHDGHORW ERPHQ ´

the unsubstantiated discourse of 1950s American psychiatry filtered through a pop culture lens

dramatized by Freeman. These are not strictly black American views but a middle class

American consensus that the black middle class wish not to alienate. Freeman introduces what

now might be seen as a camp moment but underpins the prevailing homophobic reaction against

homosexual identification.

¹⁰³ Alexander 207.

¹⁰⁴ Freeman 123.

Mapping the number of historic social, cultural and political conflagrations against the
FRXQWU\¶V VXGGHQ LQWHUHVW LQ KRPRVH[XDQfÆHKDYLRU
standard medico-historic diagnosis in the field of psychiatry where the prevailing wisdom aver
the notion of homosexuality as a mental illness emphasize the closeted response to cultural
taboos against anything that might be seen as nonstandard. M Jacqui Alexander writes ³
« ZKHQ WUDGLWLRQ LV SDLUHG ZLWK EDUEDULVP LW LV GRF
struggle to beat back the modern in its unbounded desire for fixity and stasis. ⁴⁰⁵ The
transgressive Rustin was fully aware of the limitations of the movement and yet was not without
hope that the endeavor would change the thinking of the majoritarian to the extent where
American society would become in time (Alexander would still argue that linear time is a
patriarchal trap) women, gays, /DWLQRV ZRXOG DOVR ILQG WKHLU ZD\ LQW
about these geopolitical histories of colonization, neocolonialism and neo imperialism together is
also a way of thinking about the various ways in which racialization and colonization are being
FRQVWDQWO\ ZULWWHQ LQWR PRGHUQLW\¶V GLIIHUHQW SU
the uneven class relations and differentiations produced by neo- OLEHUDOV FDSL¹⁰⁶WDO GLVS
Ekxkn"Ugzø microcosm of each of the intensities that Alexander develops is shown their effect on
the wider community as systematically they are confronted by a new method of resistance that
destabilize hegemony, at least momentarily.

As the play moves back and forth in time, the spectator sees performative masculinities
struggle to adopt non resistance. Pacifism is a literal political strategy, phenomenological
UHSUHVHQWDWLRQ DQG DOOXVLRQ WR JD\ PDOH UROH SOD
violence is vital to his relationship to the overarching narrative of the movement. μ <RX PXVW KHOS

¹⁰⁵ Alexander 220.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander 194.

QRWKLQJ PRUH WKDQ ¹⁰⁹DTIO DZ cil rights project would add itself to the rules of hegemony for the larger purpose of rescinded racist laws. To Rustin credit, after his

DUUHVW KDG QRWKLQJ WR KLGH ³, V FHOLED F\ WKH DQVZH

GHVLUH ¹¹⁰Freeman's what the power wants to prohibit and the most effective way to

SURKLELW GHVLUH LV WKURXJK SXQLVKPHQW ZKHUH ³WKH I

reinvention of a heterosexual- R Q O \ W U D ¹¹¹GRWHLRQ already been exposed to this kind of punishment by being caught having sex in a park in Pasadena, California in 1953.

Enter Malcolm X

Malcolm X is introduced late in act two to explore the coming chasm between what would be seen as the assimilationist King movement and a radical re-imagining of racial politics espousing a more aggressive stance against American racist policy. Malcolm X as the

SHUIRUPDWLYH K\SHU PDVFXOLQH VLJQLILHU ZDV WR DVVH

King. Freeman takes a verbatim exchange between Rustin and Malcolm X from a radio program debate in 1963. Malcolm X states:

+HUH LQ \$PHULFD WKH EODFN PDQ LV WKH PLQRULW\ :
with WKH ZKLWH PDQ' DOO KH KDV WR GR LV OHW \RX VLW GRZ
factory or whatever else he has to do. Many of these whites who pose as liberals and act as
DGYLVRUV IRU 1HJUR OHDGHUV VXFK DV \RXUVHOI DQG 'U
7XUQ WKH R¹¹²WKHU FKHHN '

Rustin rejoins, But do you believe brotherhood is pos V L E O H ¹¹³Malcolm X clearly does not. In KL V UHVSRQVH WR 5XVWLQ KH V¹¹⁴Like the opening

with Thurmond and Randolph, the choice to include Malcolm X as the ultimate counterpoint to

¹⁰⁹ Foucault 84.
¹¹⁰ Freeman 110.
¹¹¹ Alexander 206.
¹¹² Freeman 137.
¹¹³ Freeman 137
¹¹⁴ Freeman 137.

Rustin returns the play to distinct political thinkers. The neo colonial subject was no longer according to Malcolm X to be seen as docile performers in re-claiming their right to be full

citizens in the nation- V W D W H E X W X Q G H U W K H L U R Z Q W H U P V 0 D O F R O P

anytime, sir, you have to pass a law that will make the white man accept you into his society,

W K D W ¶ V Q R W E U R W K H U K R R G W K D W ¶ V K \ S R F U L V \ « ´ 0 D O F R O P

where the liberation of blacks from a postcolonial strategy of assimilation is to be rejected. The

Q D W L R Q ¶ V Q D U U D W L R Q L Q W K L V F D V H 3 D Q \$ I U L F D Q V R O L G

K L V W R U \ G H V W L Q \ L Q U H D F W L R Q D J D L Q V W K H J H P R Q L F K L V W

temporarily, in places as well as in relational contexts that connected them to, rather than

V H S D U D W L Q J W K H P I U R P R ¹¹⁵ W K H U M S I O D K W A S I N D I E W I T H D I F E W L Y L V W V ´

transnational human rights projects where the theory of the nation- V W D W H ¶ V Q D U U D W L Y H E

repository of those in power can be seen in the writings of Homi Bhabha.

0 D O F R O P ; ¶ V P R Y H D Z O R I S T I A N ¶ V W K H L Q J D I G 5 X V W L Q ¶ V E

rights movement would effectively give birth to a number of black organizations with their own

agendas such as SNCC which spawned student protests to help South African blacks in their

struggle against their own apartheid regime. Like Rustin, utilizing the power of theatricality in

creating images of black power rather than acquiescence, 0 D O F R O P ; ¶ V h y p e U W L F X O D W H

masculine image was concomitant to that of King. Yet this is where the comparison ends. He

explains his tr D Q V Q D W L R Q D O D F W L Y L V P ³, I D Q \ W L P H V L U \ R X K I

Z K L W H P D Q D F F H S W \ R X L Q W R K L V V R F L H W \ W K D W ¶ V Q R W

gun on you to make you put your arm around me and pretend you love me, that ¶ V Q R W

¹¹⁵ Tennant 132.

EURWKHUKRRG WKURXJK ODZV RI WROHUDQFH +H JRHV RQ WR
WRJHWKHU WKURXJK ODZV RI WROHUDQFH +H JRHV RQ WR

black man into his school, neighborhood, social, economic and political system without laws

KDYLQJ WR EH SDVVHG WKHQ ZH ZRXOG JR IRU SWKDW :H Z
ZKHUH .LQJ ZRXOG VHH WKH XVHIXOQHVV RI D VWUDWHJ\ W

constructed from a knowledge- EDVH ' Wkh PRUH X would say this kind of
legislated morality is a temporality therefore merely trading one kind of slavery for a happier
slavery.

Furthermore, Marxist economic theory, elemental in the cosmology of a Pan African
movement puts an emphasis on community as economic, social and cultural collective which
played a significant role in how shapers of a post Civil Rights and Malcolm X generation of
young black intellectuals saw the importance of the heteronormative paradigm as prescriptive.

Subsequent hegemonic policy saw an overreach of capitalism whereupon neo liberal polices
stepped in to upend the scale of the burgeoning pan ethnic movements. The expanding solidarity
among groups within Islamic theocracies against the state of Israel and the formation of groups
grounded in Islamic Fundamentalism thwarted an evolutionary process of inclusiveness seized in

the last years of his life by Malcolm X. Rustin would cling to assimilation and integration seeing

LW V DGYDQWDJHV IRU Wkh EODFN DQG JDPRY HPHQW
LW V DGYDQWDJHV IRU Wkh EODFN DQG JDPRY HPHQW

strategy for the for younger generation of black men and black gay men. However, post 9/11 saw
a complication in nation-sate policies involving young black men including an influx of drugs
into the black community, draconian drug laws and an increase in the incarceration rate and thus
disenfranchisement of many black men.

¹¹⁶ Freeman 137.
¹¹⁷ Freeman 137.

6 W L O O 5 X V W L Q ¶ V P H H W L Q J D Q G H [F K D Q J H Z L W K 0 D O F F
negotiation where dialogue would act as the main conduit through which opposing views could
be aired and examined. In a sense the black gay man was now center stage, straddling the old and
W K H Q H Z , U R Q L F D O O \ L W L V 0 D O F R O P ; ¶ V P L O L W D Q W X U J H
surrounding the coming AIDS crisis. Gay groups such as ACT UP would not wait passively for
J R Y H U Q P H Q W V W R G H F L G H W R E H W R O H U D Q W L Q D F N Q R Z O H
demanding an accelerated process for releasing new drugs to soothe the afflicted. In effect, it is
the radicalism of Mal F R O P ; W K D W K D V L Q I R U P H G O L E H U D W L R Q P R Y H

5 X V W L Q ¶ V R S H Q K R P R V H [X D O L W \ D V V R F L D W H G Z L W K W
conduit to a better life for millions of the underclass, black and white, collides with Malcolm X ¶
V H S D U D W L V W L G H D V R I O L E H U D W L R Q 5 X V W L Q ¶ V J D \ V H Q V L
the universality of human experience whereas Malcolm X saw the passive channeling of a
disenfranchised group fighting for a place at the table as deleterious to that process. Both of these
men had as their goal empowerment, their strategies were axiomatically different but the end
game for Rustin and Malcolm X was the rejection of the status quo. Citizenship and sex remains
in the interstices of the activist subject crossing borders of race, ethnicity and orientation.

Civil/ Sex

The final moments of the play return to Rustin and Baldwin. The ideas of citizenry and
sexuality have been batted back and forth between the two during the course of the play.

Baldw L Q V H H V W K H F R P S U R P L V H V R I 5 X V W L Q ¶ V S R O L W L F V D V
W K H L Q W H Q V H O H J D O F K D O O H Q J H V I D F H G E \ W K H / * % 7 F R P I
cornerstone of a wave of conservative policies to come. The polity is never a place where one
strategy fits all; the black community is well aware of the number of infringements on their civil

across a generation of theatre-goers but in actuality may have more substantial appeal to a certain audience from a certain era. As assimilationist strategies have taken over black and LGBT politics in America, where even the most radical of activists seem to acquiesce to the traditional and normative. What is useful for the modern activist/spectator is *Elxkn"Ugzø* pedagogy. By the SOD\¶V HQG 5XVWLQ LV OLWHUDDOO\ ZUDSSHG LQ WKH UDL but rather what is discovered is his allegiance to an integrationist model has been adopted by several subsequent liberation movements; witness the current gay marriage controversy. We learn what Rustin learned about the advantages and disadvantages of visibility for those who struggle for recognition and full citizenship.

% DNKWLQ GHVFULEHV¹²⁰ Meaning in the 3-Dark World: The Daylight/

performer is the empowered presence who selectively edits their research merely for the sake of its theatricality. It is through an investigation of these performance genealogies, generally producing an archive stemming from ethnographic methodology and the theatricalization of the document that inform this discourse on the ontology of this performance genre in staging the

OLYHV RI 3RWKHUV '

, Q WKL V FKDSWHU , H[S Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Q ¶ V

Oral History, a documentary theatre piece presented in 2010 adapted from his interviews with black gay Southern men. His documented interviews are structured from oral histories similar to the research of another black ethnographer, Zora Neale Hurston.¹²¹ Like Hurston, Johnson

inserts himself into the narratives of those interviewed. Their research shares an overall methodological transgression of self-inscription where their biography bleeds into the

LQWHUYLHZHH¶V UHFRXQWV DFWLQJ DV FRQQHFWLYH H[SO

departs from the traditional content of black folklore narratives by including and emphasizing same sex attraction. By transmitting his narratives into theatre, the heretofore maligned black homosexual in black American dramatic literature is afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves on such topics as education, family relations, homo/sexuality, coming out and religion.

- RKQVRQ¶V SHUIR as Interviewer and Subperformer (the interviewed)

and the intentional effect of that performance in his exploration of sexual variance within the confines of Southern culture provide a lens into the complications and potentialities of making

¹²⁰Mikhail " argues most poetic genres are monologic. In the case of *Sweet Tea* I would suggest, the heteroglossia Bakhtin espouses is indeed to be found in the dramatic genre dialogic. 14 Jan 2012 [http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3304/2008-2009/07BakhtinDiscourseintheNovel\(Overview\).pdf](http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3304/2008-2009/07BakhtinDiscourseintheNovel(Overview).pdf)

¹²¹ = o *Mules and Men* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008) was first published in 1935.

visible black gay lived experience. What interests me most is an interrogation of *Sweet Tea* as it travels from document to theatre, archive to repertoire. Does documentary theatre serve in understanding this particular marginalized group or given the dearth of distinguished black gay performance simply muddy the waters further? Or does the performative phenomenological engagement portend¹²² less visibility? What about spectator response? Certainly, the play adds to the discourse on black gay aesthetics and in doing so disrupts the traditional masculinist focused drama pervasive in the black family narrative. At the same time, in adapting the archive to drama, the language of the closet as described by Sedgwick and evidenced in their liminal identity prepare a space for re-interpretation when performed by Johnson. Individual stories attest to strategies and tactics employed that may act as pedagogy for a subset of an already marginalized group and to that end, their own cultural agency. Keeping this in mind, I explore the constraints and opportunities that emerge out of this performance. What is significant about this type of theatrical gesture is that it enhances the black queer aesthetic.

Sweet Tea and New Orality

In the introduction to *Sweet Tea* Johnson approaches this project by employing a traditional text-based approach. Johnson's working approach is that of a performance studies scholar and ethnographer. His ethnographic methods are drawn from the work of D. Soyini Madison¹²⁴

¹²² @ . . . u h . . .) . . . K . . . k inelt describes the documentary as taken from a . . . The value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement p7

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

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

whose treatise on critical ethnography dispenses a modern understanding of the processes and

PHWKRG RORJLHV RI UHVHDFK RXWVLGH RI RQH HPHV FXOWXU
FXOWXUH FDQ EH FODLPHG DV KLV ELRJUDSK\ EXW KLV DSS
VXJJHVWHG JXLGHOLQHV , ZLOO OLVW WZR ZKLFK , WKLQN

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

ODGLVRQ¶V HPSKDV LJHV WR WKH DXWKRU D FOHDU HWKLF D

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

The use of oral history as the method of gathering the stories has a dual purpose for Johnson: one is the storytelling practice so closely associated with southern culture and

3 PRUHYHU RUDO KLVWRULHV « LQ VRPH ZD\ SURYLGH DQ I

dissidents, especially in the face of archivists, families of deceased queers, and other holders of queer history ZKR DUH UHOXFWDQW RU XQZLOO¹²⁶ The use of the doorz DFF

¹²⁵ Madison 151-154.

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

on one interview is central to the documentation of the lives of black gay men and yet problematizes the performance of those same stories on the stage.) X U W K H U P R W H - R K Q V R Q

positionality precludes a negative portraiture of black gay men that is in keeping with the rupture between what was considered formalist ethnography and a modern reading of the context of P D U J L Q D O L J H G S W E R T S O H V T O U Y H V

documentary theatre and critical ethnography. Having utilized the oral tradition, the exposed tensions between the traditional and the contemporary as it travels from document to stage invites a closer scrutiny of that tradition in African American narrativity.

, I Z H U H I H U W R & D U R O O D U W L Q T V G H V F U L S W L R Q V R I G F

W H Q H W V E H L Q J ³ 7 R H O D E R U D W H E A F R I K A N T R A D I T I O N O F T H E G R I O T, W X U H R I W K

storyteller, would seem to preserve the link between African folklore and African American folk lore where the oral tradition has long been considered by anthropologists and ethnographers as the main tool of communication by which African/American heritage is remembered and preserved¹²⁸. In the past, an overdetermined notion of oral tradition promulgated by formalists sought to structure definite distinctions in oral tradition thus binding oral societies into rigid W K L Q N L Q J D E R X W W K H L U S D V W V 7 K H R U S D O N G T H E N E W R U V L V L C

source for ethnographers or historians in recording remembrances of events from their black subjects. I say overdetermined because of the lack of nuance missed by the recorder as well as related as a self-editing for the purposes of tradition or safety by those being interviewed. In this way the oral history becomes a part truth, part performance, depending on who is telling or

¹²⁷ # U " - TDR, 50.3 (Autumn 2006) 11.

¹²⁸) ‡ # u y \ u Ethnohistory 56.1 (Winter 1989). In his essay, Cohen Oral Historiography = Traditions are those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture. Versions that are not widely known should rightfully be #

the definitions are not as distinct as Henige professes.

retelling the story. I include this Eurocentric reading of oral history because it was widely thought this was the sole method in which the Africans communicated their history; many early white ethnographers relied on this bit of deduction in their embrace of the oral history as representing a way of relating passed onto the generations of African Americans as true way of

U H F R U G L Q J W K H L U H [S H U L H Q F H \$ V & R K H Q ¶ V H V V D \ R Q \$ I U
been regional aspects of oral tradition where those who have access to the knowledge of the community were asked to give witness as well as other complexities that tended to be overlooked. The complexities would include the area of sexual variance where the black community would certainly know about it but never have admitted to the behavior and perhaps issues of divided within the community that were present i.e. religious and spiritual differences, education etc that would be cause for the critical ethnographer to seek the groups within the groups like peeling back the layers of an artichoke to get a fuller description of the stories being related , Q W K L V U H J D U G - R K Q V R Q ¶ V S H U I R U P D Q F H H W K Q R J U D

Johnson cites an affinity to Hurston by patterning his research into the marginalized lives of the other alongside hers. Comparatively, Hurston interviewed her subjects at a time when their ability to read and write was limited by their race and class. The argument could be made the

F R P P R Q D O L W \ Z L W K - R K Q V R Q ¶ V V X E M H F W L V W K H L U E O D F N
D V H Y H U H O \ U H V W U L F W H G O H J D U G V H V W H F P K X W R E O L N H + X U V
written into her novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* - R K Q V R Q ¶ V V X E M H F W V P
W K H W K H D W U L F D O V W D J H + X U V W R Q ¶ V D U F K L Y H E D V H G R Q
access to reading and writing as op S R V H G W R - R K Q V R Q ¶ V U H V H D U F K E D V H G
a culture with some access to reading and writing. The distinction is not as rigid as it may appear at first glance because even though there is a lack of access to formal reading and written skills,

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

Still, the question of who is in control of the mediated narrative, author or subject, lingers. The axiomatic response would be the men interviewed become the primary source, the archive, of any subsequent re-imagined mediatization of the oral histories. Diana Taylor defines *W K H D U F K L Y H D V* ¹³² «As the place where knowledge is stored, power is invested in the entity. The written /oral divide as Taylor attests does not necessitate that one has predominance over the other. Meaning there is not a struggle between the two as both act as mnemonic transmitters and animator for the repertoire. Moreover the argument can be extended to the repertoire as a place to transmit knowledge¹³³ therefore performance can live in both the moment and the reproduction. Tampering with the document as it is transmitted into stage performance cannot help but produce mediation. - R K Q V R Q Z U L W H V ³ 7 K X V L W Z D V me that I conduct an oral history project that would take advantage of my training in performance studies and ethnography, for the sensuousness of performance ethnography ² the smell, taste, touch, sight, and sounds of the cultural space of the other ² is also part of the V R X W K H U ¹³⁴ Writing and performing against this strict boundary of the South as a place of racial and class tensions, the spaces between the elongated oppression of blacks is where

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

¹³³ Taylor 16

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

- RKQVRQ¶V PHQ DVVHUW WKH community they helped to form and

furthermore their presence stands as a signifier for the marginalized in communities black and white outside of the South.

Departing from the masculinist narrative traditionally preferred by the black community,

- RKQVRQ¶V V XEMHFWV DUH QRW RQO\ DVNHG WR JLYH WHV

experiences as black and gay but they also provide ethical commentary on a variety of societal issues that address their political and social acculturation. For example, when C.C. is asked to describe growing up gay and black in Mississippi in the 1970s, he answers:

> « @ :KHQ , ZDV JURZLQJ XS DQG WKLJ JRHV EDFN WR IRU %DFN LQ MXQLRU KLJK , ZDV JRLQJ OLNH WR SDUJ Because there were gay men in the community that were very sophisticated. And this is something I tell everybody. I grew up around very sophisticated black gay men, and in VRPH ZD\V , GLGQ¶W NQRZ RI DQ\ RWKHU WKLQJ 6R W WUDYHOLQJ DQG , ZRXOG DOZD\V WKLQN h, h, h or whatever, European, would be all over me. And I got it. I had the best education in WHUPV RI EHLQJ ZHOO UHDG KRZ WR HDW KRZ WR KDY WUDYHOLQJ D \RXQJ EODFN PDQ DQG WKHQ PHHWLQJ GLIIHUHQW IURP HYHQ ZKHUH , FRPH IURP ´ 6R , WKLQ people were just not allowing you to be anything. They had a vested interest in your well-being¹³⁵.

Such testimony gives the reader/spectator a glimpse into contemporary American social culture

UHIXWLQJ WKH PLVUHSUHVHQWHG QRWLRQ WKDW WKHUH ZD

FRPPXQLW\ DQG WKH ³ROG VFKRRO´ VWUDWHJ\ RI HGXFDWL

& & ¶V FDVH S the forces of these men in conjunction with his own black gay

YRLFH -RKQVRQ RSHQV D V SDFH ZKHUH WKHLU ³WDON EDFI

between opposing forces. Writing about reflexivity, Victor Turner offers:

¹³⁵ Johnson 101

« SHUIRUPDQFH UHI... Its most perceptive members acting representatively turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves.¹³⁶

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

*Uyggv/Vgcø*s overall liminality gestures toward pedagogy as fluid peripatetic. When the question of sexual identity is examined, these men from wide ranging communities within the Southern states offer anecdotes of commonality, while elucidating varying perspectives based on their individual circumstances their comfortability with all or partial degrees of the contemporarily held notion of being openly gay. When asked how he felt about being a black gay man, R. Dioneaux , one of the pre- RS WUDQVJHQGHU VD\V³, DP D KXPDC Who is black? I am a human being who is black. I am a human being who, at the moment, is male. At least the shell says that. The vessel VD\V WKDW 7KH GULYHU↑V OLFHQV WKH HPSKDVLV RQ³, DP D KXPDC EHLQJ ZKR LV « ´ 7KH QRX IRU PH¹³⁷ Révealed in her answer is the conscious/unconscious strategies of survival, maneuvering in the quotidian in a search for identity and identification. It also speaks to the fragmentation of the noun and imposed adjectives. Here the conversation accomplishes a dual process in the methodology of oral history where the ignored voice of black gay man is amplified

E\ RQH EODFN JD\ PDQ ZKR LQ WXUQ UHSUHVHQWV D SURMH

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

¹³⁷ Johnson Sweet Tea 390.

WHOOLQJ¹³⁸ The R. L. Johnson homogenized language is their place of immanence while a range of black gay performativity is actualized in staging.

To trouble this point of objectivity just a bit further, it might be argued the black and gay community upon seeing the production rather than reading about its origins would seem to

DIFFHSW DW RQFH -RKQVRQ¶V SRUWUD\DOV EHFEDXVH RI D ID
SROLWLFDOO\ JDOYDQLJLQJ IRU WKH FRPPXQLW\ ,Q DQ HD
VSRNHQ RI +DUU\ (ODP¶V WKHRU\ RI WKH ³UHDOLW\ FKHFN´

collective black activism, citing the repetitive circulation of a mediated captured violence directed against black people namely the beating and murder of Emmett Till and later the beating

RI 5RGQH\ .LQJ 8VLQJ WKHDWUH DV PHWDSKRU IRU LGHQW

moment made several times larger on a scale of intensity by a history of compounded atrocities.

Digestion of this realness moved the black community to take action against the oppressive and dismissive nature of the nation-state. Thus the documentary approach is a moment of pedagogy for the black community as well as for the nation-state. But what if queer resists realism?

Of course, manner and mode of representation do have their repercussions in *Uyggv'Vgcøu*

conversion to a play. Summarily, the way the black gay men are read and the Q ³UHDG´ DV WKH\

performed discloses the danger of what Reinelt described as the anti- WKHDWULFDO ³VXVSLFL

mimesis. Portraying these lives on stage exposes them to the constraints of the newly visible

where their presence complicates the traditional structure of black narrativity. The intermittent

black gay character (generally the sissy) that had been seen in black drama since the 1960s

became a trope of sexual variance used by black playwrights to assert the hyper masculine and a

denunciation of the black homosexual as being the de-masculinization perpetuated by white

¹³⁸ Johnson 606.

hegemony. Of course, this homophobic response is reaction to the historic injustice and misrepresentation of black men traced back to the minstrel image and to the sudden emergence of black competition with working class white males as a result of the black civil rights gains in the 1960s. *Uyggv"Vgcøu* circumscribing of the black gay experience is sutured to the heteronormative black experience and consequently reifies an image of shame and prejudice, threatening the traditional values of the black community. This threat re-enforces the language of WKH FORVHW DQG VXGGHQO\ WKH ³GRZQ ORZ´ EHFRRPHV WK sexual variance.

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

For whatever is lost in translation as the archive is adapted into the repertoire, the actuality of performance of the archive must imbricate the entire range of possibility and a UHDOL]DWLRQ RI FRQVWUDLQWV -RKQVRQ¶V SHUIRUPDQFH of its uniqueness and by the exposure of the black gay lens on a variety of subject. What the research reveals is the history of the black homosexual and heterosexual communities is connected by way of their mutual modes of survival. Their histories cannot be rendered into a dyad where the perspective of each respective group is seen to contradict or differ mightily from

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

Sweet Tea "Vtcpuht o cvkqp"kpvtq"Eqew o gpvct{"Vjgcvtg

The point of *Uyggv"Vgcou* performance ethnography methodology is to provide an archive of black gay southern men. At first this may seem axiomatic but as Madison describes the many ways the ethnographer can become the conduit through which the subject is accessed and

H[SHULHQFHG LW PD \ uEhose way to Record their Story. This is why that the avenues of communication where the explicit aim is to reveal a subculture little exposed to the public will search for a variety of outlets to gain visibility. Madison convincingly argues it is a method for expanding American historical memory. The act of remembering as a recuperative is a pivotal tactic for those wishing to forge a connection between the performance ethnography

DQG GRFXPHQW DU \ WKHDWUH & DURO 0DUW represents a WHV ³ & R C struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history ² the complex ways in which men

DQG ZRPHQ WKLQN DERXW WKH HYHQWV ¹³⁹ WKUWLOK D SH WKH assessment gives a good definition for this genre of theatre but I would emphasize the

complexities she speaks about as it applies to the very different experiences of men and women

LQ WKH VDPH VRFLDO VHWWLQJ \$OWKRJK WKLW WKHDWUH

event that resonates and at best parallels something in the present, it does necessarily plot an

understanding of past events in an egalitarian manner. Diana Taylor tells us, ³ 3 HUIRUPDQFH

¹³⁹ Martin 9.

JHQHDORJLHV GUDZ RQ WKH LGHD RI H[SUHVVL, the PRYHPHQ

authors of these productions are then responsible to the facts of the stories that are trying to re-tell. Particularly when the subject of the performance crosses sexuality and race, a potentiality of alterity is at play in revealing what had been secreted or invisible or even misconstrued.

Considering Bakhtin, Johnson as author imageHPERGLHV KLV FKDUDFWHUV ¶
interrogation of sexual exploration. Speaking about the manner in which they use their bodies is the performative gesture most discomfiting to their relatives and subsequently the black community. Moving his body suggestively in some of the narratives is a deliberate pedagogical exercise where Johnson invokes a freedom of black gay physical desire and sensuality inherent in their identity. ³, I ERXQG DULHVQ \$ WRKLEER WIDRUEH WHVWHG ´
a transgressive manner then the relationship between the perpetrator and the act must be willful DQG LQWHQG HG QRW DFFHQWDO RU XIDFXUDL RXV ´
used by Jenks to describe the transgressor but evokes a racialized lens of overwhelming criminal EHKDYLRUV DVFULEHG WR EODFN PHQ ,Q -RKQVRQ ¶ V FDVH
is a willful act targeting a taboo. The effect is that the transgressive acquire a voice and a platform to explore the interstices between appropriation and assimilation where the identifying FXOWXUDO PDUNHUV DUH QR OREDFNU' WRQWKHG WDMRUELLVODLV
absence of the marginalized in history that make the telling of their stories so vital. In fact, the talk back becomes recuperative for the actor and the spectator. The genre is particularly useful to LGBT and people of color because it allows for the transitory history Martin writes about to finally have a hearing. As an example, Syggv"Vgcðu"black gay men tell us what we could not know about a sexual agency practiced by black gay men in the American South.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor 5.
¹⁴¹ Chris Jenks, Transgression, (London: Routledge, 2003) 177

As dramaturgy documentary theatre is pastiche borrowing from theatre conventions, testimonials, and oral interpretation in service to remembering the past, determined by the most sophisticated technology i.e. the tape recorder, video camera etc. The methodology surrounding the gathering of these narratives relays to the audience that the story performed is based on a verbatim conversation. Since the audience was not present at the taped interview, there is understandably no way they can extrapolate from the interviews the complexities of the described events. The argument that arises from a reliance on these technologies to hold the

FRQYHUV D W L R Q DV ³HYLGHQFH' DV LW LV WUDQVPLWWHG L
 author of the piece acts as judge and juror where their presence will subversively or covertly seep into the performance V ¶ YHULVLPLOLW XGHHUHQDZHQDQYRQRIAWKHA
 Taylor would say the body of evidence does not lie with the written and the oral history as places where authority can be claimed *per se* but instead between the archival material and the repertoire or embodied practice/knowledge.¹⁴² Taylor says it is the interaction of the archive and repertoire as a marker of what is possible to learn and understand about cultures that have been dismissed RU HUDVHG E\ WKH GRPLQDQW VRFHDO, QIRUHQHU & DURC
 what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability \ ' \$ W H L S E M S W W A
 LQ ORRN L Q J DW - R K Q V R Q ³SHUIRUPDQFH' LW PDQDJHV WR F
 viable albeit mediated mode of re-telling the lives of these men.

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

¹⁴² Taylor 19.

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

Placing the representation of black gay males in the genre of documentary theatre brings the sociohistoric and geopolitical together to project onto the stage an image of black gay men which is intended to provide a frame work for a hermeneutic. Online reviewer Keith Ecker

describes the direction: Daniel Alexander Jones ¶ GLUHFWRQ LV GHFHQW WKRXJK

Often Johnson will be fumbling with a jar or stringing a strand of beads onto a tree for no

DSSDUHQW UHDVRQ 3HUKDSV LW¶V SRHWLF EXW LW¶V PHD

distraction as it is a missed opportunity.¹⁴³ I would have rather seen action that falls in line more

directly with the stories, whether acting out anecdotes or assuming the posture each character

possessed while being interviewed by Johnson. The question to be asked would be is the piece an

avenue of inclusionary politics? The answers are a hopeful positive that leads to further

representation of black gay men in performance. Moreover, the lives of these men happen to be

transmitted through the body of another self-identified black gay man. It is a point that cannot be

overstated as the question of what one does ZLWK RQH¶V ERG\ EHFRRPHV WKH VLV

the strategy of survival and provides the leitmotif of their wonderings and wanderings. Johnson

shares commonality of race, sexual orientation, religion in most cases as well as regional origins.

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

6 W L O O H Y H Q L I W K H S H U I R U P H U μ V E L R J U D S K \ L Q W H U V H F W V

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

7 K H G R F X P H Q W D U \ W K H S W E E T H E M T O D I N F I N A Q W K H Y F D V H R I

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

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

The Tea on Performing Our Own

There is revealing monologue o Q W K H R U L J L Q V R I ³ W H D ´ D V L W S H U W D significance to black people and in particular, black gay men spoken by Johnson as Johnson. In it Johnson is holding a jar of sweet tea as he takes the audience on a genealogical journey of the makings of the beverage and metonymically has come to represent much more than just the U R P D Q W L F F X O W X U D O 6 R X W K H U Q F X O W X U D O U H I H U H Q W + H race and class boundaries, and every family (and even different people within the same family) K D V L W V R ¹⁴⁴ Q Using language loaded with metaphor, Johnson embodies ingredients of the sweet tea process. At the same time affirming through his body the presence of a constructed subject formation that is part of a subculture where the vernacular is invented by the group much O L N H W K H Y D U L D Q W U H F L S H I R U V Z H H W W H D 7 K H Z R U G ³ W E O D F N J D \ Y H U Q D F X O D U \$ V K H S H U I R U P V ³ W H D ´ L V W K H R powerful and forceful support for the freedom to be as visible as one can be.

In its transformation from book to play, the demands of performing the verbatim narratives of his subjects are shaped by several modes of performance technique. However, - R K Q V R Q T V

VD \ V ³ , D P D F F R X Q W D E O H L Q D Q H Z Z D \ ¹⁴⁵ Q R Z W K D W W K H V H

¹⁴⁴ Johnson 19.

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

primary position of being author and interlocutor is a performative that offers several avenues in the way of performance. Ironically, Johnson as black, gay and Southern, performs his own subjectivity that becomes the basis for his performance technique. According to *Theatre Journal*

UHYLHZHU \$QQ) SO de Q B \ K DW M W K U W D O V] F D W R K Q V R Q ¶ V X Q G I
HWKQRJUDSK \ ¶ V VWUH Q J W K V D V D Q H P E R G I L H G F R
LQWHUYL¹⁴⁶ Q Z F R U S R U D W L Q J W K H W H Q H W V R I O D G L V R Q ¶ V S U R S
LQIRUPDWLRQ DQG WKHQ et formal as sole Auditor L Q J e r v i c e R t k o V R Q ¶ V S

tenuous authenticity of the documentary theatre performance. Johnson performs as himself between charters, dressed simply in slacks and button down shirt, retaining the auraization of the academic researcher

LQ DQ HIIRUW WR VWULS WKH VSHFWDFXODULW
QDUUDWLYHV FRXOG UHODWHG LQ D GLUHFWO \ ZLWKRXW -
)ROLQR :KLWH GHIHQGV KLQWV RI WHQXR XVQHVV ZKHQ VKH
characterizations of each man, Johnson sustained his presence as intermediary between audience
DQG V X E M H F¹⁴⁷ W H K D F U D F W H U of interpretation as well as integrating the non
linear storyline as the men and Johnson expound on various topical issues.

Black gay performance/performatvity began in the 1970s emerging out of the nascent performance art genre. Essentially, the politics of identity opened the door to avant-garde performances built on feminist and gay themes. Some of the more renowned examples include Vaginal Davis and Sylvester. These performance artists created pieces that explored racism and classism. The VROR SHUIRUPHU ¶ V³ DFWLQJ ´ RI D YDULHW \ RI LQGL traumatic event, the modern theatre sophisticate has become inured and initiated into this performance genre to the extent that it is accepted as a natural method in representing others in

¹⁴⁶ Folino White 675. *Theatre Journal* 62.4 (December 2010) 675.

¹⁴⁷ Folino White 675.

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

7KH YLDELQW\ RI -RKQVRQ¶V DFWLQJ DELQW\ RU UDW

by the attendance of a sizeable portion of his audience as black gay men. Metaphysically, it is this relational mode of symbiotic transfers between actor and audience that quantifies certain truthfulness in the project. Reinelt writes:

« WKH LGHD RI PXOWLSOH UHODWLRQV KLSV WR SHUIRUPD establishes some of the parameters to how documentaries mean: the meanings are produced relationally. In documentary, some aspects of the lifeworld of the spectators are evoked because they know beforehand or come to recognise the reality-based aspect of the performance. They may therefore take up the labour of learning about and integrating what they are experiencing with their own existential existence. On other occasions, they may view it as a fiction and ignore the reality factor. In some cases, they may become involved with what they see as if it were directly connected to their own lives, stimulating personal memories, identification, recognition.¹⁴⁹

, Q WKH URRP WKH DXGLEOH JDVSV RI UHFRJQLWLRQ IURP

or manner in which Johnson moves his hands, eyes, voice that heighten the kinetic response within the spectator. These men dance with each other figuratively in the corporeal facticity of

- RKQVRQ¶V VIXUURJEDWH JDVSV is aware of the slippage in this genre of

theatre WKH ORQH DFWRU SHUIRUPLQJ KLV PXOWLSOH VXEMHFW

the theatrical conceit of becoming the character. - RKQVRQ¶V SHUIRUPDQFH LV QRW

direct outing out of each of his characters. There is not the precision of southern accent that attends each man who represents different region over several Southern States. So Johnson

¹⁴⁹ Reinelt 7-8

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

First, if we look at the work of Anna Deveare Smith, we will find comparable examples to illustrate an adapted structural method of performance Johnson utilizes as his primary performance model. In her search to evolve from the interiority of American Method acting, Deveare Smith sought to challenge the notion of using the self to become the self of another character/subject. In her experimentation and applicability she concentrated on what a character spoke, diving that once the words were absorbed, the body and soul of the character was etched onto the body of the performer U P H U 5 H S H D W L Q J R I W K H V X E M H F W V ¶ Z R U G V ¶ serves as their technique of inhabiting the character. It is distinctive from a kind of psychological interiority where the monologue of the individual actor is copacetic with the characters ¶ emotional trajectory. The spectator is allowed into the experience of the subject when there is a certain distancing between actor and subject. It is not clear in either the document or his program notes what mode of acting his characters Johnson adopts but since his play owes much W R 6 P L W K ¶ V Z R U N L Q V W \ O H D Q G V W U X F W X U H L W L V H D V \ 6 P L W K ¶ V ³ P H W K R G ´ W K D Q W K H 0 H W K R G + R Z H Y H U Z H P X V V subjects differ from that of Deveare Smit K Z K H U H D V V K H ³ L Q K D E L W V ´ D Y D U L H V and female, some famously positive and some famously villainous taken from the real event of K H U S O D \ V - R K Q V R Q ¶ V F K D U D F W H U V D U H P H Q D Q G D O O R I to say that are not fierce in their ability to survive but none are famously known as negative characters in their community.

¹⁵⁰Anna Deveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* XXVII

Sweet Tea¹⁵¹ V X V H R I D S D V W L F K H R I W K H D W U L F D O F R Q Y H Q W

solo performance genre. If Deveare Smith has defined the documentary performance to mean a

U H P R Y H G D S S U R D F K Z K H U H D Q X P E H U R I G L I I H U H Q W F K D U D

performance utilizes a partial applicability because his performance includes black gay men from

the south albeit from different classes U H J L R Q V D Q G H G X F D W L R Q O R U H R Y H U

are specific in her choice of social events so the documentation comes from mostly recognizable

personalities. She employs the same kind of verbatim channeling for each character. Johnson on

the other hand, takes unknown people and thus defines them for the spectator. The traumatic

events in the lives of the men coincide and overlap in many instances with the overall injustice

for black Americans. The window of how this group survives is the window through which we

get to experience his men. Their view of black gay history is the true benefit of his performance.

Their narratives are presented in some cases as ongoing conversations about spirituality and

sexual orientation or ruminations on differences between black gay men and white gay men. This

L V W R V D \ W I S E W S C E N E Q V H R Q V Q R G H Q R X H P H Q W X Q O L N H ' H Y H D

the endgame is known to the audience.

There is another performance method for the type of ethnographic research that speaks to

restored behavior. Performance Studies maven Richard Schechner defines performance as

³ U H V W R U H G ¹⁵¹ E H K V D Y L R U S X W L Q S H U V R Q D O W H U P V U H V W R U H

D P V R P H R Q H H O V H ' 6 F K H F K Q H U J R H V R Q W R V X E V W D Q W L D

rehearsal process where the strips of behavior extracted from the dramatic setting are pieced

together to formulate the performance. Through a series of rehearsal gestures that are actually

based upon the research of the actor ritualizes their physical embodiment of their subject. It is

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

Z L W K R X W W K H D L P W R Z D U G D F D W K D U W L F U H V S R Q V H I U R P

to their subject. It is through this restored behavior as performance method that the actor finds the nuances and boundaries of his characters and through which the audience can identify.

Identity and identification then becomes a performative mode to express individual identity.

Searching for the core of the performance, the idea is that through the repetition of behavior,

there will emerge the authentic. 7 K X V W K H D F W R U L L E H F W R P H P H G H S P W K U R X J

which the subject presents it. The entire mimetic is elided while an adherence to what has been absorbed by the mind and body of the actor through the rehearsal process is the framing device

for performance. Here again, Johnson would say he is not trying to strictly restore the behavior

of the men. As the lone actor on the stage, it is his physical and mental commitment each night to

give the written performance but his body is subject to that of the athlete who may or may not be

able to achieve a certain threshold of peak ability each night so the characters will sometimes be

impressionistic or the energy will be calibrated throughout to give Johnson the resilience to

sustain an evening of acting eleven different people.

, Z R X O G R I I H U - R K Q V R Q ¶ V S H U I R U P D Q F H I R U P V D K \ E U L

Schechner taking useful aspects of each technique; non interiority and a rehearsal process to

structure and distinguish each character. Johnson adds something else though, performing black

gay men as a black gay man. His biography intersects with those of his character, making this

kind of performance more about the engagement with an empathetic and sympathetic audience.

This is to say, **Sweet Teas** the cliché would have it, preaches to the choir as it weaves together

race and sexual orientation but it is the method of performance for that should be considered an

autonomous choice as it seeks to find the inclusionary throughway into a setting called a public

venue. Having the freedom to be able to perform this black gay event openly allows for

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

Johnson enters through a screen door on the porch as himself. He quickly moves into the audience area, passing down the front row, greeting those whom he knows and does not know. It is a gesture of welcome and the **gestus** of openness from the performer, as if there is nothing to hide. I extend myself to you as a southern gentle man and as a black gay man that prepared to engage you. It is the gesture that will come from his characters, too. The men he performs are not hesitant to share their stories and opinions on a wide range of topics. As his body assumes the idiosyncratic nuances of the characters/signifiers, Johnson propels himself into the story as willing host. In performing his host duties, he manages to put the audience at ease. It is an ease that is meant to invite confidence and to suspend disbelief. To be clear, the spectator is asked to believe that the performance and the stories are true ² black gay men exist in the south and have lived amongst those in denial or partial acknowledgement for generations.

, Q W K H S U R J U D P Q R W H V - R K Q V R Q ¶ V F O D L P V W K D W K H
performance. In framing each character for the audience, he interjects moments and events from his own biography as a black gay southern man to assert his subjectivity and objectivity. His playing arises from his observance of the physicality of each individual. The audience must rely
D Q G W U X V W - R K Q V R Q W K D W K L V U H Q G H U L Q J R I W K H V H P H
conform to the entertainment aspect of the theatrical. However, it must be understood at the same time that the number of men interviewed by Johnson, only eleven of them make it into the play. So we must assume some were omitted because of the similarity of their actual accounts of

H Y H Q W V R U S H U K D S V V R P H Z H U H O H V V ³ G U D P D W L F ' W K D Q V
P L J K W E H H Y H Q P R U H U H O H Y D Q W L V - R K Q V R Q ¶ V D I I L Q L W \ I

no slight was intended. So it is their imagination.

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

Interestingly, the ability to isolate/connect is as much a part of their narratives as their ability to be openly gay. For these men know where to find homosexual contacts if they so desire. We are told over and over again that the isolation was many times self imposed because there was no lack of companionship or sex partners. It is idea of that they are now able to exert some agency in their choices that is communicated through the piece. This idea is played out against the pervasive black male image. As transgressive acts, meaning that black gay men were outside of heteronormative authority structure subscribed to by the black middle class saw the fractured nature of identification is also symptomatic of dis-identification. 'XQFDQ RIIHUV 37KH ZDV D PRPHQW ZKHQ P\ IDWKHU ZDV WU\LQJ WR EXWFK PH

DERXW PH VD\LQJ ³, P JNDQ, WLQD XSERXWPVHOI DJDLQVW
WDX¹⁵²JKW
Identification being a political, social and cultural practice is equally problematic for the same sex attracted in the black community. The argument against black gayness by those in the black intelligentsia as well as the Black Arts movement of the 1960s was that homosexuality was a decadent and therefore European perversion. If you identified with that then you could not be identified with the burgeoning black power movement.

Any attempt to unpack the characters motivations as they present their choices reveals
ZKDW LV D[LRPDWLF DQG VXEWOH LQ D GLVFXVVLRQ RI WKH
obvious that the collective material where the central focus is the experience of black gay men is not aggregate to offer a wide-ranging look at the diversity within the black gay community that completely distinguishes a critical analysis from that of the now familiar, well established dramatic narratives drawn from the normative black community. A worthwhile critical review where an argument is attempted in favor or against this type of strong character or weak characters amount to the same subjective discourses applied to the numerous collections of black themed dramaturgy. Therefore, DV , WDNH D OHVV WKDQ IRUPDO FULWLFDD
dramaturgy, what approach is partly familiar to performance review but in addition a more free
IORZLQJ PHGLWDWLRQ RU LQ EODFN JD\ YHUQDFXODU ³VKD
that differ from many of their counterparts, urban black masculinities predominant in late 20th century black drama who reveal to the spectator their orientation.

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

¹⁵² Johnson 49

same way because they are southern, black and gay. If the actor (not in the traditional sense but the object through which these lives are re-told) in all sincerity is methodically and deliberately removing themselves from the equation, the lives of these individuals are still being re-told. So aspects of their lives are observed and absorbed by the spectator even when the narrator remains faithful to his subject and their words. It is language that gives meaning to their lives and while

WKH ZRUGV DUH DEOH WR GHILQH WKHLU LGHQWLWLHV LW

process. Dis-identification is the process by which the marginalized (in this case people of color) have been able to survive under withering prejudicial laws creating an underclass beholden to the social and cultural boundaries prescribed by those in power (in this case, the white heteropatriarchy). As described by Munoz¹⁵³, the act of dis-identification is a literal self-imposed severing of identity so that one is neither black nor white but a momentary hybrid while in the midst of a hostile public sphere. For black gay men, their participation in the community is obvious in some ways and subversive in others but the same can be said of blacks within the white power structure. Fragmentation has its transcendent qualities lending itself to the subjugated subject a means of agency.

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

¹⁵³ Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications*. pp 15-20. U is ascribed to people of color and exclusively to queer people of color as a strategy of survival. His ideas are also used by Patrick Johnson in his lengthy essay on Grandmother: from *Black Queer Studies* (2005) 124-151.

VSHDNV RI KLV FKLOGKRRG ZKHUH ³ «WKHUH ZDV DOZD\ V D

of protect me. But the bigger boys, I never had sex with them, but they just kind of felt a sense

WKDW , QHHGH ¹⁶⁴Greene senses the attraction to other boys but does not act on it. I

would submit this is one of the freedoms that complicates a total embrace of coming out for many black gay men.

Contrasting the experience of black gay men then and now allows Johnson a

KLVRULRJUDSKLFD LQVHUW LOOXVWUDWLQJ LURQLFDOO

the 20th century than can be seen contemporarily. From the oldest, George Eagerson to the

youngest, Stephen and 7LP¶P SRLQW RXW WKH GLIIHUHQFH EHWZHHQ

sissy ways then and now. George Eagerson, a transgender nightclub performer known as

Countess Vivian is aware of the number of black gay bars in New Orleans beginning in the

1920s where the need to be a masculine homosexual was not the sought after fantasy figure of

desire prevalent in contemporary homo society. His experience as chronicler offers a glimpse

inside the occupied space of queerness where the sissy is the predominant and pervasive

homosexual representation. She is framed as sitting on the porch in a rocker with a fan as she

displays the witticisms and wisdom of a *grande dame*. The Countess uses a cane and reminds us

of her longevity. Johnson luxuriates in her body and words as he performs her using a fan to

punctuate and accentuate her narrative.

7KH \RXQJHU PHQ DOWKRXJK WKH\ LGHQWLW\ DV JD\ V

SHUVRQD DQG LQWHJUDO SDUW RI WKHLU LGHQWLW\ DV D

are there to give a spectrum of black gay identification with the sissy being a referent for a host

of experiences that teaches the young black gay boy that in order to survive, that aspect of his

¹⁵⁴ Johnson E Patrick. *Sweet Tea*. p.50

character should be toned down or erased all together. To be clear, this is not confined to the black gay homosexual but to the larger western practice of homonormativity and the preference

IRU WKH ³, ¶ P MXVW OLNH HYHU\RQH HOVH´ SDUDGLJP , PHU

As the white gay community gained visibility during the years of identity politics, the image of white homosexuals was determined changed to minimize the image of the effeminate white gay male. After all there had been centuries of the performed dandyism among white homosexuals, at

WLPHV WKH SHUIRUPDQFH ZDV DFFHSWDEOH ZHUH WKHUH Z

White male privilege prevailed. There were times in Western societies where male/male relationships were condoned and exalted. But the black sissy has eked out a unique identity within the both the contemporary black and white gay communities. The black sissy was never prone to mask itself in layers of performed masculinity. The black sissy seemed to revel in its spectacularity. The black sissy was recognized member of the black community even though it could be a fraught relationship. The black sissy was the conduit through which the gay black male could maneuver its own subjectivity. The snap queen acted as liberator to the western gay movement.

If there is a discursive discourse presented in the narratives it is the relationship these men have with organized religion. To be sure, most of these men are men of faith, who exhibit for the most part fealty to Western religious tradition namely Christianity. Yet, this is not to say

WKH\ GRQ ¶ W TXHVWLRQ WKH SURFHVVHV RI WKH FKXUFK ZK

unnatural and a strict reading of the Bible, sinful. However each man is allowed to argue his case for remaining in the church despite its prejudicial doctrines. Many of these men adhere to these

GRFWULQHV *HURPH VD\V ³ « , WKLEONWKDWHRIGORYHV WK

Z K D W W¹⁵⁵ H n e s G n R n discuss tradition but at the same time implement and practice a heterodoxy that they have creatively erected in service to their own sense of responsibility to their community.

The black church is a place of ambivalence Sweet Tea Even though the black church like the black community is not a monolithic entity, still the impact of the church on the quotidian life of black people is an undeniable and essential place to understand the social movements of black people in the United States and particularly in the Southern United States. Like Hurston,

- R K Q V R Q ¶ V L Q W H l u t o t h e b z e n a p o r t h e W u r c h a n o n e a r l y e v e r y a r e a o f e d u c a t i o n a n d d i s c i p l i n e a s g u i d i n g p o s t s f o r l i v i n g . T h a t C h r i s t i a n i t y h a s s u c h a t r e m e n d o u s

h o l d o n b l a c k A m e r i c a n s f r o m t h i s p e r i o d t o c o n t e m p o r a r y t i m e h a s i t s f o u n d a t i o n i n t h e s o l i d a r i t y f o s t e r e d b y t h e b l a c k c h u r c h i n e x t e n d i n g i t s s u p p o r t t o a g r o u p b a s i c a l l y s u r r o u n d e d b y t h e e n e m y . W h e n w r i t i n g a b o u t t h e c o l o n i a l s t r u c t u r e , A n n P e l l i g r i n i u s e s t e r m s l i k e

³ D S S U R S U L D W L R Q ´ D Q G ³ D V V L P L O D W L R Q ´ I L J D X O L H V ¹⁵⁶ P Q ´ W K H K L I n t r o d u c e t h e s e t e r m s b e c a u s e t h e y a r e i n t e r w o v e n i n t o t h e h i s t o r i c n a r r a t i v e o f b l a c k s i n

A m e r i c a . I t i s a m e a n s b y w h i c h t h e i r s t r a t e g y e n f o l d e d w e s t e r n C h r i s t i a n b e l i e f s i n a d d i t i o n t o t h e i r A f r i c a n h e r i t a g e t h a t p a v e d a w a y t o w a r d c i t i z e n s h i p . B l a c k g a y m e n h a v e b e e n r e c i p i e n t s

a s w e l l a s t h e p u r v e y o r s o f t h e s a m e s t r a t e g y . I t i s n o w o n d e r t h e n t h a t m a n o f t h e b l a c k m e n i n i n t e r v i e w e d a r e s e e n t o a c c e p t a n d r e t a i n a f e a l t y t o C h r i s t i a n b e l i e f s a s t h e y r e c o n c i l e t h o s e

b e l i e f s t h a t p r e a c h a g a i n s t h o m o s e x u a l i t y . T h e a c t o f t h e c o l o n i z e d i s t o r e t a i n s o m e s e n s e o f t h e i r i d e n t i t y b y s i m u l t a n e o u s l y r e m e m b e r i n g a n d f o r g e t t i n g t h e i r c u l t u r a l m a r k e r s t o i d e n t i f y

w i t h t h e i r c o l o n i z e r s . I n m a n y w a y s a w a y t o j o i n t h e d o m i n a n t g r o u p w a s t o t h i n k a n d t o

w o r s h i p a s t h e y d i d . T h e p e r f o r m a n c e o f r e l i g i o n i s n o t t a c t i c a l t h a t t h e W e s t e r n c u l t u r e i n v e n t e d

¹⁵⁵ Johnson 220

¹⁵⁶ Ann Pellegrini, Performance Anxieties (Routledge, 1996) 70.

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

Uyggv"Vgcøu G L D O R J L F V W U X F W X U H H V W D E O L V K H V D S D W F K Z

stories are woven together and yet their distinctions animate an overlapping conversation. The men performed give the spectator the familiar and the unfamiliar perspective of being both black and gay in the south. The men become characters in the parlance of theatre and their language

W K R X J K W K H L U R Z Q P X V W D F T X L U H D Y H Q H H U R I W K H G U D P

technique to the intentionality of this theatrical exer F L V H 7 K H S O D \ ¶ V G L U H F W R U G H

for the jazz rhythms. Consequently, *Sweet Tea* is not structured in any deliberate manner. The distancing and the theatricality inform one another where narratives intercept, clash and collapse into one another H U 7 K H S O D \ L V H [S H U L H Q F H G D V P X F K L Q W K H P H V

talk about their lives and allow Johnson to don an article or prop to distinguish them. As if he were playing in a jazz band where the improvisations are also the strategy by which this musical riff asserts itself, the authenticity of each character lies in their ability to relay their own story. Since black gay men are so seldom given full sway in a theatrical production other than playing the foil for the masculine characters (usually white) their appeal is at once a gesture toward the

V S H F W D W R U W R O H D Q L Q F O R V H U W R K H D U Z K D W L V E H L Q J

D Q G W K H U H I R U H X Q U H O L D E O H E X W O L N H \$ U W D X G t ¶ V W K H D W

than how the spectator receives their words. Though the characters do not know each other, it is Johnson who introduces them and provides the connecting tissue by which a commonality of black queerness can be absorbed by the audience.

The complications RI PHQ OLNH ' & DQ H[SOLFLWO\ ³RXW´ EODFN offers insight into a sexually fluid environment amongst black men that is seldom discussed in the black community. DC use of language is filled with colloquialisms and the vernacular of the black community but his articulate narration of his personal experiences presents the dichotomy of being black and educated. To be clear, DC crosses the lines of what is imposed from the outside by white hegemony and years of cultural defamation while at the same time he asserts his sexual preference in a unique manner in the context of what has been appropriate for the black

GUDPD 7KXV KLV FORVHW ODQJXDJH D¹⁵⁷These speech acts E\ 6HGJ are useful in understanding what Sedg ZLFN FDOOV D ZD\ RI FRPPXQLFDWLQJ I within a context of being discreet and open. It is a problematized practice for sure, for the ODQJXDJH RI WKH FORVHW GHILQHV WKH VXEMHFW¶V UHOD language re YHDOV D FRPSUHKHQVLRQ RI KLV VH[XDO RULHQWDW complicated reasoning of the detrimental binarism of hetero/homosexuality that insinuates itself in modern sexual discourse.

DC is fully aware of the contradictions of sexual orientation within the black community. But his is never the strict deterrent or what Foucault would call a structure of power at the local level that maintains a watchful eye over those who step outside the boundaries of what is deemed appropriate. However the strict categorizations of sexuality are seen to be more fluid,

H[SHULPHQWDO 7KLV LV QRW WR VD\ WKDW WELMGOFWH[H[XDOLWV happened to him and what he participated in gives is circumscribed by a frank willingness to try V R P H W K L Q J Q H Z + H V D \ V ³ > \$ Q G @ K L J K V F K R R O , K D G V H [

¹⁵⁷ Sedgwick 3.

WKHLU FRXVLQ \$QG D IHZ JX\ V LQ WKH ¹⁵⁸He goss Rto Celab rade LQ WKI

on having sex with girls as well as having sex with a woman who babysat for him and later her husband. But there is not a sense of moralizing that he applies to the situation. Whereas the movement to adopt the middle class mores of white hegemony was the aim of the Civil Rights movement, the actual practice was certainly in place visibly but there was a complicated practice

RI VH[XDOLW\ WKDW ZDV QRW DFNQRZOHGJHG 5HWXUQLQJ

opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, SHUV¹⁵⁹ So Sedgwick a tacit acknowledgement of the experimentation adds to the critique of the practice and to its control. It might seem from a 21st century lens exposing these relationships has caused a deleterious effect on the black community since the amount of information and research that has gone into what a traditional society might deem inappropriate. But the definitions are not theirs to make.

Sedgwick would agree that the interrelationships amongst members of the black community and most certainly those within the black community who were inclined to admit to their same sex attraction might see the makings of their language was a way of communicating their desires as an act of intimacy they allowed themselves to experience. To be clear, this is not a prescription or recuperative for all of those who participated but from the telling of these events, the black gay men discovered strategies of survival and the space to create their own community. In the face of traditional ideas surrounding black respectability calls to mind the generations of educating blacks into a practice of accountability. What Sedgwick would point out

WKR XJK LV WKH GDQJHU RI WKH ³LJQRUDQFH´ RI WKH EHKD

mainstream late 20th century black drama. Sedgwick writes:

¹⁵⁸ Johnson 263
¹⁵⁹ Sedgwick 4

Inarguably, there is a satisfaction in dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in the command of knowledge, but in their ignorance. The effect is a real one but it carries dangers with it as well. The chief of these dangers is

W K H V F R U Q I X O I H D U I X O R U S D W K H W L F L J L Q J U H L I L F D W L

As the black community moved into the middle classes, there was not a sudden introduction to big city ways but a cautionary advance into sexual politics that prohibited admitting to the level of sexual variance that was no more unusual than any other American community but there was

D Q D G R S W L R Q R I ³ L J Q R U D Q F H ' D V D Z D \ R I F R Q I U R Q W L Q J D

image of normativity for politics sake. As the community became more and more middle class, the ignorant assumption that homosexuality was not (should not) be practiced on any widespread activity was clearly seen in black cultural practices. So homosexuals could remain in the community but they were not to be openly acknowledged. It is through DC utterances of his

V H [X D O H Q F R X Q W H U V W K D W W K H E O R F N D J H R I ³ U H L I L F D W L F

To be clear, as Johnson performed DC, he moved through the audience passing out lollipops which he seductively and leisurely sucked on as he recounted tales of sexuality seldom seen on the stage using hetero practices let alone homosexual sex. It is the gesture that writes

D J D L Q V W 6 H G J Z L F N ¶ V Z H O O I R X I O G H G E X W O n P L S W G G H V F U

may not have had the freedom to identify as homosexual in the midst of the homophobic space of the south but as conveyed by Johnson, the teachable moment is that the black gay body was not always subject to the control from outside or inside, to be clear, the black gay body is a body

that can be read and in the historical context of the re- W H O O L Q J R I ' & ¶ V V W R U \ K L V E
place of self-gratification as well as political agency before the opening space of the gay rights

movement permeated the rigid social mores of the black community.

¹⁶⁰Sedgwick 7.

The tacit acknowledgement of their same sex attraction and experiences within their community has to be seen from the perspective of these men and not from the political correctness of late 20th century identity politics. Some of the men do not identify as gay because of its association with white male homosexuality. Some of the men see themselves as bisexual. It is their tactical deployment of (in) visibility that has allowed them to in - R K Q V R Q ¶ V Z R U G V ³ S U R Y L G H D V S D F H I R U W K H V H P H Q W R K D Y H P R U H I U H H G R F terms and the codes of the South to co-exist with neighbors and family and still express their V H [X D ⁶ S O W A manner in which these men choose to engage their community with candor around their sexual preference can be seen to be a counter argument to the mainstream gay rights movement where the discourse of the closet is seen to be detrimental to the movement as a whole. However, what is categorically applicable to one group of marginalized people may be detrimental to the wellbeing of a subset of the same marginalized group. To further complicate

W K H L V V X H S H U I R U P L Q J W K H V H P H Q Z K R P D \ R U P D \ Q R W E conv H U V D W L R Q L Q I D Y R U R I R U L Q R S S R V L W L R Q W R I X O O G L V

It is the AIDS epidemic as traumatic event that forces a disclosure that might have been unnecessary if it had not occurred. Summing up a collective response, Duncan says, ³ < H D K W K H U H are conversations that I would never [have] had with my parents and never been hurt, mortally wounded, by my peers, had we not had AIDS. And some of what we face and that hurt our own community around this whole business about being out and black and gay and lesbian and what K D Y H \ R X , W ¶ V D E R X W S H R S O H ¶ V I H D U R I O R V L Q J W K H L U O L W D Q G W K H \ G L G Q ¶ W K D Y H D Q \ Z D \ R I G H D O L Q J Z L W K L W just lost, you know, Big Mama to heart trouble or breast cancer or something else like that we

¹⁶¹ Johnson 109.

ZHUHQ¶W WDONLQJ DERXW DQG QRZ ZH¶YH JRW WKLV WKLV
WDON DERXW

¹⁶⁰What we are missing here from these men is pain and loss of continuity in their lives and history that evaporate with each death.

Speaking frankly about their experiences to Johnson gives the reader/spectator the opportunity to compare and contrast the circumstances surrounding and leading to the dramatic moment of intimate relationships. The language of resistance manifest as anagnorisis

³ UHFRJQLWLRQ´ LI \RX ZLOO ZKHUH WKH IODZ LV DW ODV
Greek dramatists intended. Here we would assume the hero to be the black gay men but instead they act as anti heroes and the recognition is instead placed in mind of the spectator. The flaw is hubris generally defined as pride. In this context hubris is that of privilege where non-acceptance and superiority are in tension with possibility and inclusivity.

The positivity of the men is pervasive in the book and the play. It is to their credit that the gentility displayed and iterated during the interviews is insight into the subject construction of these men. They are open to the interview process and the reader/spectator can make of their reaction to real events in any way they choose. But what might also be considered is the layered approach to which these men expose themselves to Johnson and then to Johnson performance of

that action/language. In the play the men move so their bodies are part of our reaction but since
ZH RQO\ VHH -RKQVRQ¶V ERG\ WR ZKRP GR ZH LGHQWLI\ D
performance as a living installation of the repertoire is also subject to the restored behavior,

³ D XHGW LFDWHG´ E\ WKH UHKHDUVDO SURFHVV ZKHUH , SUH
extent the same at each performance. There is one interesting sidestep though, I saw two successive performances. The character of football player whose sexual adventures are the most

¹⁶² Johnson 318.

graphic I have seen portrayed on stage for a black gay man, relates to the audience his sexual encounter with his fellow football team members. The scene had been elongated on Saturday

QLJKW ZKHUH -RKQVRQ¶V hic UEDWLRQV DORQJ ZLWK D JUDS
caused a stir in the audience that I could not tell was in recognition or approving or disapproving.

But he next Sunday afternoon performance, Johnson shortened the scene and it did not have the full resonance of sexual freedom that it sustained on the previous night. This is not to say there

ZDV KLQGUDQFH RQ WKH DFWRU¶V SDUW EXW LQ NHHS LQJ Z
VLPSOH IDWLJXH RU SHUKDSV DQ DFWRU¶V SDUW EXW LQ NHHS LQJ Z
afternoon.

Uyggv"Vgcøu men can be seen as intersubjectivity where there are a number of traits that make their existence in the community more complicated than those whose sexuality is copacetic with normativity. Looking from the outside, we might find their behavior repressed and limited
EXW WLP H DQG JDLQ WKH PHQ VKRZ WKDW WKHLU OLYHV ZH
homosexual. Self-awareness is a gnawing part of their consciousness of survival mixed with the traditions sutured to their ethnic and regional experience. The matrix of homosexuality permeates their spirituality, sexuality and intelligence. Their identities are complicated by a traditional rearing meaning their community has been subject to generations of violence and legally enforced separation where their very being was antithetical to what was considered by the white power structure as civilized. So the fine line they walk with these tensions embedded in the quotidian existence within the black community is forever subject to a negotiated behavior that sometimes appears to be capitulation but is inherently derived from their emersion in and reaction to a hostile public space.

7KH IURQW SRUFK OLNH DQ\ RWKHU V\PESEQW LPDJH LQ
 invites a further investigation of what this cultural code means to certain members of the
 audience. In American iconography, the front porch has come to signify a certain entrance to the
 PDQ¶V F DVWOH ZKHUH WKH SRLQW VfeRihneWkhinkKReXvH LV VHH
 porch is a traditionally located feminized space because it is the place of confrontation before the
 home is entered so it can be seen as the place of first defense. In many American plays the front
 porch is n middle class security and a symbol of leisure. It is the place for surveillance, for
 courtship and for community. The front porch is American is a space and place of gentility
 particularly in line with a perceived Southern gentility. Because documentary theatre is likened
 to the courtroom drama figuratively speaking since it offers verbatim testimony from the
 participants (characters) and poses a question of legality. As Carol Martin indicates, an aspect of
 documentary theatre {to] LQWHUPLQJOH DXWREERJUDSK\ ZLWK KLVWRU

Next to the porch is a tree. The tree is hung with jars of what is described by Johnson as
 VZHHW WHD 7KH SOD\¶V SURJUDP DOVR GHSLFWV WKH WUH
 Jonson like the hanging jars of tea. Since the stage area is relatively small, the actor is moved
 around the tree and even at some points in the play sits at the base of the tree. It is as if he is
 being protected by the souls of the men. Their essence is equated with the sweet tea, almost like
 floating signifiers as they suspend from the branches, But it is also the image of the lynching that
 IXUWKHU KLVWRULHV WKH EODFN JD\ ERG\ ,Q NHHSLQJ ZL
 WKHDWUH WKH IXWXUH RI WKH SDVW LV GLVERXUVH LQ WK
 from page to stage is the explicit insertion of black gay men into the reality of black life in the
 south. As vexing as that action seems to the heteropatriarcal authority in the black community,

¹⁶³ Martin 13.

the two are sutured to each other. Ironically, in all of its poetic resonance the tree then becomes the sign of the thoroughfare into the imagined community of the southern black experience. Even as the projected and interjected shame of homosexuality reifies an identity that must be shaded in many ways for self-protection and as a way of conterminous existence with the black community within a larger hostile public sphere, the tree is both cover and roots. As a place of remembrance for the black community, the obvious meaning implied is both literal and figurative as the

IRUHQVLF V\PERO RI EODFN JD\ PHQ¶V HYLGHQWLDU\ SUHV
 -RKQVRQ VLWV LQ WKH WUHH¶V WUXQN WR UHFLWH VRPH R

men as embedded carriers/tellers of knowledge that extends into the cultural memory. In the reimagined narratives of black life that *Sweet Tea* provides the intrusion into the tradition of black cultural memory where the sexually variant are unannounced even though with the narratives provided by these men the tradition is clearly a one-sided remembrance. Therefore the tree reifies a silhouette of the transgressive within the cultural memory of black people. The black gay landscape gains by having these men shown as participants in their community and thus actors in the history of blacks in the South.

\$UH WKHUH FRQVWUDLQWV W³aneness among the men s³it³ IRUPDQF

includes the transgendered is not reductively imposed as the something the audience should be expecting from the individual narratives. As Johnson has stated he remains outside/inside as the chronicler but identifies with many aspects of his subjects ¶ives. What is precarious is to avoid the stereotype and to keep the individual. Such a narrative particularly once adapted to

perfo UPDQFH WKHQ ZRXOG VHHN WR PDNH WKH PHQ³FKDUDFV

narrative instructs the playwright to give his characters³WU D³W³ with particular emotional releases. The simplicity of their recounts and yes, reminisces, would only provide the

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

- R K Q V R Q ¶ V V D \ V R I K L V S H U I R U P D Q F H W K D W W K H V H P H

metaphor in describing the number of physical stances he adopts for each character. He is the flirtatious quintessential southern belle when performing Countess Vivian; a primping exuberant football jock with a healthy sexual appetite for Chaz. It is the performance of black gay sensuality and sexuality that permeate his embodiment. Guided by Johnson's abandon to these performative gesture in his interpretation of these men, the audience is made apart of the

K L V W R U L J D W L R Q R I W K H S H U I R U P D Q F H - R K Q V R Q ¶ V D F F X U D

W K H V S H F W U D O E R G L H V R I H D F K R I W K H V I R O N S I G H T S R U P H G E H I I

reality, the gay black body formulates its own fraught and tortuous history extrapolated in its subjectivity. At first this might seem detrimental to the cause of black gay theatre but I would submit, in its immanence, a certain oeuvre of black gay aesthetic emerges. Harry Elam Jr. says,

³ 7 K H U D F H T X H V W L R Q L V L Q K H U H Q W O \ W K H D W U L F D O) U R P

American soil, the discourse on race, the definitions and meanings of blackness have been intricately linked to issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁶⁴ For the purposes of this interrogation,

I would insert **gay** as a companion to blackness whose coupling would also be applicable to

(O D P W K H R U \ - R K Q V R Q ¶ V E R G \ E H F R P H V W K H V L W H I R U E O

spectral image of the black gay male that is accomplished.

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

Johnson as the actor of these men is the embodiment of their experience. His presence means we are figuratively receiving the lives of these men taken from the archive (document) and each time it is performed the repertory takes on an aliveness of memory. To be clear, it is Johnson body on to which the spectator projects their own appropriation and affiliation with these men. It is Johnson as mediated subject because he is acting verbatim dialogue in addition to his own experiences as a link between the narrations; it is Johnson who will emphasize connections depending on his own read of the audience. This is not to say his performance will

YDU\ JUHDWO\ IURP QLJKW WR QLJKW EXW LW ZLOO YDU\

documentary theatre raise questions about the continuum between documentaries and

VLPXOD¹⁶⁵WLRQ where a healthy skepticism is useful particularly when a mediated source

LV DYDLODEOH WKH LGHD WKDW D ³UHDO' UHSUHVHQQWDWL

further scrutiny.

Regional specificity LV XVXDOO\ SDUW RI WKH DFWRU¶V GLVWLQJ

This is not the case so much for Johnson and his acting of each of these men; their specific location is a blur. It is a departure from the performance ethnography he so assiduously applied

ZKHQ ZULWLQJ WKH GRFXPHQW ,Q -RKQVRQ¶V SHUIRUPDQF

whether they are from South Carolina or Louisiana, without the distinct placement other than black Southern drawl. It is not to demean the characters but it is less of an emphasis than Johnson intends. It is the distinction of their stories that matters and the physicality he imbues with each character that show his strength as performer. In approaching this project from the perspective of social research, an argument can be made that Johnson research would be commensurate with the qualitative subset where his observations come directly from his contact

¹⁶⁵ Martin 11.

with this subjects and they are in fact the suppliers of the information. If this is the case, then we can a Y R L G W K H P H V V \ S V \ F K R O R J L F D O X Q G H U S L Q Q L Q J V R I D S interior monologue in producing a desired emotional affect. Even if the emotions of actor and subject overlap, the performed piece satisfies the criteria of social research rather than ethnographic study merely by definition.

Vjg"Urgevcvqt"cpf"Rgthqt o kpi"vjg"õkõ

I sat in the Viaduct Theatre in Chicago, waiting for the play to begin¹⁶⁶. As I looked around the audience, I was struck by the large number of black people attending. Coming from California, I was not used to black people outnumbering any other color as spectator. Granted the subject matter was more encouraging to a specific demographic but being in the majority produces its own effect on those who are marginalized in any specific community. But I will speak more about that later. But my observation included that amongst the black people were black gay men. Since *Sweet Tea* is a play about black gay men this was also not unusual but again the obvious attitude signifying a ³ T X H H Q ´ H Y H Q L I W K D W T X H H Q L V R Q W markings are still discernable providing its own assertion of gayness. To put it another way, we were all queer in this room whether we admitted to it or not.

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

¹⁶⁶ In May 2010, I attended two performances of *Sweet Tea* on two successive days, Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon.

the audience and performance. In Theatre Audiences 6 X V D Q % H Q Q H W W Z U L W H V 3 7 K

Z K L F K F R Q V W L W X W H D Q D X G L H Q F H ¶ V L P P H G L D W H U H D G L Q J

P H D V X U H G D J D L Q V W W K H L Q W H U Q D O K R Ü E R K Q V R Q H ¶ S H F W D W

audience may not all be totally aware of his performance ethnography document but it is the physical presence of black gay themes which resonate within those who desire to witness an event that is seldom seen. It is the expectation of validation that brings in the audience. Their participatory attendance makes them co-creators just as Johnson is co-creator with his subjects forming a strategy of performative activism. While the actual performance becomes the location of verisimilitude in the minds of the spectator, there are more complexities to consider in unpacking audience participation in this emerging aesthetic of black gay theatre. Identification becomes a more complex issue and is not the clearly delineated choice.

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

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

A place(lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence QFH « 7KH ODZ RI WKH ³SURSHU' UXO elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own ³SURSHU' DQG GLVWLQFW ORFDWLRQ D ORFDWLRQ LW configuration of positions. It is SOLHV DQ LQGLFDWLRQ RI VWDELOLW\

On the other hand:

A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time YDULDEOHV 7KXV VSDFH LV FRPSRVHG RI PRELOH HOHI produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in D SRO\YDOHQW XQLW\ RI FRQIOLF¹⁶⁹WXDO RU FRQWUDFWX

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

Aesthetically, scenography recapitulates Southern cosmology dominated by two iconic images: the front porch and the tree. We assume it is the mythological space that is signifier for the rural south. The porch is the resting place, the communal place and the place of surveillance. It is the place where a traditional world is remembered, a small town-ish lens that implies a neighborly environment even though the actual history of the area contradicts this bromide in many instances. The porch represents a heteronormativity but in this case it is the platform from which Countess Vivian/Johnson testifies. This is an important setting because it affirms a gentility that is meant to distinguish the south of America from other places. In her review

)ROLQR :KLWH WHOOV XV ' >WKH@ UHDOLVWLF VFHQHU\« U VHW RI SUDFWLFHV DQG DQ LGHD té this 7KH TIME OF THE DAY FOR KXHV RI V gathering, a time to swap stories and to commune. A scene of homegrown community perpetuates in the mind of the spectator be they black or white, familiar or unfamiliar with

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

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

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

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

west, a major urban center like Chicago, and the black gay male population was neither cowed by the subject matter or was comfortable in their own self-acceptance that the play was seen as place to be seen. Interestingly, Johnson refers to Chicago a V W K H ³ X S V R X W K ´ P H D Q L Q J great number of southern blacks who have moved north including a number of black gay men.

6 R W K H F R P P X Q L W \ L W V H O I L V G L I I H U H Q W I U R P Z K D W , ¶ Y H in the city of Los Angeles. Since much of the narratives experiences are very familiar and easy to relate to, it would appear that the regionalism of black homosexuality uncovers behaviors that had occurred elsewhere in the country but were held to a secretive existence in the black southe U Q F R P P X Q L W \ 7 K H D X G L H Q F H D F N Q R Z O H G J H V L W V I D P K X K V ´ \$ X G L E O H V X S S R U W I R U W K H F R Q W D F W J R Q H V Z L W K L our experience maybe for the first time. The theatre takes on the cultural memory as an epicenter in the heretofore closeted landscape of black gay life. The audience is reverential in a sense where the church of our youth is brought into the performance arena.

The audience participation in what becomes an excursion into the rarely seen black gay life in what is essentially a temporality. Those who can relate to the monologues view the men as part of their own existence whole those who cannot relate but empathize use the experience to ³ T X H H U ´ W K H L U R Z Q 7 R E W Y F O H D U W K H W H P S R U D O L V even if the vision will alter quickly, it is the presentation of the what if against the normative view. The audience may wonder if these men have any releavance beyond the moment. It is not a wholly axiomatic observation but what is significant is that they were there to witness the narratives and then bear witness to the stories told through Johnson. What may be most L P S R U W D Q W L V W K D W W K H U H L V F R Q Y H U V D W L R Q t i V W D U W H G clear that the men interviewed availed themselves of every tactic they could to live the life of a

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

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

Are the spectators for *Sweet Tea* privy to the extensive coding surrounding the play? Of FRXUVH LW GRHVQ¶W WDNH D EODFN JD\ PDOH WR GHFRGH because the tropes of the South have a mediated familiarity embedded in American tradition as cultural codes even for those who are not black gay men. Johnson embodies a sort of prismatic Southern black man that emerges out of each of the men featured. So that the gesture of the black male body mixes with that of the gay male, specifically the camp and sissified gestures as well as a languid tonal quality associated with southern speech patterns. The same sex intimacy need not KDYH D ORW RI H[SODQDWLRQ HLWKHU EHFDDXVH WKH - R K Q V the black male corporeality in close proximity so that the dandy-fied spectacularity of some of

men is also cross referenced for the audience. So that the performance is layered in a codified comprehensibility is well suited to the pr R G X F W L R Q ¶ V D L P) X U W K H U P R U H W K H having requested anonymity in most of their identities would not want a picture perfect portrayal but rather the impressionistic. To illustrate my point, the set itself is minimalist where the front porch because the lectern for each of these men in the shade of a giant but theatrical tree hung with jars of sweet tea.

The audience then is to raise a cognitive awareness through performance that seeks to teach about a seldom seen group in society and to authenticate their stories as part of the community. The telling of these marginalized men is a recuperative in that the stories deliver both the framework of an argument which says these men have always been amongst the ³ Q R U P D O ´ D Q G D V R O X W L R Q Z K L F K Y D A Y W K H U H of S human rights. The authentication stems from their words which are now reclaimed and the mere P H Q W L R Q R U Z K L V S H U R I W K H Z R U G ³ K R P R V H [X D O ´ Z L W K L W imagined, claiming a new lens that adapts and insinuates itself into the politics of identity that V D \ V µ , D P K H U H W R R ´ 7 K H Q D U U D W L R Q V W K R X J K W K H \ V the same time contextualizes the performance of the sissy in the gothic metaphor of the South. Gentility and an easy careful attention to detail is emblematic of a leisurely paced lifestyle drawn from a tradition of separate communities clearly distinguished by race and class but with very stringent rules as to how one conducts themselves in this volatile space. If the southern society were seen as a Venn diagram the meeting between black and white resists modernity as the negotiation between the two groups is historic and complex.

\$ V G R F X P H Q W D U \ W K H D W U H ¶ V D L P L O W A S I L O N Y E A R G H V R P H P subject, the performance of black gay men is intended to supply a look into this netherworld. I

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

In the midst of a barrage of the hyper masculinity of the black male, embedded in hip hop and on film and television, the audience response to the range of black maleness is difficult to gauge without some quantitative methodology to accompany the responses. If we look think of

PHQ SOD\ LQJ ZRPHQ ¶ V UROHV WKURXJKRXW, PEXFKOR I ZHVWH

recording of what the spectator thought once women were allowed to play women on stage.

What we do know is the change was a long time in coming so the sudden disruption of the hyper masculine image with that of the flexible image of black gay men, the imaginings have yet to reach any consensus Where these black gay images would compete in the minds of the spectator after witnessing the number of homophobic reactions from the black community itself in light of a post-racial script circulating amongst some liberal media pundits, the ability for these images to

UHPDLQ LQ WKH PLQGV RI WKH LQGLYLGXDOV LV GHWHUPLQ

have numerous repeats. As documentary theatre seems to live in the moment, it is more difficult for other black actors, gay or straight to perform the piece with the same eventful aura

VXUURXQGLQJ -RKQVRQ ¶ V YLUWXRVR WXUQ ,W LV WKH VDP

However a recent production of *Twilight* in commemoration of the riots of 1992 was performed with multiple actors playing the parts to critical acclaim. It is a proposition that might interest directors for future productions of *Sweet Tea*

7KH SRVVLELOLW\ EHKLQG -RKQVRQ¶V HIIRUW LV REYLF

group I saw that Sunday consisted of three black gay undergrads. This is the new generation of black gay men; educated, enthusiastic and unbridled by a past of self-inflicted patterns of constructed identity. To me, they appeared to be the black gay hope. But there is much to be gained by the mentorship and reflexivity of the men from **Sweet Tea** those who have gone on before and experienced some of the worse episodes in black and gay American life. Johnson remains true to the co- SHUIRUPHU¶V SUHPLVH RI SHUIRUPDQFH HWKQR

transgender educator, is asked if there is more interrelating between the white and black gay FRPPXQLWLHV LQ WKH 6RXWK KH DQVZHUV ³\$V RSSRVHG V

KDYH VDLG DQG , µP VXUH \RX¶YH KHDUG WKLV EHIRUH XQ

button issue, unless yo X QHHG D FRXSOH RI EODFN GUDJ TXHHQV IRU

VHJUHDWHG DV WKH ¹⁷⁰ The disparity between the white gay community and the black gay community is indicative of the same practices of segregation historically present in the larger community, The white gay community seemingly inclusive and in some ways more progressive than the hetero white community is still invested in the stereotypical imaging nagging the American cultural representations from the days of the days of the minstrel show. **Sweet Tea** acknowledges the communities working toward knowing and understanding each other. The men are not under any illusion that their blackness is not a factor in the hindrances. What Dioneaux may not realize is the same tension between white and black gays in the south is also a northern issue. White gay men tend to be very mobile and carry with them their cultural baggage, so the prejudices get to be played out in another region of the country.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson 381.

In the phenomenological sense, the audience becomes the co-creator of the production.

\$ORQJ ZLWK -RKQVRQ¶V SHUIRUPDQFH WKH SHUIRUPDWLYL

participate; the moments of church, disco songs, sexual innuendo and humor. Reinelt writes,

³ 3DUWQHUL QumZLWK WKH GR The reality in question, spectators evaluate or

contest the truth- YDOXH RI WKH¹⁷¹ (YRFXPLHQWGR¶W JHW D UHDOLVWL

EHLQJ RIIHUG 7KLV LV WKH SODFH WKURXJKZKLFK WKHV

visible. The visceral reaction from the audience is the aesthetic the documentary theatre

promises.

Even though the spectators present on the night I attended were mostly black, their

UHVSRQVH WR -RKQVRQ¶V GLUHFWRUHQWFRQVWUDWLRO ZLWK

plays with a provocative engagement with the audience. Johnson sashays along the front row

handing out lollipops, tossing them to those in the other rows. Sucking humorously and

knowingly on the lollipops as he greets friends and strangers become the single gesture of

defiance and resistance to generations of taboo in black and white society. His breaking of the

fourth wall is an immediate set up for the nontraditional structure to follow. Johnson is himself

from the beginning and ends with his words. Throughout the play, he will comment on the

characters as if they are part of his identificatory subjectivity. His insertion of his own

experiences is then prelude and leitmotif to the other characters. Their stories of sex and agency,

difference and acceptance and metaphysical comradeship with those they have never met may

seem as a wrestling with the fragmentation and hyper awareness of being both black and gay in

America. It is this visceral reaction to what Johnson performs that is the most informative about

the piece. His decision to be visible for these men is the cathartic for the audience members who

¹⁷¹ Reinelt 10.

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

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

U . . . V . . . -- Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*

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

U . . . -- Saidiya v. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

V . . . --Sonny from *bonded*

Gender non conformity and sexual variance are rare themes in the African American drama. From the ordinary works of the slave narrative adapted into the anti slave melodramas of the antebellum period, black masculinities have received caricatured treatments from even the most well intentioned white playwrights ranging from the virtuous black male to the sex starved gargantuan, to the submissive black male. In the context of stage performance, these inaccurate representations became the basis on which to illustrate black male sexuality eliding the range of masculinities that would have been reasonably present in this fraught period of American history. It is only in the last decade that experimental dramas have attempted to introduce themes of non normative E O D F N P D O H V L Q W R W K H F D Q R Q R I \$ I U L F D Q \$ P H U L F D O play *bonded*¹⁷² is one of these efforts.

8 V L Q J - R O O \ ¶ V e n S o e D a n d U H . . . Chapter 4 to ascertain a genealogy of black gay male representation as well as examine the possible reasons for the absence of the sexually variant black male in African American slave dramas. - R O O \ ¶ V e n S o e D a n d U H . . . substantiates the inherent theatricality in black and gay performance/performativity. It is an illustration of the

¹⁷² *bonded* debuted at the Los Angeles Theatre Center on March 18 2011.

slave seen in such antislavery melodramas as *Wpeng"Vqoou"Ecckp* by adding to the trope a male slave attracted to another male slave, a nuanced intimacy of slave culture that is meant to appeal

D Q G L Q I R U P D P R G H U Q D X G L H Q F H + L V W R U \ W K H R U L V W + D
narrative, L W L V W K H F R Q W H Q W D O R Q H W K D W : K L W W \ J X W K H Y D U X
would seem to support Jol O \ ¶ - Interpretation of intimacies relayed in the slave narratives is the
message that subsumes the entire range of sexual experience. In doing so black gay theatre
practitioners begin to establish a black gay aesthetic grounded in self-relexivity and in turn
I R U P X O D W H R X U R Z Q J O H U I G E R L S H R O R R P D Q Y F D Q W

If we reflect on the tensions under which the slave population had to live, the prison like atmosphere of the plantation, the brutality of disrupted relations to add to the physical and mental torture, slave intimacies are sure to take on a nonstandard trajectory at the same time that they attempt to form structured familial relationships. Moreover, as male prison populations have been shown to reflect a high degree of homosexual practice due to the homosocial structure, it would not be uncommon for male slaves to experience the same kinds of intimacies. It is also not surprising that these relationships would have been kept secretive because of the association of same sex attraction w L W K Z H D N Q H V V D Q G I H P L Q L Q L W \ 3 7 K H G H I H Q V H

& K D U O H V & O L I W R Q 3 D Q G U H F O D P D W L R Q R I E O D F N P D Q K R R O
\$ I U L F D Q \$ P H U L F D Q P D O H s t v s O n D o i t e m p o r a r y L o d i E y W h e Y l a c k / f a m i l y

has undergone a scrutiny that no other ethnic group has experienced in American society; an alternative to the standard was nevertheless an option that is not outside of the possibilities

F R Q V L G H U L Q J W K H O L P L W H G I U H H G R P M v O D D Y H S V H Q G X U H G

¹⁷⁶ = † ‡ The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, (Jon Hopkins University Press, 1987) 41.

¹⁷⁷ Clifton 342.

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

Trauma, Historic Narratives and Black Gay Bodies

Writing on his blog, Jolly says the impetus to write *bonded* was to uncover coded same sex intimacy found a more meaningful creative outlet in play format. When he began the process he was well aware of the rigid discourse on sexual behavior amongst the slave and their white owners that set during slavery are painful and embarrassing. But through the pain there is hope and perhaps there is a possibility that as irretrievable loss and as a scab of memory that cannot heal insinuates itself into the imaginary of the black people as recurring personal trauma that manifests as much a part of the present as the past. It is a melancholic construction that seeks to mend itself even when institutional discourse reminds the racialized body over and over of its inequity. It is no wonder the black male found the need to never disclose any impulses that were out of line with conformist attitudes.

Consequently, the enduring maligned depiction of black males foments a collective barrier against non conformity which reaches deeply into the present black community informing their responses to the sexually variant. To be clearer, the enduring racialized culture is still part

of an ungrieved melancholy. This is equally true of sexual

¹⁷⁸) K † @ Mar 18 2011. <http://jollydrama.com/>

¹⁷⁹ K † @ Mar 18 2011. <http://jollydrama.com/>

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

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

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

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

Chronology is no doubt a code shared by the both chronicle and narrative, but narrative utilizes other codes as well and produces a meaning quite different from a chronicle. It is even more fully than does the chronicle. The point is that narrativization produces a meaning quite different from that produced by chronologicalization. And it does this by imposing a discursive form on the events that its own chronicle comprises by means that are poetic i Q Q D W X U H «

In the case of *bonded* the play interrupts the traditional rules of preservation and reception of the documentation and cultural imagination of slavery because of the instantiation of normative gender and sexual roles that accompany the re-telling. The discursive is mindful of being black and same sex attracted as bifurcated existence suffering trauma etched onto the body of the black gay male. In re-telling the story so that there are now all forms of sexuality considered, the traumatiz HG V X E M H F W Q H Y H U I R U J H W V - R O O \ ¶ V M X V W L I L D E O H K R P R V H [X D O G H V L U H R Q W K H S O D Q W D W L R Q L V D Q H [H U F L V invention and artistry are methods for inserting black gay men into a history that assiduously avoids acknowledging their existence.

The play also inspires a broader interrogation of why history is a recurring theme in *The American* Play. These dramas tend to stage heteronormative codes within the African American history where characters that represent the sexually variant are either excluded or if included marginalized to derogatory effect such as Amiri % D U D N E B p i s m To the extent that African American families can be brimming with a number of children with different fathers or wives with many lovers, rarely do we see an African American drama in which a man or a Z R P D Q L V H Q J D J L Q J L Q D V D P H V H i s u r e c o d e d i n g h i s t o r y 6 5 R E H U

¹⁸¹ White 42.

7 DUHOO \$OYL The Brother and Sister Plays a few recent examples. Playwright Donald Jolly then has performed a service to the theatre going community at large and the black community in particular by providing us with a look into the lives of two male African American slaves who find themselves attracted to each other.

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

Obviously, including a study of same-sex relationships in the historical narratives of black lives has been difficult because of the lack of evidential proof. Yet, simply because there is little to substantiate the claims of actual male-male or female-female relations in the era before the 20th FHQWXU\ LV QR FDXVH WR DVVHUW WKHUH WKH\ GLGQ ¶ even dangerously negative to broach, given the differences in education and class and male/female status, same sex coupling was hardly even documented at the time even under the most tolerant of communities. What is available as a guideline of sorts to imply a sexual practice

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

It is important in consideration of the context of the persistent narrative where masculinities are always already believed to be heteronormative, *bonded* gives adequate contextualization in its creative treatment and re-imagining of the conformist slave narrative. The playwright goes further in his engaging with male-male sex even implying with one of the young black men that he had a sexual relationship with *LWK KLV PRWKHU ¶ V RZQHU *LYHQ V* ³ *QDWXUDO ´ PDQQHU LQ ZKLFK WKLY WRS FLYV LQWU R G X F H C* *bonded pedagogy* in *White* that beyond the well documented rape of female slaves by white masters is overwhelmingly evident but also avers there was also the possibility of rape of male slaves as well. However, Jolly goes further when he implies the relationship between the young man and his white owner was consensual. Moreover the play cites a sexual curiosity of white men toward black men glimpsed in the melodramas of the day.¹⁸² The defensive positions against this kind of revelation is seen in the dynamic between the male slaves in the play where their sense of helplessness might be read as feminine resulting in overcompensation to the extent that adherence to the hyper masculine leads to the betrayal of other blacks. The act of sex had always been implied or comically depicted amongst blacks but the fascination with black bodies deemed by white slave owners that resulted in many children of mixed race where normal relations are condoned. Subject to the repressive political regime predicated on their inferiority, the psychological and physical torture meant that anything normative would have been very difficult obtain let alone maintain. Desire is seen as having a reciprocal modality in conflict with a recognized code of virtue ethics. By virtue ethics, I mean, a code of morality that includes duty, responsibility, filial piety and more importantly, family. The

¹⁸² William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships*, (Routledge, 2001) 146-147. Banemann describes a section of *h v o d } u [• where d } v foppish white planter, St Clare, has a very odd, intimate relationship with his equally foppish black valet, Adolph.*

opposite of virtue is vice, thus anything outside of this set of ethical behavior is to be considered

W U D Q V J U H V V L Y H 7 K H F H Q W U D O F R Q I O L F W S U H V H Q W H G L V

virtue; the tension between the expected family man and their own tacitly acknowledged desire for someone of their own sex.

My discussion of a purposeful use of melodrama as the theatrical framing device recalls the evidential slave narratives enhance the temporality of the historic narrative. My intention is not to probe the history of the melodrama but to apply it as a method of cultural, performance studies and history theories to unpack slave narrative in particular through the medium of theatre

D Q G W K H F R Q W H P S R U D U \ S O D \ Z U L J K W ¶ V X V H R I L W W R D U J

peoples gain visibility in contemporary theatre. Jolly states the main reason behind bonded was

K L V R Y H U Z K H O P L Q J F X U L R V L W Z W I R W ¶ G L J ¶ L Q Z V Q W W K D R W S ¶ I D V V D R

dirt, get all messy and covered in its secrets, sift through the myths and facts, and get buried so deep that when I return to the surface, I will have exhumed something precious and

X Q H [S H P ¶ W H G H ' D E O D F N D Q G J D \ S O D \ Z U L J K W ¶ V X V H R I L W W R D U J

contemporary notions around the dominant societal taboo of male/male intimacy providing a vibrant and daring inquiry into the lived experience of black slaves.

(Y H Q W K H Z R U G ¶ E R Q G H G ' F R Q M X U H V L P D J H V R I V H [D Q

F R Q W U D F W X D O R E O L J D W L R Q R I \$ V D ¶ V P R W K H U Z K R K D V D E

debt is paid. But the word resonates more widely on several levels that are not literal. Seeing the word, unity is inferred by its definition. Bonds hold things together as in binding two objects with rope or adherent. It also means cultural practices that unite a community or individuals. It is a word that in legalese would meet a marriage of sorts, something legally binding as a contract

¹⁸³ K) † @ U http://jollydrama.com/>

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

Lastly, if the *mise en scene* of *bonded* moves around in a muddy atmosphere of repeatedly. It is an attempt to recreate slave dialogues that does not depend on authentically researched documentation but rather as a place where stream of consciousness dominates and the play becomes an expository exercise of loss and memory in the retelling of traumatic events. I mention the consistency as an authentic link to the past but it remains a stinging reminder of the language and its correlation to the rules of power and sex so defined by Foucault.¹⁸⁴ In a climactic scene Sonny, the closeted slave fends off the repeated advances of Asa, the younger the relationships between the characters as a word used to both demark as less than and more

¹⁸⁴ Foucault .84-86.

¹⁸⁵ Sonny, *bonded Act II*.

than. Hearing the word in the midst of a modern audience, it is revelatory that the wince I felt as a black man from a generation that sought to eradicate the word from everyday use, I realize the word retains its musculature even though a younger black generation uses the word habitually in

WKHLU VRQJ O\ULFV , PHQWLRQ WKLV EHFDXVHtoKHD DULQJ /I
\HW XQERUQ FKLOGUHQ DV ³QLJJDKV' KDV UHIHUFH WR V
(PEHGGHG LQ WK¹⁸⁶Jolly indicates the word is a deliberate dramaturgical device

used for authenticity and to wrench the audience sensibilit LHV DURXQG WKH ZRUG¶V PR
and at the same time remind the audience of its resilient power to demean. Interestingly, the

word though politically incorrect in contemporary society has a numbing effect as it is repeated continuously as the slaves refer to each in a concerted way to debase and control and in another

ZD\ WR VKRZ FDPDUDGHULH 0RUHRYHU ³QLJJHU' KDV FRPH
GHSHQGLQJ RQ WKH VLWXDWLRQ DQG ZKR XWWHUV LW 7KH
is floating signifier for black identity, historic in its origin but consistent in its resilience to

UHPDLQ GHILQH E\ GHEDVHPHQW DIIHFWLRQ LQWHQWLRQ
DEXVH DQG GHEDVHPHQW ³QLJJHU¶SUIHVWHYWKH VRUH VS
WKH LPDJH RI RWKHUHG VH[XDOLW\ ³1LJJDK IDJJRW' LV Q

identification language which is understood in modern society as epithets for homosexuals. The tacit sexual variance in bonded is no W QDPHG DV ³VLVV\` RU HYHQ ³XQQDWXU

nothing to compete with as far as words to mark the slave body as other than an inferior black ERG\ 6HHNLQJ VXEVDQWLDWLRQ ZKHUH WKH SRHWLFV RI

historical fa FWV ³QLJJHU' LV WKH EULGJH WKDW DOZD\ DOUHDQ
period of American history heightening an excessive emotional attachment of he proceedings, an

¹⁸⁶ Donald Jolly, *bonded script* 7 V o

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

Staging Melodramatic Masculinities

*bonded*¹⁸⁷ opens on two slaves on the porch of their slave cabin; a young woman in her teens, Lily, is shaving Sonny, a big hunk of a black man in his twenties. It is home and as such is

HPEOHPDWLF RI PHORGUDDV NQRZC Q DV WKH 3VMSDFH RI LQ

property of master but so are the Lily and Sonny. Still it is there space where they are allowed to

have some respite from their daily labor. The specificity of the slave cabin provides an

immediate referent for the contemporary audience schooled LQ WKH 3OLYLQJV RI WKR V

forced to labor; it is a living apparatus, a museum piece to the spectator as we listen in to

dialogue that mixes a vernacular of the past with a familiar sentiment in that the plantation is a

character in the scene that does not have to speak in order to assert its authority over Lily and

Sonny. In the the world of these characters this place provides and takes away, in that they are

dependent on their every need by this harnessed geography that surveys their every move and in

turn induces them to watch each other for signs of transgression. Lily and Sonny are the

archetypes of the black man and woman bound to the whims of the nation-state. They have no

ZRUWK RWKHU WKDQ IUHH ODERU VR 6RKHU UTD/ FOL IHQ D/Q G \ \$V

another level. Even though she is only fifteen, Lily is aware of the failing plantation and

GHVSHUDWH IRU SURWHFWLRQ DV WKH FUHGLWRU¶V FORVH

the others have been sold off to pay WKH PDVWHU¶V GHEWV 6R WKH W DON W

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

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

evades the commitment. Lily is suspicious but does not go beyond the boundary of to push him away for good. Instead, she has knowledge of the impending arrival of a new slave brought from the North but nevertheless remains confident that he is not going to be replaced. The message projected is the looming rivalry between the conformist and non conformist paradigm.

stripping and washing of Asa as he is baptized/re-born into his life as a slave. Sonny is left to the task. The tension between the two is plain in the script but it is managed as a moment of chemistry between the actors and is projected kinesthetically to the spectator. In the small space

Inferred with the implicitly embedded bondage and discipline of the slave/master system and the accoutrements associated with the s/m act, the tying up and the whipping and then the washing is uncomfortable and titillating at the same time. Asa revisits but is finally unable and submits.

Sonny finds the act of performing the overseer and the person in control and means to assert his sensuality of the ritual is as rich and terrible as anything experienced theatre goers will find in their repertoire of theatre attendance. The other moment of sexuality takes place while Sonny

interesting and unique to a black drama where the sexuality is strictly normative even for

shoes exposes a loose and experimental curiosity about what might be a pleasurable moment.

The scene occurs at the end of an exhausting day of labor when the two men fall to the ground and soon fall asleep, positioned near each other. It at this time Sonny hears Asa speaking to

someone in his dreams. It appears Asa slept in the same bed with his Boston mentor leading him to relate to their sexual encounters. Sonny is strangely aroused by what he hears and begins to

IRQGOH \$VD¶V IRRW LQ KLV GUHDP DV LI LW ZHUH VRPH QH

is abruptly stopped when Asa awakens.

If **bonded** appears to be traditional and modern, it is because it incorporates both idioms into its **mise en scne** for dramatic effect. It is the hoped for life that is built into the melodramatic framing of the same sex relationship between Sonny and Asa while simultaneously stepping into the brutality of the slave system. While the play retains a certain adherence to the

YLUWXR XV GLFWDWHV RI WKH PHORGUDFD Fantasy life from DADR JLYHV

and sexual. In using Sonny and Asa to illustrate the complexities of sexuality, even if the practices of same sex attraction had to be discreet, the hoped for relationship was not anathema. But still the normative as the top force of propriety asserts a strict behavior of outward decorum. Sonny finds his ambivalent feelings toward Asa to be powerful, irresistible, repellant and shameful all at once repeats. Asa is desperate for Sonny and freedom. Jolly emphasizes his characters conflict while providing a genealogy of the self condemnation of black same sex relationships. More over same sex attraction under enormously complex circumstances opens the door to a conversation about fixity and fluidity amongst the slave caste that resonates to contemporary sexual placement of black men, gay and straight /LNH 6WJALDQGE Play J¶

Jolly imagines the scenes of gendered intimacy as oneiric where the men are intimate with each other without revealing their feelings. It is only when Asa declares his love to Sonny that the reality of the situation becomes in the best sense of melodrama, the marker of their destiny.

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

orientation confirmed by a long lost love Matthew, sold up the river, at a point before the play begins. Lily is the only black woman left on the plantation. She entices and attempts to seduce
6 R Q Q \ R Y H U D Q G R Y H U X Q W L O V K H J L Y H V X S H Y H U K D Y L Q J
Q L J J D K ' H Q W H F U W W K H
heightened as threads of the past begin to unravel to give the spectator a fuller account of plantation life. As it is, the north is forcibly transported to the south bringing with it the progressive sentiments embodied by Asa to the entrenched sensibilities of lives disciplined by bondage exhibited by the slaves.

, W L V \$ V D D V W K H D Q W D J R Q L V W L Q W K H S L H F H W K D W G
fixity. Not only is the Northern educated Negro who is suddenly forced into slavery but he is also the Northerner who has a different lens from which sexual intimacy is explored. It is intimated in a dream scene when Asa is playfully fending off the advances of his white mentor. Apparently, he slept in the same bed with him and was allowed or expected to respond to him sexually. The idea that this was a statutory rape would not be historically correct so the relationship between black boys or black women were on the same level of freedom whether it was the North or the South. The thinking and critical awareness of this unequal status is the point of negotiation for black people during this era (as it would be for many generations to follow) lending Asa a street smarts that is advantageous to his calculating strategy and tactics. It is also a representation of a

F K D U D F W H U Z K R P D \ Q R W N Q R Z Z K D W K H ¶ V I H H O L Q J E X W L V
³ Q D W X U D O ' W R K L P

Jack is the oldest character in the play that fiercely defends K L V L G H Q W L W \ D V ³ W K H
\$ I U L F D Q ' , W L V K H U H Z K H U H W K H P H W D S K \ V L F V H Q W H U V W
Africa and nigger become purposeful tautology. Jack abuses the word as well as applies its

inferred inferiority as his weapon of power/knowledge reified by the use of the whip. Jack knows

WKH VHFUHW RI 6RQQ\¶V SDVW OLDLVRQ ZLWK 0DWWKHZ 7

knowledge as he attempts to discipline Asa. Countering some of the Afrocentric theories of no

knowledge of same sex relations in Africa, Jolly re-imagines this narrative through Jack. Not

only is there knowledge of these acts but he has learned to demonize the actor from a Eurocentric bigotry.

Africa is represented in the character of Jack known amongst the slaves DV WKH ³ROG

\$IULFDQ ´ +H LV WKH ROGHVW VODYH RQ WKH SODQWDWLRC

the mother country and the adapted ways of the new country. His idea of sexuality is more

toward the hyper masculine in that he is the appointed overseer and therefore has some control

over the other slaves on the plantation. This is where the idea of punishment and discipline are

helpful in understanding a way of control by physical beatings and knowledge of the other. The

localized center of knowledge, the plantation is a world untold itself that is not subject to outside

LQWHUIHUHQFHV ,W LV WKH RQH SODFH ZKHUH WKH DELOL

a private decision. The old African is told to train Asa to be the docile slave nature has intended.

But the African sees the inherent sissy qualities and uses the means of discipline at his disposal

to pleasure himself with the stripping and beatings. Humiliation is the first resort. When Asa

continues to resist, the old African though probably more opposite sex attracted than same sex

forces himself on the boy setting in motion events that will sever his ties from the plantation.

Lily is the lone female character that is seen. She acts as the liaison between the house and the slave quarters. Since the plantation has fallen on hard times (it is implied there were

never many slaves on this particular plantation to begin with) her duties have multiplied. But as

WKH SOD\¶V VLQJOH IHPDOH VKH he few black men a white to her. LQWHU RI

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

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

- R O O \ ¶ V H [F O X V L R Q R I Z K L W H F K D U D F W H U V P L J K W E H V

that is precisely the point. What resonates for the contemporary spectator is the image of the white master so embedded in American imagination that their actual presence is unnecessary; omitting them out acts to reify their existence. We are asked to examine our own subconscious submission to the power that is not directly in front of us but projecting their control through our own process of self- subjugation and self-delusion. In their absence a self-reflexivity is asked of the spectator. This is the transformative nature Jolly attempts in the not so subtle messaging in an effort to have the spectator consider his/her own self-imprisonment. The idea of moving away from the traditional definitions of historic roles to a place of recognized fluidity is implicit in the poetics of **bonded** Consciously separating the traditional slave story to the modern understanding of racist tropes is W K H U H D V S H G D J R J \ - R O O \ ¶ V X V H R I W K H F R Q W H P S R U D U \ G U D P D R I W K H P D U J L Q D O L J H G W R S U R M H F W spectator.

Slavery and religion is debated in the piece, as Jolly has his characters testify at various times about their faith or lack of faith where a virtuously lived life has clearly been part of the

V O D Y H R Z Q H U \ ¶ V L Q G R F W U L Q D W L R Q D Q G G L V F L S O L Q H R I K L

W K H S O D \ ¶ V V H W W L Q J ~~his identity was now every one's~~ ~~unforgotten~~ ~~in~~ the lives of black slaves. Sonny uses Biblical phrases to guide his thinking against resisting the rigid rule of life on the plantation. His faith in the European God has erased the memory of any connection with the African religions. His identification is that of a slave with no prospects o any other existence. As with the colonial subject, the effects of being colonized begins to take on a life of its where the colonized becomes more and more in sync with imitating the colonizer. Although the formal black church has not yet organized on the plantation, the empathy of the

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

bonded¹⁸⁹ V H Q V D W L R Q D O X V H R I ³ W K H W K I S H D W L F D O I X Q F W
amplify an idea of moral truth, in this case a natural attraction between two slaves who happen to be of the same sex, in gesture and image where the depth of their passion is undeniably a possibility that could not be explicated in the spoken word. The play insists on wrestling with an unsubtle indication of a power-knowledge that is to be never to be spoken or written for that matter. The avoidance dance knows about sexual otherness but as power relations play out seeks to keep this information within the familial or at the very least the community, policing in a direct/indirect strategy that limits circulating ideas of sexual discourse in the black community. The pro and con of black men as less than men implied through same sex practices is the at the very core of the disidentifactory mode of hiding same sex attraction excites a discussion on the fixity of hyper masculine image, family and religion; issues the play discloses in order to engage the audience on the very nature of historical narratives where nuance of sexuality is ignored and the myriad forms of intimate relations including fetish is ignored.

Labor is the overwhelming metaphor embedded in the narrative, the abuse of labor and the power of the labored body. The designers concoct a set that is serves two functions: the slave quarters and the plow. At one point in the play, Asa and Sonny use a transformed slave quarters

D V W K H S O R Z E H F D X V H ³ W K H P D W H U T V P X O H C L H G ' 7 K H
FRPSOHWH WKHLU WDVN IRU WKH GD\ 6RQQ\ UHPDUNV ³ W F

¹⁸⁹ Williams 18.

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

Staged in the yard of the plantation where the slave cabin figures prominently as a spectacular theatrical device and place of imagined cultural referent. The slave cabin serves a double function. It is the place of the public and private identity of the slave. It is in proximity to WKH PDVWHU¶V KRXVH DQG \HW LQ WKH VKDGRZV ,W LV D³KRPH´ LV QHJDWHG DV LW. The slave cabin is a place where the slave can rest a bit at night and then return to work at dawn. Interestingly, the place as public and private EHFDXVH LW LV VXSSRVHG WR EH WKH VODYH¶V GRPDLQ EX the whim of the master. So it is a place/space of limbo. When the cabin turns into a field plow before the eyes of the audience, it becomes clear that home and hard labor are inextricably linked. The converted cabin, now a plow, is pulled by the two black actors in a grueling workout DV LW VLPXODWHV D GD¶V ZRUN RQ WKH IDUP %HLQJ DV F strain of their muscles as they maneuvered the plow from the slave cabin, pulling it into full view of the audience as it stretches the length of the playing space. We were hear the call and response of the slave men as Sonny, being the more experienced of the two, tries to get Asa to commit to a rhythm that will give the plow momentum. At last, Asa understands not to resist and Sonny learns a persistence urging is what is needed for Asa to respond. The intense struggle between the two is metaphor for their struggle to be intimate with one another and the phallic plow is tool Jolly uses to emphasize the sexual overtones of the scene.

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

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

¹⁹⁰ U . . . # h
 blackface, Mungo is the classic servant who knows more about the relationships in the household than his rich employers. Mungo is also one of the first black dandies on the English speaking stage.

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

Thus playing against type becomes a strategic maneuver in establishing a re-claimed heritage and to create a black gay cultural niche within the larger understanding of black history. The process of performance has been in a sense becomes a borrowed tactical mode of resistance reminiscent of mainstream black culture to an accepted traditional method of discussing or in this case not discussing homosexuality. Obviously, including a study of same-sex relationships in history has been difficult on a purely lack of evidential proof. Because there is little to substantiate the claims of actual male-male or female-female relations in the era before the 20th century is no ca X V H W R D V V H U W W K H U H W K H \ V L P S O \ G L G Q ¶ W H [L V even dangerously negative to broach, given the differences in education and class and male/female status, same sex coupling was hardly even documented at the time even under the most tolerant of communities. If we look at the black American throughout their existence in American society, the question of variant sexuality become moot given their lack of

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

The cast is mostly young and lighter skinned blacks except for the actor playing the African. Sonny and Asa have been cast to resemble an iconic rendering of imagined male couples. In other words, sonny is butch: tall, broad shouldered, deep voiced. While Asa is small bottom; small framed, sassy and overly emotional. I would suggest the casting is to contemporize history and not to complicate embedded images of gay men. Modern audiences might not accept the reverse of body image and sexual role playing. Jolly has written the description of the men this way so the casting director is being true to the script. But what we know of sexually variant behavior that the usual models are reified rather than challenged. I mention the color of their skin because in casting people RI FRORU WHQGV IRU UROHV R-en-for-a RG ' DQG 3 subtext of racism as the darker the person the more malevolent they appear. Furthermore, Asa DQG /LO\ DUH OLJKW VNLQQHG EODFNV LPSO\LOQ D VDPHQH does not specify the color combination but in staging the play, a reliance on coding in casting choices reveals the confines of melodrama as having an advantage and disadvantage in bring the black same sex couple into a modern theatre project.

However, WKH SHUIRUPDQFHV DUH PRGHUQ LQ DSSURDFK P subscribe to experimental or Method training but theses modern black actors utilizes a magic 3 ZKDW LI' WR SURMHFW WKHPVHOYHV LQWR UROH RI D VOD believability of the character that is out of place (Asa) can be seen as a disruptive force in the midst of plantation gentility. If the work of modern actors is to lose and regain the ethnic

bonded cpf"Ognqftc o cøu"Rtq o kug

"Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?"¹⁹² The quote is

WDNHQ IURP D VODYH ZRPDQ¶V QDUUDWLYH ,W VSHDNV WR

to the prevailing legal reality and cultural misreading of black people and their ability to be

LQWLDPDWH ,W LV D SRHWLF SLHFH RI ZULWLQJ WKDW -ROO

narrative that asks the spectator to ponder the intimate life of a black slave. Could there have

been a real bond between two people trying to negotiate a day to day existence in the most

unimaginable of circumstances where their worth was not as a human being but as an object of

IRUFHG ODERU" -DFREV¶V SODIQLWLYH WDWLH FHQW DVVXUH

was true for what we can assume are male/female relations, it must be true as well for the

opposites. On its surface the play tends to resemble the kind of slave drama that Americans have

become accustomed to where the slaves are all-suffering and their sexuality is never an issue.

From this traditional approach the spectator can extrapolate the degradation and the historic

racism afflicting the black community giving context to a host of sociocultural challenges. So the

piece seeks to view these invisible intimacies as another avenue to suggest that sexuality was a

lively and fluid enterprise on the plantation not restricted to the plantation.

bonded VHQVDWLRQDO XVH RI ³WKH WKH ¹⁹³KLHDLFD O IXQFW

amplify an idea of moral truth, in this case a natural attraction between two slaves who happen

to be of the same sex, in gesture and image where the depth of their passion is undeniably a

possibility that could not be explicated in the spoken word. The play insists on wrestling with an

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

¹⁹³ Williams 18.

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

The dictionary defines melodramas ³a dramatic form that does not observe the laws of cause and effect and that exaggerates emotion and emphasizes plot or action at the expense of ¹⁹⁴Exaggerated emotion offers a method of dramatic presentation that leaves no room for ambiguity. In the case of the missing black gay male from history, an emphasis on excessive emotionality forces the characters in behaviors that would defy the consequential outcomes in the context of the plantation life. This is to say it would seem to follow the aim of this kind of historic drama is to infuse a ³Chorus ^{E O D F N} to have any effect at all it would be to shift the tactical silence around the subject of black gay men to a place of animation and testifying performativity to actively retrieve the absent body. Furthermore, ³ O H O R G U D P D ' Z U L W H 6 D L G L \ D + D U W P D Q ³ S U H V H Q W and dissent « ¹⁹⁵ She is specifically referring to the antislavery plays where blacks were the heroes and heroines of the piece mostly due to their noble bearing and an ability to suffer horrendous treatment with dignity. It was an effective use of overly-emotional situations to

¹⁹⁴ Diction # ' U

¹⁹⁵ Hartman 27.

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

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

\$ V - D F R E V U H O D W H V D I H P D O H V O D Y H ¶ V G H V L U H I R U F F

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

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

VRFLHW\ 0DNLQJ WKH EODFN JD\ PDOH LQFOXVLYH LQ WKH

beginning process of re-claiming the image of the black gay male.

There is now some scholarship investigating the historical evidence of same sex relations in the black community from the days slavery was introduced in the American colonies. The argument that there are no documented examples of this kind of sexual intimacy was seen within certain sectors of black academia during the black studies programs in the late 60s and

WKURXJKRXW WKH V DQG V ,W ZDV WKH LGSad WKDW KR

that the entire notion of a black homosexual meant something had gone terribly wrong in their family life that made them into sissies or punks. The impulse to defend against black homosexuality was certainly the backlash of racist and homophobic reactions against this kind of assimilation. Where the late 60s black movement had become a radicalized version of the King movement where strategies of resistance were being re-thought by latter group of black cultural and academic agents. Deciding the conversation of an inclusionary gesture towards the nascent LGBT movement was seen as a capitulation with Western decadence amongst the Marxists in

WKH JURXSV DQG WKXV WKH YHU\ QRWLRQ WKDW WKH EOD

and bull- GDJJ was seen as weakening of the black political ascendancy. However, the

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

As identity designations became sexualized and gendered, the feminist movement and the simultaneous gay liberation movement protested against traditional white heterosexual male hegemony interjecting into the post 60s discourse a different perspective on the arts and sciences.

Gays in particular in their understanding off queer theory sough t disrupt a pattern of invisibility

E\ SULRULWLJLQJ WKH DFW RI ³FRPLQJ RXW´ DV WKH QDVFH
injustice and ridicule. Even though the racial divide between white gays and gays of color could not be described as starting out on an equal footing, the advantage of visibility was meant to be a teleological break from the past. Most gays of color could understand the concept but putting into practice was not always the liberating force it was meant to be. Instead, a modulated response could be the only safe method for their acknowledgement of their homosexuality. This was unique to each community of color and therefore it had to be left to them to devise a

SDUWLFXODU VQWURDXWH J\ 7KIH³ DRUPLV UHIOHFWHGH WKH VDPH W

dqpfou storyline is created out of the archive of the slave narrative, we can perceive the

QDUUDWRUV DV ³LQQRFHQWV´ LQ WKH JULS RI SROLWLFDOC

case for their liberation , V D Q Q R F H Q W V For these stories exist as the normative family structure, one man and one woman, generally fractured by the system of humans as commodified objects seems foremost and standard throughout the archive. The meta-narratives remain under-researched and under-reported. Utilizing the slave narrative and discovering the same sex eroticism hidden within its rich, lugubrious and nuanced language, Jolly has complicated the centrality and causality of the persistent depiction of the heteronormative paradigm in African American life. That writing has come to replace embodiment as a slippery slope for the

playwright whose intent is to historicize the other, PRUH VSHFLILFDOO\ WKH \$IUR T) re-imagining is aware of the incongruities and yet seeks to avoid them by letting the characters VSHDN IRU WKHPVHOYHV LQ WKH ³ZKDW LI ´ (YHQ LI WKH VO of salve life, for Jolly, there has always been a parallel narrative embedded in the prose suggesting the navigations of sexual intimacy amongst the African American male slave population as a reality. In essence, the spectator is brought into what is seen as a rarefied event, inviting privity to those who might have dismissed the notion of the intimate same sex slave relation.

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

/LVWHG DPRQJVV -ROO\¶V UHVHDFK VRXUFHV RQ EOD
 : DOWHU % Male in the Antebellum America Banemann tells us: Little
 documentation survive on which to reconstruct male-male sexuality under slavery during the
 HDUO\ SDUW RI \$PHULFD¶V KLVWRU\ EXW UHPQDQWV RI WK
 SODFHV HVSHFLDOO\ LQ ¹⁹⁶ Banemann's *The First to Have One* at the Smithsonian 3
 of same sex relationships remains a complexity to the extent that the availability of archived
 material is nearly non-existent. So then is it all just conjecture? Not necessarily since the
 subversive homoerotic leanings can be found in song lyrics of the period as well as public
 performance. His research finds some evidence in the slave narrative of a sexuality that might be
 FRQVLGHUHG IOXLG % DQHPDQQ FLWHV (ULF /RWW¶V ZRUN
 performance where white men in blackface interweave in their songs the mythic huge black
 phallus. Lott suggest the working class white patron of the minstrel show are indeed harboring a
 desire for sexual contact with black men and this is the subversive performance that allows them
 to fantasize about the prospect with losing white male privilege. As a reference for Jolly,
 % DWHPDQ¶V UHVHDFK LV DYDLODEOH WR H[WUDSRODWH W
 American life from its earliest history.

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

¹⁹⁶ Banemann 144.

is delivered in the context of an unexplainable same gender loving scenario. Both aspects of the word are resonant amongst the spectator and there are audible gasps when it is first uttered. The epitaph troubles t KH \RXQJ EODFN PDQ EURXJKW IRUFLEO\ WR WKH D QLJJHU ´ \$W WKH VDPH WLPH EHLQJ IRUFHG WR VHOI HPX on his resistance and tacit self-acknowledgement that in this hostile space he had better come to the place where the word can flow in and out of his consciousness just as the realization of his servitude becomes the place where his tactical transgressions only magnify his subservient status. The place where the double bind of being black and same sex attracted and a slave feed

WKH ³H[FHVHV DQG OLPLWV´ RI KLV H[LVWHQFH VXJJHVW V

As this melancholic reverberation pierces the narrative it foregrounds a social ordering around black sexuality experienced in the discipline/bondage of the slave system. Whether this is -ROO\¶V LQWHQWLRQ RU QRW WKH FLUXPWFULEHG SOD\LG are literally under the whip recalls the fetishistic bondage fantasies of those who exorcise their traumatic emotionalism by dominating someone else. It is a psychic mind game that is meant to erode the self esteem of the individual being dominated until they submit. Their passivity is at the core of their malleability. bonded thus explores this unspoken sexually subversive dance as it

touches on every aspect of the quotidian in the lives of the slaves. A co-mingling of labor and LQWLPDF\ EOXU OLQHV RI JHQGHU UROHV VR WKDW QRUPDV option to acqu LHVFH WR WKH PDVWHU¶V ZLVKHV +RZHYHU WKH G VODYHV¶ DJHQF\ LQ SUDFWLFH +DYLQJ IRUHJRQH WKH QRU conditioning, their recourse as in a strategy to assimilate in order to survive was to tacitly embrace the variant in their community as long as they remained more or less invisible.

Xktvgnø"Problematic Recreations

Having laid down a positive approach for melodrama and a modern approach to-
 L Q W H U S U H W L Q J K L V W R U \ Q D U U D W L Y H V - R O O \ ¶ V S U R M H F W
 simplistic and emotionally excessive does work in favor of the emotional arguments against
 slavery so depicted in the abolitionist dramas of the era however complications arise in the
 equitable treatment of other marginalized peoples in the narrative, in this case, the predicament
 of slave women and the backlash of reductionism from dominant discourses which tend to dwell
 R Q D ³ Q R U P D W L Y H ´ V H [X D O L W \ R I E O D F N P D O H D Q G I H P D O H
 slave narratives. Within this discourse there is the contention that a black gay male subject
 position is ahistorical since the evidence does not present itself either in storytelling or written
 documentation.

, K D Y H T X R W H G 6 D L G L \ D + D U W P D Q ¶ V Z R U N D V D Q H [D P S
 melodrama can bring to a identity politics project but let me also problematize the melodramatic
 structure by quoting Hartman again:

Melodrama provided the dramatic frame that made the experience of slavery meaningful
 L Q W K H D Q W L Q R P L D Q W H U P V R I W K H P R U D O L P D J L Q D W L
 essential language of good and evil armed antislavery dissent with the force of moral
 U L J K W D Q G P L J K W \$ E R O L W L R Q L V W G L V F R X U V H V K D U H G
 and the sanctity of the family.¹⁹⁷

One of the arguments made by abolitionists that blacks were actually human could be explained
 by their ability to form familial structures like whites. Thus there developed a virtue ethics
 adopted by white abolitionists to prove the moral fortitude of blacks supported by Christian
 doctrine. The sexual depravity repeated in the minstrel performances was to be deemed false and
 misleading. 9 L U W X H L V G H I L Q H G D V ³ P R U D O H [F H O O H Q F H ´ 7 R H [I

¹⁹⁷ Hartman 27.

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

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

Theatrically, bonded's reliance on melodrama as the primary dramaturgical framing to tell the story has its advantages and disadvantages. I state that immediately because my

LQWHUURJDWLRQ RI WKH SOD\ *Love Withholding the Story of Two Kids* DXWKRUV
VODYHV LQ DQ LQWLPDWH UHODWLRQ ,Q XVLQJ PHORGUDP
EDFNJURXQG -ROO\ XWLOLJHV WKH JHEURHQ\ *How the Villains* LFWO\ HP

clearly delineated representation of heroes and villains. Although melodrama has attained a

SHMRUDWLYH PHDQLQJ LQ E\ FRQWHPSRUDU\ VWDQGDUGV
DJDLQVW WKH KDUVK UHDOLWLHV RI SODQDWLRQ OLIH LV

trying to stage a complex situation in simplistic terms. In doing so the play is much in keeping

with a traditional approach to ethnic dramas of the 19th century such as the dramatization of

Wpeng"Vqoou"Ecckp. Characters represented in the *mise en scene* RI REYLRXV LQWHQW RQ

part. In relative terms of contemporary African American drama, the history play is applied with

a nod backwards to the melodrama where black gay characters can finally be incorporated and the

beginnings of the hyper masculine image of black males on the stage can be observed.

Still within the folds of the melodramatic style of the play Jolly interweaves a modern metaphor for agency. The idea behind the clearly defined and overly emotive messaging of the play is useful in seeing the strain of having a threefold existence for black gay men in America.

The play wants to be persuasive in its deliberate approach to relaying the intimacy that was

present between two black men and at the same time the melodrama, a preordained method of performance returns the spectator to the place where the normal persists in intruding. In other
ZRUGV 6RQQ\ DQG \$VD¶V VH[XDO FRQQHFWLRQ LV WKZDUW
everything as a simplistic binary. Master/slave, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual etc The binaries bind these characters in the mise en scene created by Jolly that is intends to produce both a dialogic and dialectic but instead leaves the spectator with limiting options. Furthermore the incoherence around homosexuality is reified by a heteronormative paradigm even for the opposite attracted individuals who would find anything resembling a modern family structure to be almost nonexistent given the control and power tensions between master and slave.

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

7KH PDUULDJH RI 6RQQ\ WgRt. It is a celebration of his son's death
DQWLFOLPDFWLF LQ WKDW KHU SOHDV KDYH EHHQ FRQVWD

with his attraction to Asa that drives him to act. Jolly heightens the stakes in a melodramatic arc
with overt int HUYHQWLRQV LQ \$VD¶V GLUHFV DFWLRQ E\ KDYLQJ
attraction but desire and romance to Sonny. Of course, the spectator could see the projection
coming but our own wish for the true lovers to unite is a trope that motivates countless romantic
themes in the theatre that we tend to suspend our disbelief and support the illusion before us.

7KLV PLJKW DSSHU WR EH D IDXOW ZLWK WKH SOD¶V VWU

the actual excessive emotion seems to fit the decidedly emotional narrative of 19th century drama
and therefore appropriate in telling the story of Sonny and Asa. The direct approach taken by
Asa is an allegorical illustration of going beyond the down low. Thus the messaging here is to
discard the language of the closet in asserting his identification as homosexual. Asa is sensitive
enough to understand the need for this even if he has to suffer a dangerous reaction from Sonny.

\$V IRU JHQGHU UHIHUHQWV \$VD DQG /LO\ FRPSHWH IRU

comfort and understanding and acts as a respite from the harsh realities of slavery. It is one of
the more problematic elements of the dramaturgy that the sissy (Asa) and the gender specific

/LO\ YLH IRU 6RQQ¶V .Lily pleads her case before the court and her

lawyer having marriage as her client. Sonny seeing this as the way to go on the down low
accepts. Sonny and Lily jump the broom, the broom being symbolic of good and evil in black
mythology. The wedding dance becomes a frenzied dance macabre of non-hierarchical instability
as the three characters exchange one another in the course of the roundabout. Asa tries to join in
but repeatedly rebuffed by Sonny. At first. But his insistence is so concerted the velocity of his
emotions and the excellent physical actions of the actors, propel sonny into his arms and they

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

If we look closely at the relationship between Asa and Sonny, we have to realize that there is no language for their feelings toward one another. Jolly has to write about same sex attraction as an abstract while the real racial implications of their status are very real. If it appears to be hypocritical for a country to be ostensibly founded in freedom when a substantial portion of

L W V S R S X O D W L R Q L V O H J D O O \ F D U J R D Q G I R U F H G O D E R U V

Unlike heterosexually focused narratives of the slave family, the nuances within the family manifested in same sex attraction are not included in the telling. The playwright then is in uncharted waters here where he cannot stringent proof of homosexual communities, it has to be surmised that the behavior itself even though unnamed does not go unmarked. This is to say the characters around Asa and Sonny observe what is happening between them, the subtle and not so subtle body language that is commented upon. Asa says in Act II, If I dream about someone

every night and I cannot bear to be separated from that person who haunts my dreams, regardless of how wild, or unimaginable W K R V H G U H ¹⁹⁸ D E P V D U H I S

S L W F K W R ³ M X P S W K H E U R R P Z L W K K L P D Q G V R O H J L

male and female slaves. Of course Sonny is uncomprehending and true to his virtuous character

U H V S R Q G V D Q J U L O \ D Q G Z L W K U H M H F W L R Q Y H U \$ V D F

¹⁹⁸ *Bonded*. 59.

only source of hope and salvation in this horrid, wretched place! ¹⁹⁹ Here is the moment of

PHORGUDPD¶V SURPLVH WKDW WKH WZR ORYHUV VXGGHQOV

be predicted with the escalating series of overly emotional events characteristic of the melodrama, this is just what happens.

Director Rivers moves the play along at an accelerated pace in act two whereby the pace

³ TXLFNHQV OLNH D KH DUWEH²⁰⁰ DISA LQ DWKHS WKH UREH RI SDV VLR

writing process for him was like Dadaist stream of consciousness. Forbidden desires being discovered (years earlier, Sonny had attempted to run away from the plantation with another male slave named Matthew who was killed during the escape) make the characters anxious.

There careful covert activities unravel revealing true motivations DQG KRQH VW\ 6RQQ\¶V Z

WKH \$IULFDQ DUH QHYHU GHFHL YHG 7KHLU FRQIURQWDWLF

ZLWK \$VD¶V SDV VLRQDWH SOHD RI ORYH WKH GHFLVLRQ W

The heightened dramatics surrounding the ending might appear over the top but in keeping with the melodramatics of the earlier scenes, it is an apt conclusion for a play that has as its aim the full emotional involvement of the spectator. It as if Jolly and Rivera have made a wordless dance piece that plays out kinesthetically linking the spectator to the proceeding as included not distanced. Quickened pace and dogs barking on a soundtrack involves the audience in the destiny of Asa and Sonny. Our contemporary understanding of the psychological trauma of slavery and marginalization is meant to engage our sensibilities about the stories of survival that our unfamiliar in our cultural but nevertheless have always been present.

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

¹⁹⁹ ibid

²⁰⁰ Jolly, Donald. Bonded. p.

seductive body of a woman and the second time the seductive body of a sissy. In the first act

there is a time of respite given to the slaves JHQHUDOO\ RQ D 6XQGD\ FDOOHG \

consists of drumming before it was outlawed amongst slaves and a kind of energetic bodily

display between male and female slaves in a mock ceremonial sexual union. The scene is

integrated with a song ca OOHG D ³QLJJDK VRQJ¶ LQ WKH VFULSW ZKLF

progenitor of a blues format where the present situation of the plantation is sung along with

gossip and much sexual innuendo. Lily and the African Jack participate in the song as they trade

an interior dialogue back and forth while Lily moves her body enticingly in front of Sonny. The

VFHQH LV SRZHUIXO LQ WKH LW¶V GHSLFWLRQ RI VODYH UL

public space. Ironically the scene ends with a debate amongst their slaves about their African

KHULWDJH 6RQQ\ IDGDPADQW.Dack MevDied Hfyrk In around these here

parts ²⁰¹ %XW LW LV -DFN WKH \$IULTFDQZKR LV PIRYWR IIHQGHG

him! I had to go all the way from NewYork with that neegrar crying and woo-hooing and cursing

my name and FDUU\LQJ RQ 7KLV 1HHJUDU JRW WR OHDUQ KLV SO

QHHJUDU IURP XS 1RUWK WHOO- first come Jesus Kodwo, who GR ,¶V LQ

Marster Atkins, then ME! You hear that? You neegrarsdown underneath way at the bottom. ²⁰²

+DYLQJ NQROZGHJH LV SRZHU \$VD¶V DVVHUWLRQ RI KLV \$

VODYHV ZKR DUH EHLQJ HGXFDWHG DZD\ of JRP isWKHLU URRW

threatened because he is the keeper of this connection, using the power of knowledge to maintain

KLV VWDWXV DV WKH PDVWHU¶V OLDLVRQ ZLWK WKH VODYH

The wedding dance of Sonny and Lily offers a particular imagery that establishes in its

roundelay between bride, groom and friend of the groom, a power play between the normative

²⁰¹ Jolly *bonded*. 18

²⁰² Jolly 19.

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

Therein lays the most problematic rea F K R I P H O R G U D P D W R V X E V W D Q W L D of dissent. The only self identified same sex attracted man is in conflict with the only woman in the play as they vie for the affection of the lone studly male. Even as Lily is the in-between, the link be W Z H H Q 6 R Q Q \ D Q G \$ V D ¶ V P X W X D O D W W U D F W L R Q I R U H D female gender representation; the bottom to the top, the passive to the aggressor. Images created such as her physicality is akin to that of Asa. These stage picture tend to re-enforce

FRQWHPSRUDU\ JHQGHU FRQIRUPLW\ UDWKHU WKDQ GLVUXS

²⁰³ Jolly 55.

sexually defined roles of Western society becoming conflated with and parallel to modern gender roles. As the her performance moves to the fever pitch of fierce defense of the family unit,

/LO\¶V UHSUHVHQWDLRQ DV WKH ZRPDQ VFRUQHGLV WKH

conclusion. The true interchangeability of family structure is not performed but instead the old African is utilized metaphorically as reminder of the non Eurocentric linkage here and the reminder that time is the essence of queerness on the plantation where nothing is as it should be in relation to the worth of humaneness. Lily is the signifier for the female and male inherent in

6RQQ\ DQG \$VD 7KH WULR¶V DWWUDFWLRQ FDQQRW RFFOX

LQFOXGHV ZLWKLQ LW¶V PDNH XS D UHMHFWRQ RI WKH IH

denial and outright self-hatred. Watching the scenes unfold and reveal historic truths, a bridge of causality is built.

/LO\ LV QRW JLYHQ HQRXJK RI WKH SOD\¶V WLPH WR UH

second act. If there is a somewhat less opportunity for her to defend against the overwhelming odds of being black and female on the plantation, it is not explored fully. Her time is spent in pursuit of Sonny as a security and her warding off the tacitly understood connection between Sonny and Asa. Her actual role as link between the master and the other slaves where she in

HIHFW EHRPHV WKH VODYH RZQHU¶V PRXWKSLEFH LV LQW

Lily is omnipotent in her presence. Her language has to represent the power-knowledge and the strategic of her own ambitions and means of survival. Even though it is still misleading to think of blacks as monolithic, their fealty may have been a more complicated enterprise on the plantation where it was never guaranteed that one could remaining in a stable place with those who were familiar to them in any sense of the sword. Asa arrive to destabilize an already tenuous situation. So Lily looks to Sonny for protection against a soon to vanish life of some stability.

how wild, or unimaginable those dreams are « ²⁰⁴ Sonny rebukes his question, telling him he is

D 3IRRO ´ +H DGRSWV WKH K\SHU PDVFXOLQH LGHQWLW\ DV

audience as his an inner homophobia and more tacitly seen by the other characters in the play.

But not to be put off, Asa per VLVWV WHOOLQJ 6RQQ\ 3-XPS WKH EUR

the broom is the euphemistic phrase in slave culture meaning marriage. The romantic friendship between men common in the era and probably known to Asa because he is an educated black, is by passed to the marriage stage. Both characters are used to the masculine and the feminine that

demarcates even slave communities but there fixed ideas, according to Jolly appear to be more fluid. Roderick Ferguson writes black slaves in North America engaged in a range of sexual

SUDFWLFHV DQG HODERUDWHG ²⁰⁵ D there was anything closely linked to \ VWUXF

D 3IDPLO\´ LQ WKH FRQWHPSRUDU\ VHQVH RI WKH ZRUG VO

structure for reasons that would counter the support of the slave regime. Furthermore, sexuality amongst slaves was useful to produce more slaves not intended as places of normative respite.

The world of bonded closely resembles that of the authentic antebellum plantation where sexual dynamics amongst the enslaved is cannot be seen to be anything but inherently unstable.

Furthermore, in introducing this double life, the black gay man takes on actually a triple

OLIH WKDW HFKRHV WKH FRQWHPSRUDU\ EODFN\ PDQ¶V

PDUNHUV DV WKHLU RZQ VWUDWHJ\ RI VXUYLYDO 6RQQ\¶V

very close friend of his was killed trying to escape from the plantation. Lilly teases sonny

implying an unnatural connection going so far as to challenge his friendship as something more

DNLQ WR ORYHUV 6RQQ\¶V UHDFWLRQ LV YLUXOHQWO\ UH

H[SRVHG KHUVHOI WR VKH EDFNV DZD\ 6KH LV LQ QHHG RI

²⁰⁴ Jolly *bonded*:59.

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

of marriageable age left on the plantation. So she allows what could be seen as a down low situation in its coding which Jolly intends as yet more of the artistic freedom to pass onto the VSHFWDWRU WKL V VRUW RI KLVWRULF ³LQIRUPDWLRQ ´ 6RQ affections directed more toward men but is unable to act on it because of community pressure and therefore vehemently denies it while secretly having relations with men that remains uncommitted.

7KH VWDJLQJ RI WKH SOD\¶V ILQDO VEHORQJHLJKWHQV calls for an accelerated pacing of the action and the audible increasing decibel of dogs barking as it is obvious the hunting for escaped slaves has begun. It is partly due to the writing and partly due to the direction. Having built up an authentic orality, in that the slave talk is accomplished by Jolly as nonmodern. The love triangle suddenly becomes too much for any of the characters to remain silent. Asa declares his love for Sonny stunning him into taking action against Lily.

Sonny a QG \$VD PDNH KD VW\ SODQV WR UXQ DZD\ IURP WKH SO ZDUQV WKH RYHUVHHU 6XGGHQO\ WKH VWDJH LV ILOOHG Z DZD\ ´ 7R HPSKDV LJH WKH FRPEXVWLEOH DWRWVS KHUH EDU

leading the spectator to wonder if Sonny and Asa will really escape. If they are caught the fate is unthinkable. It is in these moments that the sentimentalisms of melodrama work against the

SOD\¶V ³UHDOQHVV ´ /HDY LeQWKRHHQGLQDLSHQ WR WKH

necessary but the ambiguity of slaves in flight is the lasting impression we have of these two unique black gay men. It re-enforces the melodramatic where the protagonist after suffering through an overwhelming number of challenges triumphs. It is the pay off for the excessive emotionalism of the genre. Instead, bonded leaves the audience with a different perspective on

DQWHEHOXP UHODWLRQVKLSV EXW VRPHWKLQJ FRQVHUYD

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

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

I mention this because *bonded* like any other gay themed play focused on people of color GUDZV DQ DXGLHQFH RI PRVWO\ JD\ V ZKR DUH DOZD\ V DOU addition to a certain desperation to see their stories told on the stage. It re-enforces a sense of liberatory emotion that the play can be performed openly and they can attend without a fear of attack. But the idea of seeing blacks in bondage further embeds an image of the sub status position. To this extent, *bonded* is a play that does not connect with all gays in this diasporas but

remains the museum piece of the historic artifact. Another fact that needs to be considered is the division in the Los Angeles community between blacks and Latinos as Latinos are rapidly

H[SDQGLQJ WKHLU QXPEHUV DQG UHSODFLQJ EODFNV DV W
majority. So these kinds of American slavery plays are not so identified with their participation
in the what is called the American experience The play is not expansive enough in its creative
VFRSH WR IDVKLRQ DQ ³LQYLW DMLRQ ³WR DQRI WKR VH ZH
American slave story.

Of course obfuscation exists in the telling on the separate histories of colonial Americas and American slavery. There is a determination by those who wish to control the narratives that the slave stories are very different. It is the effort to keep the races at odds with each and is evident in the skin color prejudice of former Spanish and Portuguese colonies. (The two actors

FDVW LQ ERQGHG DUH QRW EODFN VNLQGHG PHQ EXW ZKDW
surrogation where the black gay men are meant to be seen as representative, the conceit is not
always obvious that these men are outsiders being gazed at by those who will soon have the
SRZHU DV WKH GHFLGHUV LQ PDQRLW KIRFPPXQJ W\¶V PR

be a useful tool in creating the individual who has never been seen or mentioned before but the
SHUIRUPDQFH¶V GHWHUPLQDQW DELOLW\ WR KDYH WKHP LC
problematic. Bearing in mind, there were few blacks in the audience which has to do with
location and publicity and yes, subject matter. The slave story is so deeply regarded in the black
community that the introduction of sexual themes other than the rape of the black woman by the
white master produces a wary and hesitant response.

)LQDOO\ WKH SOD¶V GHQRXHPHQW VXUPLVHV D OLIH V
the audience knows they are escaping into a dystopian world. In the midst of fleeing the

S O D Q W D W L R Q \$ V D D V H N Z H 6 R R I Q Q J " « 6 Z R Q H U H U D I S O L H V 3 + R P H '

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

The spectral homestead is actually recurring through the play. It is the place that is now a far off memory to the slaves. The African character is the metaphorical last link to their origin but the generation the play represents is neither citizen nor fully human. The America of the play is the circulating hole of history written by later black playwrights as the empty void through which a construct of identity is forged. The masculinities circulate in this hole. So home becomes

D Q L Q H O X F W D E O H M R X U Q H \ 1 H Z 2 U O H D Q V L V P H Q W L R Q H G

where sexual liaisons between upper class men and prostitutes are a frequent practice. Emerging

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

Building on the historic narrative, possibilities emerge from an ahistorically constructed narrative which takes shape in producing the inclusive medium where same gender loving relationships are suddenly in conversation. ~~bonded~~ potentiality as a model in forming narratives that now use black gay men as central to the action rather than as extraneous or even as the foil to the hyper masculine protagonist re-defines the black family drama and reifies the

W U D Q V J U H V V L Y H H G J H L Q S R V W V \$ P H U L F D Q E O D F N G U D P

homoeroticism wrestles with a historic silence that seeks to pin down an argument at the very least a tolerance for the ambiguous. Various masculinities are presented at a time when the hyper

is preferred as the cultural norm in the black community but the idea is not to discount but to disencumber the variances from being talked about or testified. There is a great deal of energy

VXUURXQGLQJ WKH EODFN FRPPXQLW\¶V WKH VRFLDO DFWV

conserve and protect the family against the traumatic flood of American apartheid, the impulse is to separate the two performances. To be clear, there will be acknowledgement but we are not

JRLQJ WR VXSSRUW WKH DV ³XVXDO´ WKH QRQ QRUPDWLYH

QRW WR EHFDDWHZHFHQW

Home as theatre of Social Construction

³+RPH´ LV WKH SODFH RI LG\OOLF PHPRU\ LQ PHORGUDF

declares to Asa they running away to get back home. Sonny and Asa must survive the militia in pursuit with their growling dogs on their heels as the theatre lights fade. Where will they go even if they are not capture? The answer is unresolved in the minds of the audience. We are left with the exhilaration of the male lovers escaping servitude and debasement. In the modern imagination they are able to live out their lives on some far place like Mexico, posing as brothers or father and son. It is a scenario that is plausible because of the yet to be resolved slavery question in the US and the tensions between black and white in the so called northern free states.

6RQQ\ DQG \$VD¶V IDWH LV OHIW WR RXU LPDJLQDWLRQ E\ V

³KRPH´ WKDW FRQGLWLRQV WKH QDWHU TXHVWLRQ \$V ZL

melodramas, their happy outcome is linked to the fantasies of the audience member who is emotionally drawn into the events because they identify so strongly with the lead charter who endures all for that place/space of comfort.

If we look at the lens of social construction²⁰⁶ where they lived experience of the subject is dependent upon social, cultural and economic elements, then the love object in the slave relationship can be varied. Given the trauma of bondage over many generations and then the absolute uncertainty of a stable family unit, as Roderick Ferguson points out the slave system was used to constructing its own sex system. Strategies of normalcy would become necessary after manumission due to the ongoing inequality in American society as institutionalized racism and heterosexism made the queer tactic of disidentification a place of survival. In keeping with this idea, the plantation drama as I have pointed out earlier in this chapter is not always amenable to the black reasons. Many black gay playwrights have found their way into the genre through the experimental design while *bonded* may be the first to simply let the narrative play out in linear fashion incorporating into its plot homoerotic situations in black history.

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

²⁰⁶ g 'K) - in "Afterward, 1998," to *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, divides the theories of homosexuality into two categories: essential @ find it. While the social constructionists would argue that human sexuality is malleable and can be organized in many different ways. Therefore, identity labeled as homosexuality appears at some historical periods and at other times not.

Sonny like the husband to the fairy found in same sex relations in the late 1800s and early 1900s is surrogate for the hyper masculine in the future of categorized masculinities in 20th and 21st century America. In this sense his surrogation is an enactment of a sexuality perhaps remembered subconsciously from his African ancestors whose rituals of manhood included male

WR PDOH PHQWRUVKLS +RZHYHU -RVHSK 5 Red. The VD\V 36 XU
SURFHVV UHTXLUHV PDQ\ WULDOW DQG DW OHDW DV PDQ\
²⁰⁷ The future for the Made gay male

presence in theatrical performance would seem then to have to be re-visited again and again as long as the hyper masculine is ever present to crowd out alterity.

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