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THE MYTH OF PROMISCUITY: EXAMINING BLACK MALE SEXUAL

NARRATIVES AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Seth Young

August 2018

THE MYTH OF PROMISCUITY: EXAMINING BLACK MALE SEXUAL NARRATIVES

AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

THE MYTH OF PROMISCUITY: EXAMINING BLACK MALE SEXUAL NARRATIVES

AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

By

Seth Young

August 2018

Dissertation supervised by Marco, Gemignani, PhD.

Black masculinity and sexuality are common topics across areas of philosophy, psychology, cultural studies and others. Yet, these topics are dedicated to the racial narrative of hypersexual Black male, the sexual objectification of Black men, and their presumed promiscuity. While such topics are important, there is little qualitative research that looks at the complexity and emotionality of African American men's sexual experiences. Using the theoretical research on black masculinity and sexuality as its backdrop, this dissertation explores how heterosexual, African American men experience their sexuality. The study incorporates narrative inquiry and in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather stories of five African American men. This study also uses an autoethnography from the researcher to answer the research question and extensively consider how his experiences as a Black man influence the project. All provided narratives are analyzed through a narrative performance analysis and an interactional analysis.

The results illustrate the multifaceted, complex, and conflicted experiences of sexuality. Namely, the participants' experiences are framed through the historical, social, cultural, and personal constructions of blackness. Likewise, the results highlight the depth of these experiences, demonstrating the sexuality extended beyond sexual intercourse and pertained to how the participants understood and their relationships to others.

This dissertation highlights five important themes that are apparent in the participants' stories. First, the participants experience a sense of exhaustion after being constantly filtered through a racial narrative of hypersexuality. The men indicate different moments when problematic, reductive, and objectifying interpretations restrict their sense of self. Second, the participants' stories highlight an alienating and dehumanizing sense of fragmentation in predominantly White spaces. Third, the participants note experiences of anxiety and vigilance because they were uncertain of how people saw them. Fourth, the participants state that people sexually objectify and reduce them to their penises which also highlights a loss of their bodies and inner lives. Fifth, participants attempt to use their insights into their experiences to regain a sense of agency and strengthen their self-confidence. While this often includes a reification of some racialized stereotypes, they attempt to define sexuality on their own terms though success varied between them.

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me and my dissertation throughout internship and beyond has once again shown me the value of multiculturally sensitive work. I cannot express enough gratitude for the relentless, effervescent confidence you have given me and the belief that I can do better, should do better, and will do better as both clinician, a leader, and a person. You have helped me to realize my goals and my passions as I take the next steps to become a psychologist.

I would like to give many thanks to my family. My mother, for your many blessings and prayers and constant reminder to find the good and to find the value and lesson in everything I experience. It was with your affection and devotion that I was able to find guidance, to reach out for help and assistance when I needed it, and to remain humble. I thank my brother and sister for their presence and encouragement throughout every step of my studies and this project, texts and calls of encouragement and support for my future endeavors. I continually thank and praise my wife for your unending support, encouragement, and for being a source of stability at the times when I felt like I had none. To say you held down the fort would be an understatement and you continue to serve as one of my primary examples of what it means to be a professional, a friend, and a partner.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A COMMON CONVERSATION

When I began this dissertation, the conversation about Black men and sexuality was a conversation I wanted to have with everyone. This not only by the academic and scholarly interest of a dissertation to be completed, but also – maybe even primarily – because it involved me quite directly and personally. It involved many of my friends. It involved the society at large by the images we saw on screen and off, in photographs, in written text, in lyrics, or in the comments shared between friends and strangers. Black men were represented and talked about with a certain exoticized and fetishized sexualized bestiality and mystery, simultaneously, possessing insatiable sexual appetites and operating within some primal, otherworldly reality. As a Black man myself, I wanted to examine my position and positioning within such narratives, as much as I was interested in the scholarly sense to be made thereof.

Wondering about Black masculinity and sexuality was nothing new to me. In a sense, it was just a scholarly extension of a haunting and persistent question. As I began my research, I spoke to my friends about Black men. I asked them what blackness and masculinity meant to them. I asked them what sexuality meant to them. And as I spoke to them, more and more questions imposed themselves: "What do you think about this idea about Black men being the best at sex?" and "Do you believe it's true what they say about us? That our prowess is innate?" and "How do you feel when people make these assumptions about you?" In some strange parallel process, as I read what the formal academic literature had to say about Black men, I informally asked Black

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men what they had to say about themselves. Let alone, of course, that I asked myself these questions as well, no less a Black man myself.

Inside of smoky and loud college bars, I talked to my friends about sexual and sexualized experiences. I asked my questions and they answered me. Their answers came in the form of shared stories; stories about White women whose fathers we presumed would kill us because of our relationship with their daughters, for example. We discussed White people's curiosity with the sizes of our penises and our sexual prowess. We laughed about "Black men just knowing how to do it better than any other men of any other race." There was humor, a certain incredulity at the absurdity of much of those beliefs, as well as a seductive attraction and a fondness for a seeming power that came with such stories and beliefs. As we developed a library of sorts of common stories, it felt at times as though we were putting together a primer for non-Black people about Black men and their dicks.

In the back of our minds, though, we also knew that such "primers", as it were, would be picked up, read, believed, and even taken as fact not only by non-Black folks, but by Black boys as well. As we have. Some of us took to these stories of hypersexuality, for example, as fact, cultivating a powerful physicality as a means to power and domination. Even as a rite of passage of sorts, and in fact in conversation such a characterization as rite of passage would come up often. Some Black women told me how problematic it was for them to feel like they were objects for Black men to posture and perform a masculinity script for their friends. Yet, at the same time some Black men expressed reservation and annoyance with such stories of supposed Black male prowess. They hated how people saw them; they detested being reduced to a crude stereotype and wanted to ignore the stories and "move on".

This motivation continues to stimulate my curiosity about how other Black men define and experience their sexuality. I wonder about the ways that Black men assemble their blackness – when were they socialized? When did they begin to construct their idea of blackness? Who served as their de facto model of blackness? Where did their blackness connect with their sense of masculinity? What did being a man mean to them? Who served as their de facto model of masculinity? Did it relate to physicality and athleticism? Did their sense of manliness reference images of men as emotionless? Did their masculinity ever inform how they related to other genders? Did they assemble their beliefs about sexuality when they put together their blackness and masculinity? Was their blackness masculinity crucial to how they experienced their sexuality? What did sexuality even mean to them?

These questions ran through my head when I spoke to Black men and women about masculinity and sexuality. If I learned anything from the conversations it was that the ways we assembled and constructed our Black masculine and sexual identities were varied and complex. We referred to a common experience and to a common conversation, but the experience and conversation had a deeply personal meaning, consequence, and affect for each of us respectively. We had unique relationships to our blackness, our masculinity, and our sexuality that suggested a behavioral and identitary performance according to both our cultural and personal histories. This was an important recognition, happening as it did alongside the formal process of literature review, and recognizing therein a decided absence of precisely those individual meanings, stories and experiences, sacrificed as they were for the general, universal, and academic thematic.

Hence it was that the dissertation question, as it were, crystallized into a desire to examine just "how do Black men experience their sexuality?"

MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

In a very real sense, an important motivation for the study has already been articulated above. Personal as that is, however, I recognize the necessity of an academic and scholarly motivation, given the nature, aim, and end of a dissertation as such. To that end, Black masculinity and sexuality seem a familiar – even somewhat "popular" - topic across fields of race theory, Black philosophy, sociology and psychology, among others. Scholars in these fields critically explore this topic from different perspectives such as blackness and racial identity (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1950; Cross et al., 1991; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tatum, 1992, 2003), or gender, sexuality and sexual health (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Lease, Hampton, Fleming, Bagget, Montes, & Sawyer, 2010; Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). The impact of these identities is also often brought to bear on an examination of Black men's mental health. The overwhelming majority of such studies employ a quantitative and natural science approach, and there is little qualitative research that critically explores the effects of sexual narratives on Black men and their sexual experience. Similarly, there is little qualitative research on the ways in which Black men make sense of their sexuality within the context of these sexual narratives and identities

There are numerous quantitative research studies that focus on the impact of race and gender practices on Black people and identity development. Additionally, numerous studies examine the impact of race on identity development (Abdur-Rahman, 2006; Clark & Clark, 1939, 1950; Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tatum, 1992, 2003), where racial identity refers to an individual's belief and sense of belonging to a racial group and their relationship with the community's cultural beliefs with regard to race (Helms, 1990). Racial identity theory illustrates how individuals are socialized along racial dimensions and the processes

by which they interpret and come to understand themselves vis-a-vis race. For Black people, racial identity theory proposes an understanding of blackness in a predominantly White world, meaning they initially interpret what it means to be Black through imagery created and sustained by White-dominant culture (Ritchey, 2014; Tatum, 1992; Tatum, 2003). Tatum (2003) explains that further along in their development, Black people begin to reinterpret and reconstruct their blackness, either appreciating it and wanting to surround themselves with Black culture or attempting to reject it. Tatum's description of Black identity development illustrates the conflict and complexity that Black people experience upon assembling their identity, as they may wrestle with essentialist racist ideas, and recognize that any attempt to define their sense of blackness on its own terms is near nigh impossible given an experience pervasively and inexorably tethered to reductive interpretations of blackness.

The racial identity models can provide some explanation regarding Black people and their experiences of race. However, the models glance over or miss Black people's feelings and reactions (e.g. feelings of anxiety, confusion, exhaustion, discomfort, frustration, or resignation) to racism and stereotypic narratives. As a result, despite its usefulness in some contexts[1], the model misses the important and complicated nuance regarding racial narratives and their role in Black people's experiences. My dissertation acknowledges these feelings and considers how racial narratives about Black people serve as primers and references that can inform how Black men experience their blackness. Thus, this dissertation considers how those stories may come into play as Black men begin to understand and experience their sexuality.

Like racial identity development, there is substantial research that supports the impact of Black masculinity on identity and psychological well-being (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Kirkland

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[1] Indeed, some clinicians and researchers may find racial identity development models useful for clinical formulations, conceptualization, and critical analyses of Black experiences.

& Jackson, 2009; Lease, Hampton, Fleming, Bagget, Montes, & Sawyer, 2010; Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). These studies suggest that learning gender roles via models or narratives are important to one's gender socialization. Likewise, many of the articles that I found during my research related to the formation of sexual identity in Black men, with specific subsets focused on relationships between men having sex with men, men being on the "down low," (Glenn & Spieldenner, 2013), and safe sex practices in relation to the contraction rate of HIV in the Black-American community (Bowleg, 2004; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009; Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004; Saleh, Operario, Smith, Arnold & Kegeles, 2011; Whitehead, 1995). While some qualitative studies in the field of psychology have addressed Black masculinity and sexuality, and used in-depth interviews and/or narrative inquiry, these studies focus predominantly on sexual practices, like safe sex practices or intercourse.

There is a scarcity of information in the contemporary literature that takes a critical look at experiences of Black masculinity and sexuality as it pertains to sexual experience. Additionally, there is little qualitative research that explores how Black men interact with racial narratives about their sexuality (Bowleg et al., 2017; Slatton & Spates, 2016; Wilkins, 2012). Some studies (Bowleg et al., 2017; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009) show that most articles on the subject are quantitative**.** Other studies show (Bowleg et al., 2017; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009; DeWalt, 2011, 2013; Ritchey, 2014) that quantitative inquiries overgeneralize experiences about blackness without considering or understanding what Black masculine and sexual identities mean to Black men. Likewise, while there may be numerous quantitative studies that focus on how Black men interpret or internalize stereotypic narratives about them, there is little qualitative research on the

subject. Furthermore, there is little qualitative research that explores any of these topics through narrative inquiry (Bowleg et al., 2017).

As noted, more studies are required to learn how Black men experience their sexuality. This unfortunate gap in the literature indicates the little attention given to the complexity, exhaustion, conflict and other experiences that come up for Black men around their sexualities. Hooks (2004a) calls for an exploration of Black masculine sexuality that is anchored in one of self-affirmation and love. Though it precedes some of the contemporary work referenced here, hooks' call identifies a significant point of research that many scholars on this subject acknowledge, yet that many studies lack, namely a discussion and development of a positive perspective of Black masculine sexuality. hooks also subtly request for Black masculine sexuality to be acknowledged as multifaceted and complex, with different meanings and experiences for all Black men. Qualitative research in general, and this dissertation in particular, attempts precisely such multifaceted complexity.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Research Question and Objective

The research question of this dissertation is: how do heterosexual African American men experience their sexuality? This is a complex question. During the interviews, the participants – five African American men – told me how they made sense of their experiences insofar as it related to their blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. What became apparent through these interviews was that their experiences of their sexuality were informed and modified by their experiences of blackness. Furthermore, the research question became even more difficult as men revealed how experiences of racism were tethered to their identities.

Based on my previous, informal conversations with other Black men, I understood our stories to be intersectional. By intersectional I mean that I interpreted the stories based on the ways that their identities of race, gender, and sexuality are interconnected (Crenshaw, 1991). These intersecting identities can construct different experiences. The stories we told each other were stories that related to our blackness, our manhood, what people assumed about our sexuality, and how we viewed and experienced ourselves as sexual beings. Thus, while the primary focus of this dissertation is the question of Black men's experiences of their sexuality, their positioning along racial and gendered dimensions and its relationship with their identities is as tangential an interest as it is intersectional.

The result of this dissertation is a story of five African American men and their complicated, profound, and exhausting experiences of sexuality.

Methodology

I opted to use narrative inquiry and performance narrative analysis as the primary research method and mode of analysis. Narrative inquiry as a method focuses on how people use stories to interpret and perform their experiences and identities, and create meaning through narration (Murray & Sargeant, 2012; Riessman, 2000). This approach allowed me to focus on the participants and their stories regarding how they experience their sexuality. While a Foucauldian discourse analysis could work in this project, I believed that focusing on the discourse of race and sexuality would disconnect me from the participants and their experiences as they told their stories.

I believed that I risked re-objectifying the participants by placing my attention anywhere other than their experience[2].

The justification for choosing narrative inquiry is two-fold. First, I am interested in the multitude of circumstances wherein and whereby people use stories. Specifically, we can tell stories to reflect on and try to make sense of our stories, to understand the experiences of other people, to share knowledge, to debate, as a method of violence, and as a method to heal, among others. People use stories and, subsequently, develop narratives in many ways. Indeed, a sizeable amount research corpus shows us how narratives can be used to explore and grapple with experience (Abdur-Rahman, 2006; Arntfield, Slesar, Dickson, & Charon, 2013; Crossley, 2000; Miller, Balmer, Hermann, Graham, & Charon, 2014; Mørkved et al., 2014; Murray, 2003; Murray & Sargeant, 2011; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010; Riessman, 2004; Silver, 2013; B. Smith, 2007; B. Smith et al., 2009; Thomas, 2012; Volpe et al., 2017). In focusing on stories, narrative researchers are curious about how people use stories to recall and 'relive' formative experiences.

Second, scholars like bell hooks (2004a), Angela Davis (1983), Patricia Hill Collins (2005), and West (1994) highlight how often people use reductive stories about Black men to determine how to perceive them. People can often use these stories to produce oppressive systems or to objectify them (Armstrong, 2013; Bhabha, 1996; Coates, 2015; Collins, 2005; F. Cooper, 2006; I. Cooper, 2015; Cross et al., 1991; Duru, 2004; Fanon, 2008; Foster, 2011; Gray, 1995; Hodes, 1993; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Staples, 1982). This is not to say they are narrative researchers. Rather, it is to highlight their endorsement of narratives as important constructs for

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[2] It must be stated that I acknowledge that my desire to avoid objectification here is somewhat impossible as much of this dissertation is propped up by participant's stories which only serve as pieces of short non-fiction in the compendium of their lives.

how people experience their world and develop their identities. My goal is to focus on the participants' stories to affirm their ownership over their own experiences and potentially push against reductive narratives.

The conversations I referenced earlier, being conversations and involving narration, in a sense entail or include many of the aspects and components narrative inquiry is interested in, albeit in the disciplined and ordered manner of research method and analysis. Some of these include plot progression, narrative tension, character, audience, for example (Murray, 2003; Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkles, 2009, 2009; Smith & Sparkles, 2010). What is of particular importance for me, though, is the importance of audience as structuring medium for how stories are expressed and narrated. The very same story, so to speak, will be told very differently depending on whom it is shared with, an observation particularly salient to my role as researcher. My very person and presence therefore influence and shape the data without any express instruction even; the fact of my blackness and gender prompts me to seriously consider how my own identities influence the research. This, as well and even before the content of the story, which speak as directly to me.

In the light especially of such personal closeness to the research material, I decided to do more than the customary and usual check on bias, or pre-judgments of some existential phenomenological and hermeneutic research; I also opted to include an explicitly autoethnographic section to the dissertation as a secondary and complementary research method. Inasmuch as autoethnography examines the researcher's experiences and their connection to socio-cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), by using autoethnography as a secondary method, I explore how my interpretations of Black masculine and sexual identities are framed by cultural experiences like the participants of this study. Also, I use autoethnography to reflexively consider

how my social positions and identities shape this dissertation and open up new interpretations of the data (Finlay, 2002; Walsh, 2003). As I will elucidate in chapter 3, the reflexive process allowed me to better connect with participants' narratives by considering my position as a researcher with shared identities. As this dissertation deals with a critical and sensitive topic, I believe that it is a researcher's responsibility to explore his or her biases, and to consider how personal history can impact a project. So, as I call for the participants of this study to share their stories with me, I must do so as well. The research methods mentioned here will be expanded upon in chapter 3.

In addition, I apply the work of multiple scholars on Black psychology and -philosophy to explore the narratives of African American men. I reference these scholars to elucidate the historical construction of the hypersexual, Black male narrative and how it was adopted by Black-American men. These scholars help provide a historical and theoretical background to this study. To explore how Black men, experience their sexuality, I will explain how I use blackness, masculinity, sexuality, and other terms in this dissertation.

USE OF TERMS

Reflecting on the research question, I ask, "How do heterosexual African American men experience their sexuality?" While I broke down what this question asks and what it means for this project, salient and focal constitutive parts include blackness, masculinity, and sexuality, clearly. Moreover, I ask people to narrate their experiences, so that it makes sense to provide some description and explanation for both the adjectival and proper terms of the question (e.g. "blackness") as well as the structural and grammatical order of its expression (e.g. "story"), as it were.

Blackness

The everyday and commonsense use of blackness notwithstanding, exact definitions of blackness have been difficult to pinpoint, especially in contemporary research. Scholars of Black racial identity development (Akbar, 1989; Cross et al., 1991; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1992, 2003; Vandiver, Fhagen-smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001) note that blackness is not defined to avoid any risk of essentializing it, though Black essentialism had supposedly served a unifying purpose during Black Power and Civil Rights Movements in the U.S. (hooks, 1990). Hooks suggests that a general idea of black essentialism once promised to "concretize" identity in order to reference and acknowledge a Black culture and "being" (hooks, 1990), such as Afrocentricity.

However, despite the lack of a precise definition, the research related to Black experiences seem to offer a description or delineation of blackness nonetheless, to wit blackness being an individual's experience as a Black person, specifically his or her experience and relation to the cultural norms, heritage, traditions, values, and history associated with Black culture. Furthermore, numerous scholars (Ahmed, 2007; Butler, 1993; Coates, 2015; Collins, 2005; Du Bois, 2005; Fanon, 2008; Gray, 1995; Hooks, 1990, 1992, 2004; West, 1994), highlight how blackness also extend beyond one's self-identification. It is a term that speaks to its construction in racist spaces, wherein blackness was associated with essentializing sub-human descriptions of violence, virility, unintelligence, and laziness.

In this dissertation, I use the term blackness to acknowledge the complexity of a Black person's experience. This is to make room for and to honor the participants' own definitions of blackness which speaks to their different lived experiences.

Masculinity

I use masculinity to describe the study and expression of the patterns, behaviors, practices, and principles related to the construction of manhood (Whitehead and Barret, 2001 p. 14). These

include, but are not limited to, being the "head of the household", being "the provider", being assertive, logical, controlling emotions, and competitiveness and aggression (Philaretou and Allen, 2001; Shrock and Schwalbe, 2009). It must be stated the discussions of masculinity exists in relation to femininity as both concepts express a series of regulatory practices that inform gender experiences (Butler, 2004).

Black Masculinity

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term black masculinity in reference to Black men's interpretation and performance of manhood, embedded as it is in historical constructions of Black men. I do not offer a definition *per se* as much as I offer a broad delineation of black masculinity, which is also to emphasize the history (e.g. abuse and dehumanization of Black men in White societies), associated narratives (e.g. Black men as violent, dangerous rapists), gender constructions (e.g. Black men and patriarchal masculinity), and interpretations of masculinity (e.g. Cornel West's "Black Machismo," (1994) and the motifs of the Black "player" and "hustler" (Collins, 2005). This perspective is curated from scholarly research on Black men and masculinity (Bowleg et al., 2011; Collins, 2005; F. Cooper, 2006; T. Crook, C. Thomas, & D. Cobia, 2009a; Ferber, 2007; Hooks, 2004, 2004b; Laing, 2017; Staples, 1982).

Like my position on blackness, I use black masculinity as a term of convenience and acknowledge that black masculinity is complex and difficult to define. Thus, my position is one of many potential interpretations of black masculinity.

Sexuality

In this dissertation, I reference the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of sexuality (2006); "a central aspect" of our experiences that includes "sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction." (WHO, 2006, p.6) They

note that sexuality is not limited to sexual intercourse and can be experienced through various forms of intimacy, as well as "thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, practices, roles, and relationships." (WHO, 2006, p. 6).

Additionally, I augment this definition of sexuality with Patricia Hill Collins' approach to sexuality and sexual politics. In her book *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), she uses sexuality to describe how individuals express themselves, inclusive of sexual performance, sexual practices, and sexual orientation. As such, she views sexuality as a "site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge" (Collins, 2004, p. 11), and an experience that can be modulated through sexism, racism, and gender discrimination.

I adopt this perspective to understand sexuality as something more than simply sexual intercourse, and to consider how people can express their sexuality in diverse ways (like romantic or platonic intimacy, and affection, for example). Indeed, sexuality can even refer to one's sense of self (e.g. how one feels about his or her body and how one interprets him or herself as "sexual"). Moreover, such an expanded and dimensional understanding of sexuality also allows me to consider meaningful sexual experiences as they intersect with constructions of race and gender.

Black sexuality

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term black sexuality to conveniently refer to Black people and sexuality. I do this to acknowledge the variety of ways that Black people can experience sexuality, the ways in which Black people can be used and manipulated through whiteness, historical constructions of Black people and their sexuality, and much more. Descriptions and interpretations of black sexuality are varied, and it is difficult – if not impossible – to define a black sexuality.

Story and Narrative

14

Throughout the dissertation, I use the term narrative and stories. Narratives are one of the main ways through which an individual's multifaceted identities is enacted and performed (Parker, 2005; Redman, 2005). Many scholars use story and narrative interchangeably (Murray, 2003; Murray & Sargeant, 2011; Riessman, 2003, 2004). However, I make a distinction, using story to reference "an organized interpretation of a sequence of events. This involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events" (Murray, 2003, p. 113) whereas narrative is used to refer to a network of stories that are organized by a specific theme (Abbott, 2008; Corman, 2011a; Harper, 2009). This distinction is helpful as it allows me to identify people's stories and highlight important themes from which a collection of stories can begin to form a narrative.

Racial Narrative

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term racial narrative to describe specific networks of stories organized around the theme of race. As I will show in chapter 2, I use racial narratives to describe affirming narratives and oppressive narratives.

Black and African American

Throughout this dissertation, I use three terms to describe Black people. I use "Black" to describe people of Black African descent. I use "African American" specifically to refer to Americans of Black African descent. Likewise, I capitalize Black to denote a specific group of people. I use this trend with other racial groups as well, and in accordance with APA guidelines (2010).

It should be noted that I use the terms Black and African American as a matter of convenience. I acknowledge that racial, ethnic, cultural, and political terms of identification are much more complex and nuanced than the aforementioned labels. Indeed, such terms can be

viewed as simplistic and removed from the rich and diverse experiences of Black people worldwide. Because issues of identification can become larger discussions related and unrelated to this dissertation, I choose to use the terms Black, and African American to reduce confusion.

Non-Black, People of Color, White

I use these terms throughout the dissertation. I use the term non-Black to denote racialized groups that are not Black. I use the term "people of color" as an inclusive term to describe any racialized group that is not White. I use the term White when speaking specifically about people of European descent. I will also use the term White to speak of White-dominant discourses and systems (White dominant model, White patriarchy, White space, etc.).

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters. Chapter one, the introduction, acts as an orientation to the project. Chapter two is the literature review. It frames the discussion of Black masculinity and sexuality and is organized around four sections. First, I discuss blackness as it pertains to identity development. Then, I highlight the ways that racial narratives operate as a form of representation. Second, I explore the performance of race and gender specifically pertaining to the historical construction of Black masculinity. Third, I look at how prevailing racial narratives can be oppressive, racist and internalized by Black boys and Black men. In addition, I focus on the myth of the Black male rapist and its effects on Black men. Fourth, I look at the background of Black men adopting the narrative as a means of cultivating power and authority and its endorsement of oppressive, domineering and hegemonic male standards.

Chapter three presents the methodology of the dissertation. The chapter provides a justification for focusing on narratives and restates and clarifies the research question. Narrative

inquiry and autoethnography are explicated and presented for their epistemological and methodological import to the study. Additionally, I will share the general demographics of the participants, my method of gathering narratives through interviews, and the performative analysis that I conducted on the gathered stories.

Chapter four acts as the "findings" chapter of the dissertation. Here, I will present the results of the performative analysis and narratives provided by the participants of this project. Each narrative is discussed as it relates to the participant's interpretation of their blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. In addition to presenting the narratives, I provide additional observations about my interactions with the participants. These observations serve as a reflexive addition to the performative analysis. This chapter on the participant narratives segues into Chapter five.

Chapter five is the autoethnographic chapter. I provide narratives that relate to the topics of masculinity, blackness, and sexuality. I also provide another performative analysis at the end of the chapter, connecting my narratives to the literature provided in chapter 2.

In the concluding chapter, I synthesize the findings. In this sixth chapter, I introduce a combined narrative as it pertains to the larger themes identified in chapter four. I supplement this is with the discussion from chapter 5 to bring out deeper processes and dynamics within participant narratives. I also share constraints and limitations of this study as well as implications for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature pertinent to those research interests, issues, questions, and phenomena are reviewed below, and organized across four sections: racial narratives; Black masculinity; the myth of hypersexuality; and Black men and sexuality. This chapter's organization is designed to reflect the research questions' intersectional elements, as well as highlight notable gaps, some of which include or concern a limited view of Black masculinity, sexuality and sexual experiences, and a dearth of qualitative studies that explore the intersection of identities. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to address and step into these gaps to add to, and perhaps even advance, the scholarly record, knowledge, and debate.

NARRATING BLACK MEN

Speaking specifically about Black men, psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1976/2008, p. 92), in his powerful manner, says they are "woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories." Here, Fanon references that Black people in general, and Black men in particular, are not given to interpersonal understanding by their own, or individual actions or personalities, but come pre-packaged, as it were, distilled from stereotypic and oppressive narratives into a reductive and crude exemplar of an inferior, dangerous, and/or sexually aggressive specimen of the genus. But Fanon continues, noting that it is not only that the non-Black person fills the Black person with a racist, stereotypic, and phantastic content, but also that the Black person may come to internalize or otherwise adopt these stories and descriptions as measure and truth for themselves. The empirical Baby Doll experiments of the Clark's (Clark and Clark, 1939) parallel this Fanonian sentiment, demonstrating clearly how racist narratives painting Black people as dangerous and "inferior", profoundly impacted the ways in which Black children thought about themselves, believing as

they did that they were inferior to White children and their blackness a hindrance to their wellbeing and desires. Likewise, as I will show later in this chapter, some Black men internalize and endorse stereotypical and mythical narratives of Blacks' sexual prowess which can motivate them to objectify women (hooks, 2004a). By highlighting these specific descriptions and how people wield or suffer them, we may also glimpse how conglomerations of stories work in service of larger racial narratives.

Throughout this dissertation, I use to the term racial narrative to refer to a collection of stories organized around race or make inferences on people of color via racially-related motifs. Many scholars and researchers use narratives and stories interchangeably (McLeod, 2006; Murray, 2003; Murray & Sargeant, 2011; Riessman, 2004; Riessman & Speedy, 2007; Silver, 2013), while some note that narratives involve "more" than just telling stories (Abbott, 2008; Bell, 2002; Corman, 2011b; Harper, 2009). Murray (2003) refers to narratives as a structured order of experiences, specifically "an organized interpretation of a sequence of events. This involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events" (p. 113). Like narratives, stories will feature sequential events and include who is involved, where the event took place, when it happened, and other vital details (Murray, 2003). On the other hand, narratives speak to and contain the stories that are told, in so doing functioning as representations or organized interpretations of those stories (Corman, 2011b; Harper, 2009). Narratives represent stories that are organized around a shared theme (Corman, 2011); as a result, narratives come to overarchingly represent a network of stories. For instance, the narrative about the hypersexual, or sexually dominant Black man refers to the multitude of stories where the sexuality of Black men is the thematic focus. Additionally, people may reference specific narratives to express their

identities or to understand someone's behavior (Harper, 2009). How people reference the narrative and the narrative's thematic focus highlight the discursive elements of narrative.

According to Foucault, discourse refers to the production of information and knowledge by way of language and social and cultural practices (Hall, 1997). An important characteristic of discourse is its relationship to power, specifically how the production of information can inform or dictate how people live. Thus, discourse can govern how we communicate with each other, how we behave in different contexts, and the institutional regulations that limit or open possibilities. Referencing Foucault, Hall interprets discourse as a "system of representation," specifically "discursive representation." (Hall, 1997, p. 44). Discursive representations deal with "constructing… a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society" (Hall, 1997, p. 6).

As Foucault (1977) underscored, discursive representations focus specifically on information, rules, and practices that are dominant in a specific epoch and context. Recursively, they contribute to the discursive formations, and/or the presence of a specific "truth." Likewise, discursive representations highlight concerns in a society as well as to the power consequences that derive from those knowledge bases. For instance, scholars like Davis (1983) show narratives of the Black male rapist were predicated on the belief that Black men were hypersexual. Historically, White people used this narrative to justify the subjugation and control of Black men with violence if they presumably interacted with White women. Discursive formations act as sources of information, while also creating or problematizing the subjects of discourses and dictating or policing social norms, exclusionary practices, and the regulations of dominant discourses (Hall, 1997).

Foucault states that when a discursive formation is connected to institutional power, it "not only assumes the authority of 'the truth,' but has the power to make itself true." (Foucault, 1997, p. 27). These institutions can then dictate the information we consume, and how subjects appear within, and are controlled through those institutions – becoming therefore subjected to them. In this dissertation, the section on the myth of the hypersexual Black male provides an example of the ways in which Black men and their bodies appear within a racist framework that regulates their interactions. The ways in which racial narratives can be used to regulate bodies underscore the features of narrative and their relevance for Black men's experiences of their sexuality. Yet, where do these stories begin? How do people begin to gather and interact with these discursive, racial narratives?

Fanon mentions two ways wherein racial narratives can be evoked: the "historico-racial" and "epidermal-racial" schemas (Fanon, 1976/2008, p. 92). With the epidermal-racial schema, the complexion of our skins can signal our race to someone. Fanon notes that the epidermal-racial schema gives way to an historical-racial schema in which details, stories, and anecdotes develop and gather around us based on our race. The racial schemas play a role in how people begin to receive us. The schemas restrict or expand what we can do in the world, and even influence who operates in certain spaces (Ahmed, 2007). Butler (1993) theorizes that these schemas can turn spaces into "racially saturated fields of vision" (p. 15). She explains that in this field of vision, White people interpret people of color through a history and network of racism and oppression. This interpretation can serve as motivation and justification for the discrimination people of color experience.

However, when it comes to the ways that racial narratives gather around people, it is important to consider that there is more than skin color that is at play. First, one's complexion may

make one's race ambiguous and thus cause them to receive different narratives until their race is identified. For example, a biracial person who is of African and European descent may have a lighter complexion that makes them appear White to many people. They may receive the privileges and narratives surrounding White people, until they inform people that they are also Black. Nella Larson's novel, *Passing* (1929), focuses on the notion of racial passing, wherein an individual of a biracial or multiracial background can be accepted within a dominant group due to the phenotypic similarities to that group (which, in the context of the US, is White-American). In *Passing*, the central characters of the novel can pass as Black or White in different settings and are approached by others accordingly.

This racial ambiguity brings with it a history of strategies that allow biracial and multiracial people to survive in hostile spaces. It also points to a history where certain privileges are afforded to them based on their complexion (Ahmed, 1999). This is different than White-American narratives that may be characterized by the privileges and freedoms they are allotted (McIntosh, 2003). In such a case, the White-American narratives are not marked by the same threat of exposure and dangers of infiltration that people of color experience.

Like skin complexion, other physical features gather narratives to themselves. Many scholars (e.g. Collins, 2004; Fanon, 1976/2008; Hall,1992a; hooks, 2004a) focus on the overt and widespread sexual objectification of Black men via the focus on their penises. However, other features can also determine how stereotypic narratives are distributed. Racially associated attributes, from hair texture, to facial features – lips and noses, for example -, to general physiques – torsos, hips, buttock, and legs -, can be associated with blackness, and could also be subjected to racial and racialized histories and narratives, much like skin color (Jackson, 2006). Hairstyles, such as dreadlocks or corn-rows, may be known due to their associations with hip-hop culture and

may be negatively attributed to Black gang culture. Additionally, straight, non-curly hair, may be associated with Whiteness and White-centric views of beauty and acceptance (Jackson, 2006).

Additionally, while Fanon's theory can be assumed to take gender into consideration – and a lot of his work is predominantly Black masculinist – he focuses primarily on the phobogenic, or phobia-inducing elements of White-perceived, Black male bodies (Fanon, 1976/2008). Through his schemas, he only implies how gender intersects with race. Raced and gendered bodies can occupy, or take up, different spaces, and gather up their own narratives which can produce different relational experiences. For example, a profession or conference occupied predominantly by White men may receive a White woman or woman of color differently than they would if she were a White man (Ahmed, 2007). The racial schemas can change depending on what other characteristics or identities come into play.

Fanon sees racial schemas as being filled by narratives that are the product of racial projections and historical and political dominant discourses around Black bodies (Fanon, 1976/2008). Racial projections fulfill unconscious conflicts and unresolved tensions that are incongruent with an individual's sense of self and become transposed on people of color. For Fanon, Black bodies, specifically Black male bodies, are transformed by the white gaze (Ahmed, 2007) as they receive the projections from some White people who are unable to process their own anxieties.

Fanon's descriptions of racial projections are shared by James Baldwin. In the documentary, "Take This Hammer" (1964), Baldwin states that what we say about other people can be more descriptive of our selves "and [our] own psychology," and that such information "reveals [us]." Baldwin proceeds by saying that "White people invented [the nigger]," which was an image packed with fears and anxieties and was attached to Black people. He powerfully asserts

that "[White people] are the nigger.[3]" For Baldwin, this provocative statement means that the nigger is a concept developed by many White people from their descriptive narratives about Black people that ultimately concerns some repressed elements of the dominant racial group. The image of the nigger was reflective of their unconscious, rather than something "real". By returning the problem of the nigger back to those White people, Baldwin is revealing their authorship in the crafting some of the racial narratives that converge around Black bodies.

White authorship of racial narratives, particularly the question of who is writing or scripting the narratives (Jackson, 2006), underscores that racial narratives are a form of discursive representation of stories. The oppressive racial narratives function particularly as a type of discursive formation, as these narratives tend to police, dehumanize, and transform Black bodies into spectral objects made for consumption by the white gaze (Jackson, 2006). The writing and scripting process of the racial narratives refers to "the assignment of bodies, as understood by the scripter (e.g., the media), to certain locations of being, followed by a sociopolitical value-assessment of those bodies" (Jackson, 2006, p. 54). Such assessment dictates how well Black bodies match the narratives imposed onto them. The scripting process, mirroring the gathering of racial narratives through the racial schemas, reifies Black racial narratives and makes them oppressive. Serving as a powerful discursive configuration, scripting prohibits raced bodies from behaving in any way that is incongruent with the dominant images related to them (Jackson, 2006; Wiegman, 1993). So, as racial narratives become filtered through racial dynamics and racial politics, many of the narratives become oppressive, controlling, and restrictive of Black bodies.

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[3] When Baldwin states that White people are the nigger, he is illustrating the way 'nigger' is pregnant with many White-authored, dehumanizing descriptions and associations of Black people, such as hypersexuality, violence, low intelligence, slothfulness, and more. Baldwin argues that the concept of the nigger, and what it describes, is truly a product and reflection of White people's psyches rather than an indication of the presumed psychology of Black people.

Hall (1997b) sees racial representations developing through the commodifying of African countries. The perceived primitivism of African cultures was interpreted as the consequence of an inherent animalistic nature to Black people. Through colonialism, White colonialists believed that it was their responsibility to civilize the "savages". Racialized advertisements would serve to endorse these racist positions by showing the cleansing and domestication of African peoples. One notable example comes from the advertisements of soap, wherein Black people were seen bathing with soap and turning White (Hall, 1997). Similar advertisements have aired in recent history, with a Chinese advertisement (Griffiths & Lu, 2016) being criticized for showing a Chinese woman throwing a Black person into the laundry and transforming him into an attractive Chinese man. Additionally, an Italian commercial showed the identical premise, but with the Black man becoming White (Griffiths & Lu, 2016).

Professor Homi Bhaba of Harvard University (1999) sees many racial narratives as "colonial discourse," (p. 371) an arena that produces information and knowledge that polices the colonized. It functions by portraying the colonized subjects as amoral, criminal people (based on their race and ethnicity) and by providing evidence and justification for the policing and oppression of said peoples by governmental forces. According to Bhabha (1996), governmental powers can produce narratives about marginalized people; narratives can be reflective of the government's political power through which institutions delineate and/or restrict the possibilities of marginalized groups. Furthermore, many advertisements and other forms of media, like novels or movies, continued to show Black people as unintelligent, savage brutes, jovial slaves and servants, violent aggressors, or sexual bucks (Jackson, 2006). These formed a tightly and viciously reinforced series of images about Black people that permeated the White dominant cultures and reduced many of these images and expectations about Black people into rigid stereotypes.

Despite the difficulties that arise around racial narratives, it is important to emphasize that they are not inherently problematic. Some communities may share common stories and experiences that grow into affirmative narratives. For example, in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (2012), African-American writer Rebecca Walker compiles essays from other Black authors who write about their interpretations and appreciation for black aesthetics, or "black cool." The authors focus on diverse cultural aspects of blackness and share their experiences to foster a sense of a community with other Black people. Delimiting the racial narratives to only problematic structures that police bodies, obscure the possibility and ability to find new and creative ways to express such narratives and representations[4]. Thus, Walker positions these essays as stories in service of the "Black cool" narrative and paints Black identity and blackness as innovative.

However, for many Black-American people, racial narratives carry oppressive and negative associations which undermine their personhood and its developments. Indeed, much of the research on stereotypic narratives indicate that Black people's experiences, especially their sexuality, is framed as harmful and problematic (Bowleg et al., 2017; Bowleg et al., 2011; Laing, 2017; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Wilkins, 2012). Furthermore, there is little research that considers how Black men may take up these narratives and what role they play in the construction of masculine and sexual identities (if any). When considering Black men and their experiences, it is important to consider what happens at the intersections of race and gender, and the way in which some of the racial narratives of blackness and masculinity play a role in their identity development.

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[4] For example, a mainstream understanding of the term "swagger" (Walker, 2012), can describe a Black man's threatening arrogance, overconfidence, and bravado, which is occasionally linked to hip-hop's hypermasculinity. Yet, *Black Cool* shows how swagger can be viewed as a Black man's expression of self-affirmation, the reclamation of his body, and resistance against racist objectification. That said, this reinterpretation – even in its attempt to be affirmative - does not completely relinquish or subvert the negative connotations within the term of which Black men must contend.

GENDER, RACE, AND BLACK MASCULINITY

When considering the ways that certain narratives can become affixed and even endorsed by African American men, it is worth exploring the dominant construction of gender and gender roles and by what means they are passed on by people of all genders. More importantly, it is worth considering the way by which these gender roles change when they intersect with race.

In *Undoing Gender,* Judith Butler (2004) explains that people examine gender norms as the parameters that determine the structures of our bodies. Gender situates us within a system that is regulated and reinforced by specific social norms and practices. Gender norms thus serve as a "regulatory norm" that establishes notions of masculinity and femininity while deciding who is and is not included within that binary spectrum (Butler, 2004). We are always in relation to others, and thus our genders are always in relation to other genders, with our actions communicating the ways in which gender norms play a role in the production of behaviors. For Butler (2004), gender norms are a "social power" (p. 40), and they attempt to essentialize gender and establish a sense of normativity to bring all bodies of difference under surveillance and under question. By performing and reproducing the behaviors affiliated with certain socially acceptable genders, the actions that the genders produce simultaneously reinforce their reality and practice.

It then becomes important to explore what masculinity is, and by what means it is reinforced. Furthermore, who inherits masculinity roles and associated values? Research endorses the notion that masculinity is varied and fluid (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dean, 2005; Philaretou & Allen, 2001). This perspective challenges and critiques rigid, hegemonic views of masculinity that often dominate everyday experiences (Connell, 1995). Despite this work, ideas of a patriarchal masculinity and manhood are still prevalent in most societies and cultures. Patriarchy

criticizes men who fall beyond the fringes and sets oppressive standards which often emerge as dominant norms (Smith, 2016).

Masculinities can be summarized as the study of patterns, behaviors, practices, and principles related to the construction of manhood (Whitehead & Barret, 2001). To be a man may involve performing and mastering tasks and actions that evoke a sense of manliness (Shrock &Schwalbe, 2009), which has traditionally been associated with values such as being the provider, assertiveness, independence, rationality, emotional control, and aggression (Philaretou & Allen, 2001). Boys may evoke values of masculinity by playing with specific toys, taking up sports and fostering competition, predominantly hanging out with other boys, and later finding jobs that can financially support their families. Another demonstration of masculinity entails moving away from feelings: a lot of men are encouraged to silence their emotions and hide any indication of pain. Conversely, they are also taught that it is okay to express anger and violence (Bearman, 2000; hooks, 2004b; Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Women become avenues for some men to display their masculinity via sexual practices, wherein sexual domination and objectification of women becomes a rite of passage. In most Western societies the loss of virginity and having numerous sex partners is a typical measure of one's manhood and social recognition of manliness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lunceford, 2008; Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Additionally, traditional views of masculinity are inherently established through patriarchal means, situating men in positions of dominance and power. Masculinity also inducts women into the same patriarchal system, encouraging women to recognize and endorse the hegemonic, masculine values (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the patriarchal and normative construction of masculinity wherein all identified-men and any subordinate form of masculinity (i.e., raced masculinity, gay

masculinity, trans-masculinity, etc.) are framed and evaluated through it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men and boys, through similar or adjacent actions, can adopt hegemonic masculine values, though not every value needs to be adopted. For example, hegemonic masculinity may define a man based on his ability to provide for his family, or his physicality and athleticism, or based on his emotional reticence.

Hegemonic views of masculinity are not exempt from criticisms. For instance, it tends to endorse gender essentialism and to view manhood in a linear way, running the risk of losing perspective on the ways in different identity positions may contribute to different identity positions, and/or how those identities can factor into one's development of manhood (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, it conflates masculinity with heterosexuality, and normalizes experiences around cis-gendered heterosexual men, further reinforcing gender and sexually oppressive beliefs and practices (Bowleg et al., 2017; Collins, 2005) This socialization of hegemonic masculinity positions it as a domination model (Butler, 204) that is "aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation" (Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 281).

The structure of masculine narratives that tend to be dominant in the current cultural and historical context of the U.S. suggest a model of masculinity characterized by a discourse of supremacy. bell hooks (2004b) defines patriarchy as a political structure that situates men as "inherently dominating [and] superior to everything" (p. 18). In a patriarchal system, men are privileged enough to control and restrict "everyone deemed weak, especially females" (hooks, 2004b, p. 18). Similarly, Butler (2014) explains that patriarchal masculinity as a domination model polices normativity and determines how all bodies of all genders are viewed through dichotomous views: real or fake, desirable or undesirable, assertive or passive, objects or subjects.

As stated in the previous section on racial narratives, gender, similarly to race, gathers certain narratives upon being constructed or "identified." In other words, through enacting narratives via gender practices and specific roles, genders become reified. When genders intersect with race, we get a different sense of the ways in which narratives gather around bodies and the ways in which multifaceted identities and structures of power expand to the spaces we inhabit.

Ahmed (2007) states that, upon forming our identities and taking on certain roles, the world begins to cohere around it. This allows us to form an ontology of numerous experiences and to make note of them, ranging from the direction that one is facing, to one's profession, our relationship to the objects within our grasp, and even the world, through those lenses. The lenses are not simply screens through which we observe the world, but rather discourses that construct the world's existence. The nature of the thing (ontology), and how we can know about the thing (epistemology) are therefore inseparable, and the focus of scientific attention needs to keep these both in view. Ahmed explains that "what you come into contact with is shaped by what you do," adding that "bodies are orientated when they are occupied in time and space" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 150). By this, Ahmed means that our identities influence how we move through the world, perceive ourselves, and perceive others.

Exploring constructions of gender can provide us with a sense of the rigid forms of masculinity that play a part in the convergence of space around bodies. Specifically, constructions of masculinity provide a sense of the ways that some people adopt and enact masculine values, ushering in a variety of social norms that help to regulate those standards. Thus, it is worth considering how African American men appear through a White patriarchal domination model, and how they may adopt the values of that model.

Colonialism was one of the ways that spaces began to cohere around the view of whiteness as a dominant power, which was concomitant with masculinity as a dominant power. Since then, racial schemas determine how Black and gender bodies appear within white-oriented spaces, and how Black bodies gather their oppressive history around them. Furthermore, White people, specifically White men, exist in spaces whose coherence relates to the ways in which race and gender normalize around them, allowing them to access a series of privileges that are largely inaccessible to non-White, non-male bodies (McIntosh, 2003). Still nowadays, many White men who endorse traditional gender roles continue to construct white patriarchal spaces where men can be men[5]. These spaces push people of different genders, primarily women, to enforce those same traditional values, reinforcing and reifying the typical standards of masculinity.

hooks (1992) theorizes that, in their enslavement, Black men learned the gender-oriented rules of power and domination by White men and White slave owners. These rules became "the standard to measure Black male progress" (hooks, 1992, pg. 90) towards manhood. One of the ways in which Black-American men were indoctrinated into masculinity was through the unapologetic display of patriarchal values and actions – such as control via physical aggression - by the general White male population (Cooper, 2006; hooks, 2004a; hooks 2004b; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004).

Hooks (2004a) explains that the use of violence, ranging from physical to sexual, by White men to control their families became demonstrations for Black men to do the same, as this was the only model given to them. Additionally, this use of aggression, be it in self-defense or an act of

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[5] A tangential example of a white-patriarchal space where "men can be men," is the "tech-world" which is populated overwhelmingly by White men. White men can foreclose or criticize the acceptance of non-White men. For example, "diversity hires" can be seen as a pejorative in its derision of non-White men and the belief that White men are more deserving of tech-related jobs than non-White men. In this space, White men can criticize gender equity, sexuality, diversity and inclusion.

violence, was used as a means of demonstrating manhood and equality. hooks (1992) notes that Fredrick Douglass' affirmation of his manhood was through fight and subsequent victory over his slave master, rather than through intellectualism: "what emerges [from Douglass'] slave narrative is one of hardworking men who long assume full patriarchal responsibility for families and kin" (hooks, 1992, p. 90). For hooks (2004a), Douglass demonstrated that being human meant being a man, or embracing the values of manhood. In attempting to stand equally before White men, Black men endorsed the same patriarchal values that were modeled for them in the past.

In taking up the patriarchal model, wherein men are the emotionally-reticent, logical, aggressive providers and heads of the household, Black-American men in turn began to oppress Black-American women in private. Hooks (1992; 2004a) states that throughout the 1900s, the emphasis on the masculine ideals made Black people's movement towards equality separate from gender equality. This was specifically due to how women were seen under the gender norms. Specifically, Black women were expected to help Black men seek equality but were also expected to remain subservient to allow Black men to be men (hooks 1992).

The oppressive racial narratives created to subjugate Black people and control their bodies continue to be powerful and often hold Black people between two poles. On one end, Black individuals like Black men, are seen as lazy, unintelligent, incompetent, and happy to serve. On the other hand, they are pushed to be men of provision while also being constructed as hypersexual, dangerous criminals ready to rebel (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004). This produces the "indisputable and tragic reality" that Black men are "pathologized" through these stereotypical narratives (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004, p. 120).

The racist racial narratives created by the dominant White society enforced patriarchal values through simple and powerful caricatures of Black bodies. The narratives rendered Black

men unable to take up the very masculine traits they were attempting to exemplify and embody. bell hooks (2004a) provides a powerful example of gender-conflicts spurred between Black men and women through the active Jim Crow and segregation laws that barred Black men from being able to provide for their family. These gender-conflicts began to produce narratives of the "emasculation" of Black men, seemingly pinning the issues of Black families on Black people (hooks, 2004a, pg. 13). As I will show through this dissertation, the pathologizing and dehumanization along racial and gendered dimensions is still present in the narrative construction of Black men.

These racial narratives about the Black family and irresponsible Black men, among others, powered the "Bad Black Man" narrative (Cooper, 2006). One of the reports responsible for this was the *Moynihan Report (*Coates, 2016; hooks, 2004a). Written in 1965 by American sociologist Daniel Moynihan, then serving as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Johnson, Moynihan reported that the issues of poverty and single-mother homes in Black communities were due to the historical discrimination and segregation following the Emancipation. Furthermore, its focus on Black men being "robbed of their birth rite" (quoted. in Coates, 2016, Chapter I, para. 7) endorsed the idea that Black men were unable to display their roles as men by being providers for their families (thereby undermining the roles of Black women and endorsing the belief that they should be subservient). Moynihan saw the weakened role of the Black man as a fundamental weakness to Black families and the Black community, in addition to believing that the failings of the Black community were, at that point, ingrained within Black people. Moynihan's endorsement of government assistance programs, while superficially admirable, continued to support the idea of incompetent Black men and Black people and situated White people, supposedly White men, as the saviors to help them (Coates, 2016).

By further pathologizing Black people and Black men, Moynihan's report played a part in situating American issues, such as drug abuse, within the Black community. For example, Coates (2016) argues that, though statistically Black and White people used drugs at the same rate, the overemphasis on drug abuse in Black communities also led to increased incarceration rates within those same spaces. Nixon supported increased funding for correctional facilities, which also led to more spaces for Black people, particularly Black men, to be imprisoned[6], Thus, the destructive narratives of Black men were perpetuated. Hooks (2004a) notes that the demonizing of Black men motivated them to attempt to find alternative ways to express their manhood. This was an effort to push back against a White society that oppressed them and to create a space to define themselves in. Sex and sexual expression became one of those ways to resist White oppression.

It is in Black men's attempts to find a way to humanize themselves through the very arenas that oppress them that the narratives become complex again. In this case, it is finding one's sense of manhood in a domain of white patriarchy that threatens to restrict and regulate Black bodies. For example, while many Black men find opportunities for progress and growth through athleticism, the emphasis on physicality puts Black men back on the platform to be examined by a White audience and echoes the examination of slaves at slave auctions (Ferber, 2007). In doing so, White people contribute to the phallic displays or castrations of athletes.

It is important to note that the regulation of bodies and the regulation what is deemed problematic also speaks to what is allowed. The fields that allow Black men to show their strength are still steeped in white patriarchal supremacy, encroaching on the space of Black men and their ability to define their identities. Despite this, accountability is not removed from Black men.

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[6] Admittedly, this is a quick explanation of a much more complex problem within a complex, nuanced essay.

Indeed, it simply highlights the history of oppression and racial narratives constructed by White supremacy that are transcribed on Black men.

This dissertation dives deeper to explore these issues, specifically the ways in which these constructed narratives of Black bodies are

MYTH OF THE HYPERSEXUAL BLACK MALE

Black male sexuality is thoroughly suffused with a racial narrative history, and any attempt to understand such sexuality in the present needs to be cognizant of racial narratives within historical context. The mythic narrative of the hypersexual Black male provides us with a backstory to the plot focused on Black men as potentially virile rapists that serve as the motivation for the authors, in this case White slave owners, to control and regulate the bodies of Black men.

Some racial narratives address the 'brutal physicality' of violent Black men. Some narratives, such as that of the hypersexual Black male, focus specifically on the sexuality of Black men with the intention of framing them as sexual deviants likely to rape White women (Cooper, 2015; Davis, 1983; Hodes, 1993). In other instances, narratives frame Black men as hypersexual individuals who command sexual prowess, thus eliciting curiosity and desire (hooks, 2004a; West, 1993). These narratives force many Black men into an oppressive and restricting binary where they sustain both perspectives at once. This, of course, says nothing about how Black men themselves attempt to wrestle this narrative away from many of the White people that script it, which I will discuss later. These narratives perpetuate the notion of the Black man's sexual appetite as insatiable and bestial. By placing their attention on the Black male body as a potential threat to social and cultural orders, many White people can use the myth of the hypersexual Black male to differentiate themselves from Black men and even to attack them.

Dr. Robert Staples, a sociologist and Professor Emeritus at the University of California, San Francisco, (1982) states that the complexity of the sexual narrative is rooted in the contrasting nature of how sexuality was historically expressed in African and European cultures. According to Staples, Europeans favored "chastity" over what they saw as the "[lustful] sexual instinct (in its raw state)" of Africans (Staples, 1982, p. 75). Staples says that the emphasis on sexual purity and restraint came with the advent of private property, a patriarchal system that provided men the right to claim heirs and pushed forth the practice of "sexual exclusivity" (Staples, 1982, p. 76). In contrast, sexual expression was interwoven throughout African cultures, wherein traditions and rituals would provide an avenue to dictate the "instinctive manifestations of sexuality" (1993, p. 76). Staples argues that some communities – "such as those South of the Sahara" (p. 76), used rituals to delineate and regulate appropriate sexual practices. For Staples, the communities implemented the practices to police what they considered criminal acts of sexuality. As an aside, it is worth noting that Staples arguments fall short, sometimes by his own admission. While he indicates an apparent contrast between European and African cultures, Staples (1993) acknowledges that many Africans did endorse a sense of chastity to regulate the bodies of Black women (e.g. women were punished for not being virgins[7]) (p. 76). With African peoples being captured and sold into slavery, European discourses and practices were forced upon African people as they became the property of White slave owners.

As property, Black men were at the receiving end of their owners' wishes and desires, including being forced into sexual relationships and practices of all sorts and kinds (Allain 2013; Cooper 2015; Foster, 2011; Hodes, 1993). The rape of Black male slaves was, by comparison to that of Black women, barely documented, although the sexual liberties slave owners took with

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[7] Many Black women – and women in general - are still punished for a patriarchal perception of virginity.

their slaves made it likely that they would seek both Black men and Black women as a source of sexual gratification. This would take different forms, like with Black men being forced to rape other Black slaves, or forced to participate in a range of sexual acts with their masters.

In her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), former slave, abolitionist and writer Harriet Jacobs mentions a time when, following the death of their slave master, his son became the owner of a slave named Luke. The son, cruel and vindictive, would constantly whip Luke without reason. Jacobs adds that she would see Luke wearing nothing but a shirt which left him open to his legs, penis, and buttocks to be whipped. Additionally, upon her escape, she mentions seeing Luke chained to a bed of their master. Though she writes in vague terms, some scholars read her phrasing, such as "strange freaks of nepotism... of a nature too filthy to be repeated," (qtd. in Abdur-Rahman, 2006), to be suggestive of rape.

Black male slaves would also be forced into sexual acts by White women (Allain, 2013; Cooper, 2015; Foster, 2011; Leiter, 2003). Some White women took advantage of the resources they had, and they would prey on the "most brutalized" slave over whom the woman could demonstrate her authority (Foster, 2011, p. 462). Should the Black man resist or deny access to his body, the woman threatened them with punishment: accusing them of rape or making sexual advances towards her which would result in further abuse.

Additionally, Black slaves would be forced to have sex with one another. Some slaves, such as Elizabeth Amwood, describe the experiences of being cornered in the woods with another, unnamed male slave by two White men. They forced the slaves to have sex with one another at gunpoint. This highlighted the act of forced coupling that occurred within the context of voyeuristic pleasure. In other instances, some slaves were forced to couple under the context of reproduction or "slave breeding," and slave owners often forced enslaved men to have sex with

numerous women to produce more slaves and turned Black men into "stock men" and "bulls" (Foster, 2011, p. 455)

This focus and obsession with the body is expected when one takes the time to consider how interwoven physical appearance is into the concept of race. Biologist Carl Linnaeus and his student John Blumenbach came up with the notion of race that divided people into groups based on geographic location, psychological traits, and physical features. Blumenbach became one of the first scientists to categorize these groups into hierarchies and assigned value to features, with White Europeans or Caucasians, being at the top of the list, and Black Africans or Negroes at the bottom (Tyson, 2011). Black men were noted as being closer to apes than they were to humans, with anatomies that were "coarse, rude, and asymmetrical," (Saint-Aubin, 2005).

Yet, among this focus on the body, the Black man's penis was often the center of the racist scientific research, revealing its value as the fulcrum of White desire, curiosity, and fear. In his essay "Grammar of Black Masculinity," Occidental College professor Arthur Saint-Aubin (2005) states that many physicians during the nineteenth century agreed about the Black man's "massive proportions," "virile organs," and "[excess] in size" compared to White men (Saint-Aubin, 2005, p. 260). Saint-Aubin notes that some physicians would remove the penis and testicles from bodies and keep them in jars.

Additionally, researchers at the time remarked on the 'naturally destructive capabilities' of the Black man's penis if he attempted to have sex with a White woman. Saint-Aubin cites physician Paul Broca, who wrote that because the size of the "Negroes member coincides with the length of uterine canal of the Negress," it made them apt reproductive partners. In contrast, Broca believed that, due to its length and girth, a Black man's penis was incompatible with a White

woman, and that copulation between a Black man and White woman would be "painful" and render her "infertile" (Saint-Aubin, 2005).

However, the fact remained that the anatomies of Black men and White men were the same (Saint-Aubin, 2005). To reconcile these results with their own internal beliefs, White researchers pointed to the sexual maturity of Black boys, as they believed they would sexually mature faster than White boys yet failed to mature mentally at the same rate as the latter. This supposedly made Black boys and Black men easily aroused and sexually aggressive, which then led them to become amoral deviants (Saint-Aubin, 2005).

As stated, the Black man's penis was a specific site of desire, curiosity, and fear, and, as suggested by the abuse of Black male bodies, it extended beyond scientific racist research on their anatomy. During the antebellum period, the daily experiences on slave plantations were laced with sexuality, wherein slaves would be refused clothing or very little if it were permitted (Foster, 2011; Hodes, 1993). Others, like abolitionists, idolized the Black male body and described it as "perfection" and noted the naturally athletic physique of their exposed, nude bodies even after the Black men experienced the brutal abuse of their owners (Foster, 2011, p. 450). Some White people shared their admiration and surprise of the supposedly natural endowment of Black men. Additionally, Black slaves of biracial heritage were prized based on both their complexion and their physique (Foster, 2011, p. 450).

Of course, it would come as no surprise when castration became an apt punishment for many Black men who were believed to encroach upon the property of White men, or for Black men who disobeyed the slave masters. The fear of the Black body, particularly the penis and what it could do provided enough of a rationale for castration as a viable form of punishment. Black male slaves were castrated for many acts, such as "running away, stealing, attacking a White

person, and rape" (Knight, 2007, p. 96). This practice of castration continued during the Reconstruction Era following the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of Black people (Hodes, 1993). With the advent of the Ku Klux Klan and their active policing of Black bodies and White female chastity, Black men were castrated for the accused assault of White women, whereas White men rarely saw similar treatment for similar crimes (Davis, 1983; Hodes; 1993; Knight, 2007).

Punishing the Black man by brutalizing his penis continued with lynching and lynch mobs. Martha Hodes (1993), a professor of history at Princeton, states that the KKK became the main perpetrators of the hypersexual, Black male rapist narrative. The Klansmen were concerned over the new political enfranchisement of Black people and what they perceived to be a loss of White dominance and control. Likewise, the KKK perceived these political rights as an avenue for sexual empowerment that Black men could experience with White women. This level of anxiety allowed them to rationalize their violence towards Black men and gave them the motive to lynch and castrate Black men. The Klansmen's actions enforced an idea that, despite the governmental rights they received, Black people were inferior and should remain controlled by White people.

Robyn Wiegman (1993), professor of literature and women's studies at Duke University, states that lynching "was about the law," serving as a "disciplinary practice" (Wiegman, 1993, p. 443) that dictates and regulates behavior. For White people, lynching served to portray Black people as "monstrosities of excess," that needed to be controlled. The abolition of slavery served as the means by which the monstrosities could roam free and so lynching served as the function through which White patriarchal supremacy could sustain itself. Hanging Black bodies in a tree became the moment where some of the threatened White men could psychologically regulate the

enfranchisement of Black men. Castration served the specific means by which the Black man's right to patriarchy and masculinity could be symbolically stripped away (Wiegman, 1993).

Hodes notes that the case of Henry Lowther "illustrates the way in which White anger towards Black male political power merged with sexual accusations" (Hodes, 1993, p. 407). Kidnapped and castrated by Klansmen in the middle of the night at a secluded swamp, Lowther explains that the true motive for his kidnapping and castration was because he successfully sued Klansmen after they refused to pay him for the items in his shop. Yet, such anger became sexualized (and psychologically "justified") in the claim of one attacker accusing Lowther of "going to see a White lady" (Hodes, 1993, p. 407).

In her essay, "Violent Masculinity: Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynching," professor Kristina DuRocher (2011) explains that lynch mobs often dismembered and claimed body parts from Black men prior to, or following, the lynching. The Black penis was the most prized possession of all body parts that were removed (DuRocher, 2011; Kovel, 1984). She speculates that this was due to White women and men both "fear[ing] and desir[ing]" the supposed virility and strength of the Black man's sexuality. DuRocher adds: "Such sexual souvenirs symbolically transformed control, as White men forcibly seized the sexual prowess they desired for themselves" (2011, p. 56). The mutilation and structure of racist stories of the Black male as sexually insatiable and a latent rapist served multiple functions for White men: it allowed them to continually oppress and dehumanize Black men, regulated their sexuality and participation as a citizen; it allowed White men to control and guard the sexuality of White women; it reaffirmed White women as a symbol of chastity and civilization required to be guarded; and reaffirmed the dominance of White men (Kovel, 1984; Wiegman, 1993).

Likewise, Fanon adds that the sexual narrative for the Black man "takes place at the genital level" (1976/2008, p. 135). By localizing punishment to the penis, White people situate the presumed threat of the promiscuous Black male rapist in his genitals. Fanon (1976/2008) states that his White clients would associate Black men with "biological, sex, strong, athletic, powerful… savage, animal, devil, sin" (p. 144). What sits at the origin of the clients' reductive descriptions is a denial of the Black man's humanity. Like others, Fanon (1976/2008) writes of the ways in which this denial manifested as fear of, and obsession with, the Black body. The Black male body becomes *both* an object of desire and a body to be tamed because of its potential threat to White power. The Black male body entices even as it repulses in attributions of licentious and lewd behavior and desire. This contradiction creates both abhorrence and infatuation. The Black man becomes more of a fantasy than a person.

As I stated in the section on black masculinity and racial narratives, for Fanon (1976/2008), the fantasy and myth of Black male sexuality stem from the White unconscious and repression of desires. The mythic narrative is carried through, entangled with, and irremovable from history and stories, and enacted through politics. This is important because of how it orients the myth of Black sexuality. This is to say that the fear and intrigue of Black sexuality and related racial narratives articulate a fundamental anxiety that is related to the White man's own desires and sexuality. Thus, the only way to combat these issues is through racialized projections: to oppress and control Black male bodies and to suppress their sexuality by destroying it.

Mary Hobgood (2000) argues that by restricting Black bodies, White men are generating "erotic repression, the denial of the relational self," "fascination, and repulsion," which are expressed as hatred and curiosity about Black bodies (p. 36). While control over these desires could be seen through the lynching and castration of Black men, Blackface was also used as a

vehicle to temporarily move in and occupy the racial narratives of the sexual Black male (Hobgood, 2000). For example, Hobgood argues the identification of "anything Black" allowed White individuals of varying socioeconomic status and propriety to engage in and simultaneously repress 'Black' elements of themselves. As a result, by donning Blackface, White people engaged in hedonistic practices such as "music, dancing, clowning, relaxing, and sex" (Hobgood, 2000, p. 45). Blackface provided White individuals with a cathartic release that engaged the racist narratives while simultaneously providing White individuals with an escape.

Given the dynamics of the racial narratives surrounding the Black male body and sexuality, one can see how a White person's fear and curiosity of Black sexuality translated into unabashed and deplorable violence against Black men. The accusations of rape leveled against Black men and the violence that followed thereafter exemplifies the tension that exists within the narrative. As stated before, the lynching of Black men was often coupled with castration, which could be seen as expressing a desire to humiliate, control, and covet Black male sexuality. The myth of the Black male rapist was positioned to police Black men, White women, and to establish White men as adjudicator.

While the myth of the Black man's sexual insatiability was used as rationale to brutalize Black men, it was also claimed as a fact. Davis (1983) describes the stories of Black male hypersexuality as a "political invention" (p. 84) following the Emancipation and established as a means to "deter the Black masses from rising up in revolt" (p. 185). Additionally, anti-rape theorists would focus specifically on cases of rape wherein women were assaulted by men of color. The structure of racist stories spread by the anti-rape theorists attempted to position men of color solely as the perpetrators of these crimes. Furthermore, the stories painted a picture of men of color obsessed with, and exclusively targeting, White women (Davis, 1983).

Narratives of the Black man as rapist or potential rapist have reverberated throughout America's history. For instance, in 1955 in Mississippi, Emmett Till was murdered after he reportedly flirted with a White woman. Likewise, several other cases through American history perpetrated the same image of the Black male rapist. In 1931, the trial of the Scottsboro boys focused on a group of Black boys that were falsely accused of raping two White women (2004). In 1989, four Black boys and a Hispanic boy were accused of raping a young woman in Central Park (Cooper, 2006). In 2001, Katie Robb accused four Black men of abducting and raping her (Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2007).

In addition, images of the promiscuous and hypersexual Black male that carry the weight of the sexualizing narrative are sustained through art, be it photography, film, literature, or music. Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph, "Man in the Polyester Suit," shows a faceless Black man in a suit with his penis exposed. Art historian Kobena Mercer states that, in allowing the penis to be the part of the body that identifies the subject as a Black man, the evocative photograph reveals the artist's "obsessive focus" (Mercer, 1996, p. 283). This focus fixes the Black male body, specifically the penis, as the site of a White colonial fantasy, wherein the curiosities, desires, and fears can be safely explored (Mercer, 1996). The photograph frames the Black penis in the center. The penis draws in the gaze of the viewer. The Black man's genitalia evoke a similar sense of wonder that is reminiscent of slave owners and abolitionists remarking on the physique of the slaves. By wondering about this penis, the viewers risk wondering about Black male bodies in a way that problematically sexualizes them.

This sexualization of Black men also occurs in films. An example is the "Fiction" segment of Todd Solondz's *Storytelling* (2001), which attempts to engage directly with the myth. The story involves a young, White, undergraduate student named Vi, played by Selma Blair, in a

predominantly White creative writing course led by an esteemed and critical Black male professor, played by Robert Wisdom. Race and gender are immediately figured into the foreground, with bits of dialogue like Vi's boyfriend claiming that she wants to "Fuck [the professor] like every other White cunt on campus."

The dialogue is biting, but heavy-handedly foreshadows the following scenes when Vi runs into her professor at a bar and they go home together. Throughout the scenes, the professor is callous, critical, and terse in his speech. When the two characters sleep together, the professor commands Vi to face away from him when they have sex and he subsequently orders her to shout, "Nigger, fuck me hard." The scene, though short, is graphic in every way and is a clear instance of abuse of power and of rape. Vi returns to her boyfriend, shares the incident, and writes about it for class. The workshop dismantles Vi's piece, claiming that she is "racist," "misogynistic," "sexist," "phallocentric," "callow," and poorly refers to the myth of the hypersexual Black male and the frail White woman to show depth and horror in her work. The professor agrees with the criticism, adding that Vi's writing shows a woman who wanted more, was too coy to ask for more, and shamefully returned to her impotent boyfriend.

It is interesting to consider the segment amid this chapter. The segment reveals itself as a self-aware piece of meta-fiction where, in the class criticizing Vi's story, it inevitably ends up criticizing itself. The dialogue and the graphic rape scene are very shocking and do play explicitly with the problematic racial narratives that are anchored to all the characters. Additionally, with the professor remarking that "as soon as you start writing," regardless of whether a story is true, "everything becomes fiction", the implication is that the point of view of Vi is up for scrutiny as well, and we must begin to question whether or not what is happening on film is "true."

However, Solondz fails to give us enough time to truly find evidence of deceit from Selma Blair's character. Indeed, she becomes the victimized White woman of the racial narratives. Additionally, Solondz reveals to us that the professor has slept with many, if not all, of the White women currently in the class, suggesting that she is not the first. The professor's sexual history turns the students' critiques into projective statements that refer to their own desires that, as the professor states at the end of the segment, many of the White women are too afraid to admit. This reaffirms the myth of the hypersexual Black male. Likewise, the power of the line "Nigger, fuck me hard," is shown to have a very sexually gratifying effect on the professor. He, as well, is very aware of the dynamics at play, and of the power that he has. Despite all of this, and Vi's acquiescing to the professor's commands to undress, turn around, bend over, and utter the words, a sexual assault is taking place.

Despite calling these issues into question and showing us the meta-criticism leveled at his own piece, Solondz fails to thoughtfully comment on the issue. He sets up an actual hypersexual rapist. The professor's position acts as the line of power and equality that grants him access to White women, and thus to White civilization. In attempting to play with how we perceive Black bodies, Solondz falls back on portraying Black bodies as crazed and sexualized.

Although it only makes up half of the movie, *Storytelling*'s segment resonates even nowadays. For instance, the accusations of Thomas Sayers Ellis, a prominent Black protest poet who was a visiting professor at the Iowa Writer's Workshop (Tolentino, 2016), shows similarities to Solondz's professor. Ellis was accused of sexually assaulting, raping, and preying on his students, and was accused of a history of aggression in his prior relationships. Though he was removed from his position, Ellis was notable for his renowned work and callous critiques similarly to the professor in Solondz' film. While Solondz's professor stands defiant in the face of

accusations of rape, Ellis' victims found justice where Vi found scorn. Regardless, Ellis evokes the fear that the Black male, hypersexual, virile rapist is real, their equal rights have gained them undeserved access to White spaces, and they are attacking White women. The racialized projections disable racist interpretations from acknowledging the context – by finding evidence of the myth's existence, the White supremacist fantasies can be sustained, and the chaos of Black men can be remembered.

Returning to Solondz, a similar issue comes up with director Quentin Tarantino's *Hateful Eight* (2016), wherein a protagonist's story of rape is called into question. It is possible to write an entire section on the ways in which Tarantino evokes images of Black male hypersexuality or sexualizes Black male bodies through dialogue and imagery. For example, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) shocks the audience by showing the character Marcellus Wallace, played by Ving Rhames, and noted for his intimidating, indominable, and muscular appearance, subdued and kidnapped by two White pawnshop owners. Subsequently, Wallace was violently raped in the basement by a White man, while another White man masturbated. Tarantino's explanation was that he wanted to evoke a sense of confusion in the audience when a film the audience thought was about a boxer became *Deliverance*, a film with an equally shocking rape scene (Rolling Stone, 2014). Inadvertently, this remark suggests that Tarantino was, at least at the time, unaware of the image that he was evoking – the Black male slave's sexual abuse.

Yet, *Hateful Eight* (2016) takes a slightly different turn than *Pulp Fiction (1984) or Storytelling (2011)*, although the line between real or imaginary is still called into question. The scene I want to address is one between Samuel L. Jackson's character, bounty hunter Marquis Warren, and Bruce Dern's character, Sanford Smithers. Both characters are snowed in at a cabin with other gunmen. In an apparent effort to provoke Smithers into attacking him, Jackson's Warren

tells a story of how, following the end of the Civil War, he was a wanted man and Smithers' son, Chester, was one of the bounty hunters looking for him. According to Warren, after subduing Smither's son, he made Chester crawl through the snow naked for miles until he started begging for a blanket. Warren informs Smithers that he promised to give Chester a blanket after performing fellatio on Warren's "big black johnson." Seeing Smithers recoil in horror, Warren continues to inform him that Chester "sucked on that warm, black, dingus for as long as he could." At the height of the story, intercut with scenes of Warren receiving fellatio from Chester while he tells the story to Smithers back at the cabin, Warren laughs and checks in with Smithers. He does so by asking: "Starting to see pictures, ain'tcha?"

Jackson's line immediately begins to play with the audience's interpretation of the scene. Up until that point, Jackson's character was shown to be an amoral, lying, and manipulative gunman willing to use anything to get an upper hand over those who undermined him. Though the dialogue avoids outwardly acknowledging this, Warren's delivery and emphasis on his anatomy insinuates that it could be the instance of a Black man raping a White man that makes the story even more horrifying for Smithers rather than the instance of a man raping another man. With sexual dominance being perceived as a trait of masculinity, for a Black man to strip a White man of that dominance relates back to the White man's anxiety of Black male promiscuity and sexuality. However, the story may or may not be true, and like Smithers, it is the audience's interpretation of the scene that reads into how Smithers views Warren. Thus, both Smithers and the audience are left to think: is Warren a Black rapist?

Like Solondz, Tarantino willingly engages with the presumed myths and stereotypes of Black bodies and his filmography is seasoned with the sexualization of Black men through action or through dialogue. Unlike Solondz, Tarantino's character is ambiguous and is shown to be

deceitful, thus allowing enough room for the audience to engage with a scene fixed on the issue of "White anxiety about (perceived) sexual prowess" (Clark, 2016). However, like Solondz, there is an important moment later in the film that undermines Tarantino's effort, and the portrayal of Black sexuality.

Late into the film, Warren is trying to discover who was responsible for the murder of one of the other gunmen. It is revealed that several of the gunmen in the lodge are part of a gang, with their leader, played by Channing Tatum, hiding under the floorboard. As Warren executes one of the gang members for their deceit and role in the murder, the leader of the gang castrates Warren with gunfire. Warren lives through the attack but frequently comments on how he lost his penis. Some articles (e.g. Clark, 2016) see Warren's castration as a dark reference to *Pulp Fiction* and Marsellus Wallace's rape. I would agree, and add that Tarantino's crucial error is that, by having a character castrate Warren, he inadvertently turns Warren into a Black rapist via the presumed belief of the White gang leader. It pushes the audience to think that it is possible, at least in-world, that Warren was a sadistic rapist. This also hearkens back to *Storytelling,* wherein by having the professor rape a student, the accusations of Vi playing on the myth of the Black rapist appear to be thin to the audience. Likewise, by having Warren castrated, Tarantino plays out the very fantasy that is evoked in fields of lynching and castration – it is the possibility of the sexual assault of a White body, in this case a man, that provides justification for the castration.

Some of the attempts to explore the complexity of the myth have unfortunately repeated the same historical issues as the past. The bodies of Black men become the site for some White artists to reflect their fears and desires, and they rope in the audience to take part in their gaze. It reactivates and reiterates a pattern that sexualizes Black male bodies and identifies their sexuality as an object of domination that must be either controlled or desired.

49

As this dissertation will show, research around the myth of hypersexuality disregards the sense of loss Black men may experience because of sexual objectification, reduction, and fetishization. This study tells a story of men who feel fragmented because of this racial narrative. At this point, it is important to reflect on how Black men take up these racial narratives and what their role is in the production of these images, if at all. In what is to follow, I will touch on Black-American men engaged with the racial narrative of the hypersexual Black male.

BLACK MEN AND SEXUALITY

Staples (1982) states that, prior to Emancipation, many Black people, specifically African tribes, understood sexuality as being socially situated, versus European perspectives where sexuality was something governed by God and religion. Staples (1982) mentions Black churches being a "tension reducing institution" (p. 77), rather than places where sexuality was evaluated and regulated, in contrast to White American churches where sex and sexuality were constantly under scrutiny (Staples, 1982). hooks (2004a) says that, in homes, Black people experienced a substantial change in status and experience "in the world of the home… a world away from the voyeuristic pornographic gaze of whiteness." (p. 70). This private arena allowed Black people to "create an alternate sexuality," focused on love and pleasure. Black men found that their sexuality was "capable of giving and receiving pleasure" (hooks, 2004a, p. 70).

However, many Black men would end up assuming the patriarchal values of the dominant society (hooks, 2004a; Staples, 1982). For example, Black men situated themselves as the head of their households, which mirrored the standard of men as the leader and patriarch of their homes. Yet, while many of the avenues to display manhood were restricted to some Black men, the focus

on a "phallocentric" perspective of masculinity, one that defined a man "simply because he had a penis," became accessible to all men (hooks, 1992, p. 94).

Speaking of the phallocentric view, hooks (1992) explains that as capitalistic states advance, and attributes of masculinity expanded to focus on economic values (e.g. private property, being the financial provider), sexual expression was slowly repressed. White men were able to demonstrate different expressions of masculinity, most of which were connected to capitalism. Hooks asserts that as White communities suppressed sexuality, and White men continued to endorse private property as one of the main symbols of masculinity, they reduced the ways in which sexuality can be expressed. In this complex relationship between economic success and sexual expression, White men made it, so intercourse was one of the few tools they had to showcase their power over bodies. Hooks summarizes that the dynamic between capitalism and sexuality "can be described as a shift from emphasis on patriarchal status to a phallocentric model, where what the male does with his penis becomes a greater and certainly a more accessible way to assert masculine status" (p. 94). In its accessibility, the phallocentric view enabled many men to claim manhood via the use of their penises through sexual domination and possession over women (hooks, 1992, p. 94). Black men recognized this power found through sex. That is, they could construct and even perform a new sense of masculinity even if they did not or could not endorse the same values such as being the head of a household.

For Black men, this new approach to sexuality and masculinity enabled them to create the image of the "playboy." Sex became a rite of passage and a channel by which they could begin to define themselves as men. This playboy image provided a status and space wherein Black men were able to compete with White men and emerge victorious. bell hooks (2004a) explains that, by

"equating manhood with fucking, many Black men saw status and economic success as synonymous with endless sexual conquest." (p. 70).

Moreover, hooks (2004a) believes this emphasis on sexual conquests is fueled by the loss of other avenues to express manhood by (p. 72). The female body became a means to achieve this end. Likewise, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues that the narrative of Black sexual prowess becomes such an important marker to Black masculinity, specifically Black heterosexuality, that to deny them access to the female body is to deny them access to manhood. Women become reduced to their parts, turned into "spoils of war[8]" (Collins, 2004, p. 151), in the quest for manhood. Activist and writer Kevin Powell (2001) notes that the sexualized position of Black masculinity, in which men have sex with as many women as possible, fueled his sexism and misogyny. He adds that he did whatever he wanted to women, "from squeezing girls' buttocks in gym class, to gang-banging girls in abandoned buildings" (Powell, 2001, p. 222).

Thus, Black men claimed the hypersexual narrative and used it to celebrate their sexual prowess as a means of power and authority. Cornel West agrees with bell hooks. He states that:

"…Black machismo styles solicit primarily sexual encounters with women and violent encounters with other Black men or aggressive police. In this way, the Black male search for power often reinforces the myth of Black male sexual prowess – a myth that tends to subordinate Black and White women as objects of sexual pleasure" (1994, p. 128).

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[8] Though I do not go into extensive detail in this chapter, it is worth noting that the objectification of women does carry with it different intersectional concerns and narratives. For example, Black men may objectify Black women as primarily sexual tools not unlike White people who sexualize Black men. In that case, Black women are framed within the narrative of a jezebel (Jackson, 2006, p. 36). On the other end, the objectification of White women carries an overt response to White patriarchal oppression and, in other instances, a Black man may objectify White women as a way to (unsuccessfully) de-race himself, or distance himself from his blackness. In such a case, the White woman's body is simply a means to improve race and class mobility. Likewise, Black men may objectify White women because they see it as an accomplishment or a source of access to an experience White men restrict from them (Wilkins, 2012). Of course, these issues are much more pained and nuanced than presented here.

Black male sexuality and its related narratives have become a source of power and ultimately a major element to personal identity. Bell hooks provides complexity and nuance in her assertion that Black male sexuality is less about self-affirmation and more about self-discovery. She believes that sex is where Black men "go to find themselves" because it is the only place where they perceive themselves to have any sense of authority. By adopting the racist imagery, Black men believe that they can reclaim it, transform it, feel human and fill a part of themselves that is missing. The problem, bell hooks says, is that Black men still seek sex to gain some sense of power and ignore "the reality of suffering" (2004, p. 73). That is, many Black men dismiss the pain that comes from oppressive experiences both personal and cultural.

Additionally, the use of sexuality to display manhood is far-reaching: young Black boys find themselves victims of sexual abuse under the pretense that the loss of virginity was a rite of passage (hooks, 2004a; Powell, 2001). In other instances, some Black men in leadership positions may display the same characteristics as the playboy. A recent example is rapper and entrepreneur Jay-Z who is also touted as one of Black America's contemporary leaders (Finley, 2017). Following the release of singer-songwriter Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016), Jay-Z's infidelity became a prominent topic amongst fans (Kreps, 2017). On her song "Sorry," Beyoncé references Jay-Z's history of infidelity and his longstanding affair with a woman nicknamed "Becky." This conversation continued leading up the release of Jay-Z's album *4:44,* where he admits and apologizes for his affairs (Carter, 2017). Additionally, this display of Black male leadership as bound to possessive sexuality can be seen today in the accusations of sexual assault and rape by Thomas Sayers Ellis (Tolentino, 2016).

The other route, however, was to separate one's self from those images altogether. Staples notes that middle-class Black male professionals and their families would practice sexual

conservatism to shun ideas that were concordant with myths of rape and hypersexuality. Cooper (2006) writes that by "desexualizing himself… [he] demonstrates his goodness," and his allegiance to White people, attempting to assimilate through his White adjacency (to borrow a term from poet Jenny Zhang, 2016). He adds that a Black man, finding himself in a predominantly White space, would attempt to "distance himself from other Blacks and affiliates himself with White norms," (Cooper, 2006, p. 880) to minimize the threat of subscribing to negative racialized ideas. This stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson 1995) – or the risk of conforming to the prevailing stereotypes associated with one's culture – motivates Black men to conform to White standards and expectations whatever they may be in those spaces.

The struggle to display one's manhood through sexual conquests or sexual repression complicates and, to an extent, constrains sexual expression for Black men. For some Black men, the assimilation into a White space might be achieved through avoiding and disavowing the negative racial narratives associated with one's race. In a sense, they attempt to show their allegiance in the rejection of an assumed racist view of blackness that they have internalized. On another end, some Black men attempt to reject what they see as a White patriarchal view of sexuality that promotes sexual restraint. Instead, they rebel against the White and restrained view of patriarchy and assimilate into a culture of manhood defined by the sexual domination of women. In any case, what seems to be of utmost importance is that both the existence and construction of Black sexuality are effects of imposed and socialized discourses about blackness and sex. The discourses are formed from power that, at times, constrain behaviors and practices, and, at other times, enable forms of resistance and the need to redefine what it meant to be a Black man.

It is important to consider how the oppressive racial narratives can be internalized. For instance, the Clark's Baby Doll study (Clark & Clark, 1939) shows how insidious the prevailing

racist impressions of Black people can be. Moreover, those views find expression in oppressive legislation and practices, and continue to affect the psyches of Black people. Indeed, some Black people accept those impressions and descriptions of themselves as inherent traits of identity and constitution (Clark & Clark, 1939). Small wonder that the sexualizing myths of Black men became rooted in their own sense of identity, given the belief that hypersexuality is "in their nature", and a defining part of whom they are. One can also appreciate the extension of this argument and myth to why and how some Black men came to see this sexualization to demonstrate their manhood, as it would allow them to battle against White men and their attempts to regulate their masculinity. Lastly, it is easy to see this endorsement of manhood via sexual conquests as the way for men to be men, and for Black men to feel like Black men.

However, while taking these factors into account, it is important for Black men to be held accountable and take up critical responsibility about their sexuality (hooks, 1992; hooks 2004a; Jackson, 2006; Staples, 1982; West, 1994). Indeed, simply framing Black men as victims of internalized racism risks reframing their sexism and misogyny as inescapable consequences. hooks (1992) notes that the playboy image, as sexually liberating as it may be for Black men, maintains a certain status quo of hegemonic, patriarchal values that are consciously practiced and reproduced. In such cases, Black men continue to objectify women and use their bodies as sites to demonstrate their masculinity and power. Unfortunately, the use of sexual objectification as a tool against oppression (i.e. Black men using their sexuality to show dominance over White men in a supposedly Black-controlled environment), may signal a conscious buy-in of racist, reductive narratives of Black men.

Collins (2004) points to the ways in which the media attempts to continually police Black heterosexuality by scripting, perpetuating and purporting certain Black portrayals as

"commonsense truths" (p. 151). For example, a common portrayal of Black men is as hustlers who attempt to obtain and control female bodies as a means of asserting manhood and demonstrating an "authentically Black" person, in contrast to the portrayal of the family-oriented, working-class Black man (Collins, 2004, p. 151). In addition, the media and pop culture often tend to draw from racial narratives to reaffirm a normative Black heterosexuality. Heterosexuality then becomes measured and delineated by Black individuals who endorse it to continuously challenge White patriarchal assertion over their bodies. While this serves the function of pushing against racist power structures, it also reinforces elements of gender and sexual oppression embedded within it.

Jackson (2006) states that some Black men become complicit in propagating the negative narratives of Black men. In attempting to display what experiences are like for Black men, Black men who find themselves in roles of producers, directs, musicians, among other professions tend to indirectly enforce White prescriptions of Black men. In the end, when viewed through a White, racist and patriarchal lens, Black men may find themselves grappling directly or indirectly with images adjacent to the myth of promiscuity.

Black sexuality is a common area of focus, and it is easy to name a plethora of examples where Black male sexuality is on display. Arenas such as music, notably hip-hop, rap, and R&B take up the notion of Black masculinity and sexuality as a form of entertainment, but also approach the subject matter as a site of power and dominance (hooks, 1992; hooks 2004a; Jackson, 2006; Miller-Young, 2007). Film and television series address the issue of Black sexuality in similar ways, which tend to further fetishize the Black male body and see it as an object to be either policed or sexualized (Gray, 1995). Comedy serves one arena where the sexual expression of Black men can be put on display.

Eddie Murphy's *Raw* (1987) serves as a prime example and is noted by bell hooks (1992) for being particularly phallocentric and unapologetically misogynistic. Around the 40 minute-mark in his routine, Murphy discusses how it is in a man's nature to be hypersexual and that, should he be talented enough, any well-endowed, sexually proficient person can convince a woman to do anything. This is after he makes a few comments about a woman's desire to "make love" instead of "fuck" which may make her partner agreeable, but also childish. Murphy notes that the concept of "making love" is uninteresting and unengaging, as most people want people who will "fuck the shit out of [them]." He adds that women who are dating men and expect them to be loyal are "disillusioned," while men who are loyal are "lying mother fuckers." Murphy punctuates this by saying: "No loyal men. All men fuck other women. We are low, by nature, and have to do it. We are men… it is a man thing… all men must find and conquer as much pussy as they can get." He later adds that orgasms ultimately allow women to be brainwashed, as men can do anything they want after that if they manipulatively say the right thing.

Murphy's routine, and maybe his entire act, can be considered a product of the times, and one where the social contexts should be taken into consideration. I am willing to accept this as a valid point, but only to a certain extent. That extent goes as far as to point out the casual acceptance of misogynistic, sexist, and essentialist perspectives that delimit the personhood of Black men and women. Murphy's references are and were, even at that time, made amid these racial narratives where Black masculinity was under scrutiny. When Murphy performs his routine, he is subscribing to a belief that one of the central tenets to manhood is sex and that having sex with multiple partners is paramount. Additionally, in Murphy's speech, in his mannerisms, and in his language, he attaches the problematic sexualization to Black men in particular, making sex and promiscuity goals that act as the rite of passage in Black masculinity.

In the show *Key & Peele* (2012), comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele play with this notion of inherent sexual promiscuity in Black men. In a sketch called, "Sex with Black Guys," Key and Peele overhear a conversation between two unnamed characters, played by Janet Varney and Natasha Leggero, discussing the merits of having sex with Black men. Varney and Leggero's conversation oscillates between seemingly complimenting Black men before insulting them with racist explanations. Varney says that a rumor she heard when having sex with a Black man is a "whole 'nother thing than with White men," because of they supposedly have "really good rhythm." "Way bigger [penises]… because of Africa" among other thoughts, like they are "good at pleasing White women… because they're good at pleasing their White masters." These exchanges happen for another minute before Varney's character excuses herself to the bathroom, claiming that she would have sex with the next Black man that she sees. At this point, Key and Peele decide to approach the women, with Key leaving behind Varney to the bathroom, and Peele approaching Leggero. While Key's experience is never disclosed, Leggero immediately dismisses Peele.

The skit clearly utilizes several myths, stereotypes, and common racialized assumptions about Black men and sexuality, playing them up as it were for comedic capital, as well as trenchantly commenting on the ways in which Black men nonetheless succumb or appropriate the very racialized narratives to their own ends, almost. Both Key and Peele for example pursue the White women, with Peele approaching Leggero's character stating that he bumped into the table with his penis, clearly referencing both the assumption that he is well-endowed, and that the White woman is desirous of his penis, starved as she is of a "good" penis if she only hung out (!) with White men. They believe that playing up the racial stereotypes, despite the terrible rationale for

them, would help them sleep with women. Key and Peele express a view where negative racial narratives may be accepted or endorsed to further their sexual conquests.

Likewise, the skit hints at the ways in which people internalize negative racial narratives to inform their views of themselves and their sexual partners. In this case, while Key and Peele appear to be bothered by what is being said about them, they gain some semblance of pride when it comes to the positive stereotyping, fist-bumping each other in agreement as though the positive racist remarks were true. Additionally, they are willing to endorse the racist views of the White women to sleep with them.

The comedy routines from Murphy, Key, and Peele, address experiences of Black men and sex. Yet, Key and Peele's skit appears to understand the tensions that are being held in the conversation. Key and Peele see those tensions being the sexualized history of White women and Black men, the stories that evoke those beliefs, and how both parties appear when viewed within those frames. Both White women and Black men become curious about one another, actively engaging with racism, playing off it, rejecting it, and objectifying each other.

In contrast to Key and Peele, Murphy's routine never feels like it is attempting to be satirical, or critically comments on a cultural issue. Instead, Murphy's routine seems to aim for laughter from the crowd by approaching an experience with what he believes to be brutal honesty. For Murphy, there is nothing to negotiate, there is simply the inherent behaviors and gender roles of men. In addition, Murphy's routine asserts that Black men must perform in order to be like men, and he does bad impressions of developmentally-delayed people when discussing men who do otherwise. Murphy's ableist impression suggests that a man who is unable to conquer as much pussy as possible is delayed, while also asserting that such people are incapable of sustaining the same status of manhood. As a result, where Key and Peele would later approach this idea to

highlight the racial confusion and anxiety in a given situation where sex is at play, Murphy dismisses it by fully embracing the positive stereotypes of the hypersexual narrative and by endorsing a phallocentric perspective[9].

Music, as well, reflects and responds to sex, sexuality, and race. Hip-hop and rap music is notable for its use of casual misogyny and sexism. Some songs, such as "Fight Night" (2014) from the rap trio Migos, or Jay Z and R. Kelly's "Pussy" (2002), express the effects sex has on them as artists, or how well they perform during sex. Additionally, the lyrics are laced with challenges to other men, undermining characteristics tied to their manhood. In all the verses to "Fight Night" (2014) by Migos, each rapper asserts his power over women while insulting an unnamed challenger. For example, the first verse contains the line, "Your main bitch says she wanna make a sex tape," and is followed by "Broke niggas, I can never get along with them" a couple of lines later. The second verse contains a similar remark: "Little mama want a nigga like me in the sheets," and "Who's that talking that gangsta shit? / Somebody's gonna kick your ass". Similarly, the third verse follows a similar pattern: "If your bitch is so innocent, why she sucking my children?" and "I don't speak your language, Brokanese." The verses casually assert the sexual prowess of the rap trio through their flippant remarks that reference how easy it is for them to have sex with women. Additionally, Migos' verses assert that they can inflate their masculinity and show their dismissal of and dominance over other sexually and physically weaker men.

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[9] Is is interesting to consider how this appears today in stand-up comedy. Some comedians, such as Dave Chappelle and Kevin Hart, approach the topic of sexuality: they may speak frankly of their sexual history, use sexual remarks to land their jokes, or tell outlandish stories to illustrate how sexuality can be confusing in our enjoyment of it. Comparative to Murphy, Hart and Chappelle discuss sex in a way that is less crass than Murphy's discussions on Black men and sexuality. Yet, Hart and Chappelle situate many of their sexual jokes on the implication of infidelity which aligns with Murphy's statement that "men aren't loyal." What the comedians miss, however, is the fact that the line between a routine and reality is thin for Black men. In some ways, they shave away this line: Chappelle, Murphy, and Hart reference actual events from their lives in their stand-up. Yet in situating their experiences among jokes, they blur the line farther, unfortunately endorsing the narrative of Black male hypersexuality. In Hart's case, this is even more apparent considering his publicized history of infidelity. Thus, what the comedians show is that the line between the exaggerated world of comedy and reality is that this line does not exist for Black men.

Jay Z and R. Kelly follow a similar dynamic in the song "Pussy" (2002). Jay Z remarks on how the "P-U-S-S-Y" empowers men, inflates their egos, or makes them delusional. Yet, the song is framed around either the rappers' ability to resist the all-powerful pussy, or command it like they own it. In Jay Z's verse, he tells a story about a woman named "Sweet Cooch Brown" who used sex to manipulate men into financially providing for her, ranging from paying bills to taking her on expensive vacations. However, Jay-Z resists Sweet Cooch Brown as he is attempting to shed light on the woman's manipulations. In R. Kelly's voice, he also asserts his command over women, while criticizing other men for being easily manipulated (When it comes to the motherfucking clit, clit, clit/Niggas are sick, sick, sick/ turn on you quick, quick, quick). R. Kelly notes that, while he was also a victim of "money, pussy, and drugs" in the past, he asserts that good sex keeps a woman under control ("I be giving mami much dick, dick, dick) in addition to overt violence ("these broads need to be smacked.") The last verse by a guest artist, Devin the Dude, is a story of child abuse. In his verse, he mentions that he began to have sex when he was seven years old, with a girl that was eleven years old, and was suspended from school when her father found out. Devin raps that his suspension was a vacation because "Niggas was looking at pussy at the pool," and so, he "was hitting hard when he was small."

The verses are catalogued among many other songs that contain the same explicit lyrics. The songs from Migos, Jay Z, and R. Kelly, are casual and brazen with their lines. Migos exclaim that their prowess is enough to convince a woman to be unfaithful to her partner, while criticizing them for their inability to provide for them. Likewise, Jay Z and R. Kelly dismiss men for their sexual obsessions because they allow a woman to continually take charge, while believing they should be in command of their sexuality and in control of women. Devin the Dude's verse is particularly problematic since it not only asserts the same level of obsession with sex that Jay Z

61

and R. Kelly mention, but also his disregard of his own indoctrination to a sexual lifestyle that he may have not been prepared for[10].

Additionally, while the media may focus on and reproduce ideas of the hypersexual Black male, they did so while giving attention to the docile, "good," sexless, Black man. For example, *Lethal Weapon's* (1987) Roger Murtaugh, played by Danny Glover, is a Black family-man and police officer attempting to provide for his family. Murtaugh is safer and more cautious than his partner, Martin Riggs, played by Mel Gibson. While Glover's character is occasionally seen showing affection to his wife across the four films, his sexual expression is otherwise erased. Glover himself mentioned in an interview that he felt like the sexuality and intimacy of Murtaugh and relationship were "subconsciously deleted." This is a similar point for shows like *The Cosby Show.* While Bill Cosby's, Heathcliff Huxtable is given a larger range of human responses and interactions with his family, the Huxtables are a family where race is not in the center. Like Murtaugh, Heathcliff is a nonthreatening family man who became successful on his own and succeeded in a world believed to be racist and oppressive.

Characters like Murtaugh and Heathcliff serve as foils to the carefree, assertive, and sexually liberal characters and comedians of the day. Glover via Murtaugh, and Cosby via Heathcliff, are highlighted by their desexualized nature and their caution. The desexualized nature

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[10] Admittedly, mainstream hip-hop and rap music is rife with misogynistic, sexist, and objectifying lyrics. Rap music is popular, lucrative, and influential, yet it exists within a White-dominant and controlled space wherein rap's problematic appearance is permitted. This permission obscures the genre's stylistic diversity and politically-rich influences. In failing to endorse or give air time to this variety, the White controlled space perpetuates reductive narratives of hypersexual and hyperviolent Black men. The restrictive portrayal of rap limits possibility, reduce nuance, and remove depth when it fails to celebrate or acknowledge the genre's diversity.

Likewise, hip-hop and rap's popularity echoes the commodification of Black bodies. While content is continuously produced and, in many ways, controlled by Black artists, the entertainment industry is still a White-controlled space. As a result, wealth is established off the work of Black bodies. Additionally, as hip-hop and rap music grow in popularity and amass a wider following, its influence will continue to grow. While this ensures wider exposure for Black artists, it also allows non-Black audiences to pull from and appropriate different elements from hip-hop), which they may come to believe is representative of Black culture. By regulating and endorsing hedonistic appearances of rap and hip-hop, the culture therein is reduced to its problematic parts..

reflects their level of internalized racism and oppression within a White patriarchal society. By being acceptable, fictional Black men, the message that can be communicated to other Black people is that the image of the agreeable Black men is acceptable by White society. Thus, some Black people will attempt to reconcile their anxiety by adopting desexualized images of blackness to avoid affirming any negative narratives associated with their race.

The landscape of well-known Black professionals, and Black-centered television series highlights a problematic binary. On one end, the display of promiscuous Black men who learn how to have sex as a rite of passage is anything but uncommon. Additionally, the view of promiscuity is endorsed by some Black men and viewed as intrinsically attached to their manhood. On the other end, images of the nonthreatening, desexualized characters are critically acclaimed. This binary establishes two categories that disable Black men from engaging with themselves or others as human beings. By pushing Black men and Black male characters into one category or another, racial narratives restrict how Black men can appear in between, or on the fringes of these promiscuous or desexualized categories. Likewise, it continues to reinforce the White patriarchal lens that regulates Black men.

Lastly, and most importantly, the binary of promiscuity and desexualization disavows vulnerability and ignores the social contexts that contribute to the binary's development. Disavowing vulnerability turns a blind eye to the sexual abuse that Black men can experience. It silences their feelings and pain through demonstrations of their manhood. Rejecting vulnerability ignores the sexism and misogyny of the hypersexual machismo, thereby ignoring how Black men relate to each other.

Of course, it is not all negative. Shows like *Black-ish* attempt to explore the complexity of race and class and what it is like to be viewed through a White lens. As a result, it serves as a

worthy successor to *The Cosby Show* as it focuses on an upper-class Black family negotiating their identities in ways like the Huxtables[11]. Likewise, hip-hop artists, like J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, use their music to tackle issues related to the rampant focus on sexual domination and objectification of Black bodies.

It is glaring that some of these examples may feel 'old' and 'outdated.' Indeed, citing Eddie Murphy's *Raw*, *Lethal Weapon*, or *The Cosby Show*, may feel as though this section refers to issues of the past that have been resolved in the present. However, these examples are meant to be taken in tandem with the narratives in the present. The ways through which some Black men take up the values of sexual conquests and sexual domination are pervasive and resist change. This is not to refrain from assigning responsibility, but rather, to highlight an issue of what happens when problematic, yet dominant values go unchallenged.

However, what is lacking is a sense of curiosity about how Black men experience their own sexuality. If the negative racial narratives affixed to their bodies must be critically examined, it is important to begin at a point where the voices of Black men can act as the foundation for a new complex and diverse sense of sexuality.

This dissertation fills this gap by bringing African American men's experiences to the fore. Specifically, this project highlights the unending, exhaustive struggle of trying to define one's

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[11] Like *The Cosby* Show, Black-*ish* focuses on the Johnsons, an upper-class, politically-conscious Black family, and the show provide commentary on race in the U.S including questions of deracialization and what it means to exist in predominantly White communities. The Johnsons acknowledge that docile Black families that suppress their blackness are afforded a certain degree of acceptance by White people (to the degree that they can be accepted). *Black-ish*'s Andre Johnson, the family patriarch, constantly attempts to combat the assumption that he and his family are "not Black," and frequently comment on the fact that the world reminds them that, even if they wanted to de-race themselves, it would never happen. *Black-ish'* consistent commentary serves to acknowledge the deraced and desexualized narratives of Black men and the impossibility of assimilation.The show acknowledges that Black men and Black people are often tethered to many narratives and poles – violence and sexualized or docile and desexualized. It is aware that these narratives are prevalent even today and they try to tackle important issues. In this case, *Black-ish* serves as a suitable critique of *The Cosby Show* or at least to its reputation and legacy among Black and White audiences.

sexual experiences in a world that constantly attempted to restrict possibilities through racist systems. In focusing on these experiences, this dissertation elucidates the sense of loss, discomfort, and even confliction that comes with defining one's identities in racially saturated spaces.

CHAPTER III

BLACK NARRATIVES: A METHODOLOGY

I am fascinated by stories and their effects on the audience and storyteller alike. As I claimed in the previous chapter, the stories we tell about ourselves are complicated and informed by other stories we hear about us, and around us (Baldwin, 1964; Fanon, 1976/2008). Regarding African American men, the stories they tell about themselves carry the historical constructions of their race and gender, among other cultural identities such as class and sexuality.

In this chapter, I share the research question for this study, as well as the rationale for this focus on the stories of African American men. Moreover, I will detail the primary and secondary methodologies of the project – narrative inquiry and autoethnography – and indicate how I will analyze the stories I gathered from the participants and from my autoethnographic contribution.

RESEARCH QUESTION

My research question is: How do heterosexual African American men experience their sexuality? I thought of this question after wondering whether my experience of sexuality, as a Black man, was like the population of Black men I was classed or identified with. I was curious about the prevailing narrative of the aggressive, promiscuous, Black male, and how (or if) it was taken up by Black men. I was intrigued by these comments, as there were certainly spaces within the academy where these issues were discussed at some length, for example Black feminist scholars who explore Black masculinity in tandem with Black gender issues (Collins, 2002; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1992, 2004a, 2004b).

There is scant qualitative research that addresses the complexity and diversity in how Black men experience their masculine and sexual identities. Specifically, there is a need for more

qualitative studies that consider how Black men interpret and develop their sense of sexuality and how other identities like blackness and masculinity come into play. (Bowleg et al., 2017; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009b; DeWalt, 2011, 2013; Ritchey, 2014). This dissertation highlights the intricacies of how Black men express and experience their sexuality, notably the exhaustion, struggle, fragmentation, fetishism, anxiety and vigilance. I asked and inquired about how Black men experience their blackness, their masculinity, and sexuality. Throughout this chapter, I will explore the methodologies and the research procedure I used to engage the participants and learn more about Black masculinity and sexuality.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative Inquiry

According to Murray and Sargeant (2012), narrative research focuses on how people interpret their experiences through narrations that vary across different modes (e.g., oral, written, visual narratives) and literary forms (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, poetry, etc.) (Riessman, 2000). Narrative research becomes "interested in the character of the stories told, language used, how it connects with events, how it can change [and] the way it is shared with others" (Murray & Sargeant, 2012, p. 166). Furthermore, narrative research is interested in the way that people organize their experiences through their stories, specifically in the ways that they create meaning through their interpretation of events (Murray, 2003; Riessman, 2003; Silver, 2013; Smith, 2007; Tahir, 2009).

As a research method, narrative inquiry draws from discourse analysis, narrative theory, and hermeneutic phenomenological traditions (Josselson; 2011; Murray & Sargeant, 2012). Specifically, it takes from these traditions the importance of how the individual begins to interpret

their experiences and their worlds as mutable structures. Narrative inquiry is a method that focuses on stories as the unit(s) of data (Riessman & Speedy, 2007; Trahar, 2009). The researchers explore how participants are situated within their stories – when it takes place, where they take place, and who was involved. Narrative inquiry goes beyond simply looking at how people use storytelling to speak about an experience, but how people are situated within those stories, how their identities emerge, how they relate to others, and the value a narrative may have to the narrator (Clandinin, 2006). People can use narratives to bring order to their lives, focusing on specific events. In considering the interpretative power of a narration, it is possible for participants (and, on some level, researchers) to develop and strengthen a sense of identity in the ordering, meaning-making, and storytelling process (Murray & Sargeant, 2012).

What is a narrative? As I mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, it is common for researchers to use the terms narrative and story interchangeably. This dissertation makes a distinction between the two terms for clarity and to highlight the narrative's discursive elements. Some researchers, such as Murray (2003), refer to narrative as "an organized interpretation of a sequence of events. This involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events" (Murray, 2003, p. 113). I find that this definition identifies some of the overlapping elements between a story and narrative (e.g. characters, plot, sequence of events, and more). As such, should we stick to narrative and story being interchangeable terms, this remains a strong definition. That said, I believe that the distinctive elements of a narrative are notable.

I define narrative as a network of stories that are organized around a specific theme or experience (Corman, 2011a; Harper, 2009; Smith, 2007). Narratives can be subjective, which is to say that they can be about an individual's identities and sense of self. People may tell stories to construct some narratives of being hardworking, successful, and independent. Likewise, narratives

can reflect sociocultural discourses and people can interpret or manipulate them to reinforce their identities and even their impressions of other people (Riessman & Speedy, 2007; Trahar, 2009). As noted in chapter 2, the racial narrative of the hypersexual Black male is one of these examples. This definition of narratives as a network of stories, highlights some of its discursive elements and points to how people can interpret them and adopt them to understand themselves or others.

In narrative inquiry, researchers can gather stories by interviewing participants and these stories can be overarching accounts of the participants' lives, or pertain to specific, episodic moments (Murray, 2003). They use these narratives as the unit of analysis for carrying out their research. These narratives provide windows into the rich cultural lives of the participants. The process can begin by asking a participant to share a story and this story can be spoken and recorded by the researcher. This storytelling process can also occur through writing a story or a poem, filming a scene, and even drawing a series of events. The stories can take any form. The narrative researcher can record and transcribe the conversation and stories, and critically explore the descriptions that came up and how these stories shape the participant's identities.

Narratives function to help the narrator locate and find the meaning in their experiences. We are "born into a narrative world" (Murray, 2003, p. 111), wherein we live and recall details of our lives through the small stories we share with others (Murray, 2003; Silver, 2013, Riessman, 2003). These narratives are central to the ways that we conceive of the world and how we view ourselves as they can bring a "sense of localized coherence and stability" (Murray, 2003, p. 115). This means that events we repeat and relive during the storytelling process can help us to process events that transpired.

Narratives point to the speaker's journey to discover themselves amid their storytelling. This journey highlights some of the account's imperative elements. First, as narratives are

constantly developed through our lives, they are always historical (Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkles, 2009). While we are always referring to the personal events of the past, the narratives of our lives can often reference general historical accounts. For example, as noted in chapter 2, the stories of discrimination, sexual objectification, and the sexual violence done to African American men refer to the development of racial narratives related to African American men. Fanon (1976/2008) demonstrates how the narratives of Black people are automatically affixed to Black bodies via their race and the ways in which racial narratives can influence the identities of Black men and their interactions with other people. hooks (1993; 2004a; 2004b) showed that the narratives of others can influence our own narratives, as some Black-American men co-opt the racial narrative of Black male hypersexuality and incorporate it into their own experiences. Thus, the narratives these Black men tell to locate their own power refer to the large historical contexts of Black male sexuality.

The focus of identity brings me to the second principal element of narratives. The location, performance, and the emergence of identity become points of interest within narrative research and narrative inquiry (Parker, 2005). This sense of "becoming" through narratives (Hall, 1997) highlights how important it is to look at stories beyond just their sequential structure. Indeed, narratives are a performance, wherein the stories contextualize experiences and the relationships between narrator, characters, and audience (Riessman, 2003). The stories become a way for the narrator to locate and demonstrate their identities (Murray, 2003).

Writers such as Coates (2015) illustrate the ways in which identities can be constructed using narratives and an identifiable audience. In the book *Between the World and Me* (2015), Coates shares personal stories and narratives of his life as a Black man growing up in Baltimore. Framed as a letter to his son, the book provides a series of autobiographical stories that serve as

lessons for him. Coates talks about his upbringing in Baltimore, navigating his city to avoid violence between rivaling groups, witnessing the tense relationship between police officers and the Black community, and instances of police harassment and brutality that went unpunished. Coates writes about his difficulties being a father, specifically the anxiety and sadness he sometimes felt raising a son. He tells stories of the pain as he watched his son learn how difficult the world is for Black people, and he was constantly reminded of it.

Coates offers a personal narrative of his life as a Black man and the historical constructions of Black masculinity frame the ways his identities can shift in different contexts. Some Black-American men co-opt and use the narrative of hypersexuality to amplify their sense of self. Others, like Coates, use their personal narratives as a stage where they can perform and refer to history. Coates' (2015) narrative demonstrates the oppressive perspectives of Black men and the anxiety it evoked within him as a Black boy and man, journalist and a father. Coates's focus on his son as the immediate audience provides him with a motive to share these events.

The relationship between Coates and his son highlights another fundamental element to narratives: relationship (Gergen & Gergen, 2011). The relational process emphasizes how storytelling and stories are mutually collaborative and constructed. Narratives are contextualized by the narrator's audience, and such interactions and relationship with their identities, cultures, and their audience help to create meaning in their stories (Murray, 2003; Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkles, 2009, 2009; Smith & Sparkles, 2010). An African American man sharing accounts of his life may tell a different story and narrate it differently with a Black audience than he would with a non-Black audience. These distinctions point to the way an audience can generate nuance within a story and affect the manner of its telling.

As they gather a participant's narratives to explore, researchers become members of the participant's audience. They hear the stories and hear about how the participants live. They often ask questions, ask for clarification or elaboration of certain aspects of the story, and participate in the story's telling. The researcher considers the participants' audience and, to the best of their ability, learn about how the participant interprets their experiences. It is the responsibility of the researcher to do justice to the story by framing it honestly while considering the different sociocultural positions of the participant and him or herself. Doing otherwise would risk dehumanizing and devaluing the worth of the participants. Considering the sensitivity of this dissertation's topic, it is important for me to be mindful of the participant's experiences and how they see themselves. Yet, it is also important for me to consider how experiences as Black man and researcher factor into this project.

Autoethnography

As I thought about this dissertation, I knew it was important for me to think deeply and carefully how my identity as a Black man shaped or would shape my research decisions. In chapter 1, I shared a story that showed how my subjective experiences and studies in Black psychology came to inform my research question. In the story, I addressed how the Black men experienced anxiety, confusion, and frustration that came from internalized narratives of hypersexuality, sexual objectification and fetishism by White people, and the struggle to define what sexuality meant for me as a Black man.

I knew that being reflexive was important to this project. Finlay (2002) defines reflexivity, as "thoughtful, self-conscious, awareness," (p. 532) which enables researchers to continually evaluate their responses to the project and to the participants. Finlay (2002) argues that the process

differs from simple self-reflection through its rigor: reflexivity is performed throughout the research process and researchers take note of their feelings, experiences, and responses. Reflexivity also calls on researchers to make note of how their experiences can contribute to the overall design of the project and can lead to a deeper, richer understanding of the data.

While reflexivity does note the experience of the researchers, I knew that my Black and masculine identities were factored into how I saw myself in that role. As such, I believed that it was important for me to take another step and to thoughtfully consider how my racial identity played a part throughout the research. My intent was to be reflective of my role as a Black researcher while also connecting it to sociocultural experiences. Thus, I opted to use autoethnography as a reflexive method to satisfy this purpose.

Autoethnography aims to explore the researcher's individual experiences in relation to cultural phenomena as the main subject of interest (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Traditionally, this focus on the researcher is often eschewed in favor of 'objective,' rationalist and often cerebral positions wherein the investigator is expected to be neutral and removed from the work. In autoethnography, instead, the researcher's subjective experiences and subjectivity is a fundamental element of the research project (Denzin, 2000; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011; Gemignani, 2011; Reed-Danahay, 2009). Indeed, to explore the lived experiences of our participants often requires us as researchers to consider our own positions of power (Bochner, 2012). For a researcher to remain completely neutral and removed from the project is impossible and even undesirable. As soon as we begin to gather data, change the names of participants, design questions to ask, or scenarios for participants to review, we are actively engaged with our work. Indeed, our research questions can be reflective of our lived experiences as they reveal an interest we have in a specific topic or our orientation towards the world. Autoethnography thus turns the attention to the

researcher: "the self becomes the site of inquiry" (Marx, Pennington & Hwang, 2017, p. 2) by combining the genres of autobiography and ethnography to explore that site.

Researchers focus on their lives and create narratives that focus on moments and events central to their identities. In a similar vein, an autoethnographic project "begins with a personal story" (Wall, 2008, p. 39) and the researcher's narratives are approached as though they were a participant's narratives within the inquiry. Similarly, to the participants, researchers use narratives to bring order and to create or find meaning in their lives (Freeman, 2008). The autobiographical element of autoethnography is one wherein researchers must make themselves vulnerable and be as curious about their own experiences as they are about the participants', noticing their own excitement, resistance, and anxiety that can be spurred when writing their stories.

When doing ethnography, the researcher focuses on cultural dynamics or processes, studying its actors, members, values, practices, histories, traditions, and relationships to understand them (Geertz, 2000). Geertz asserts that, as a method, ethnography requires one to consider the importance of content and context to allow for the elicitation or telling of "thick descriptions" – "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures… [that] are produced, perceived, and interpreted" (Geertz, 2000, p. 7). The focus of ethnography is culture as a social and public creation and performance that exists within and between everyone in the culture, including researchers and participants. This allows researchers to address culturally-specific issues that are pertinent in their overall history and inquiry, instead of seeing the researcher as a non-acting, external observer (Parker, 2005).

For Denzin (2000), ethnography should be transformative and do more than monitor a culture's dynamics and the individuals therein. Instead, ethnography should be "critical," "vulnerable," "performative" and personal (p. 401). This means that the method should pay

attention to an individual's relationship and transformation within one's culture. The ethnographic researcher who wishes to do work in the trenches can position a culture and its members' narratives "as a political act." (Denzin, 2000, p. 403). This means that researchers can focus on issues centered on identity and related issues wherein individuals may feel marginalized, disenfranchised, or effectively silenced via modes of oppression. Thus, ethnography requires a deep understanding of a culture's history and seek to elucidate the systems of power that became entrenched within it and continues through time (Denzin, 2000).

Autoethnography involves the merger of two genres, wherein the researcher is subject amid a culturally rich world. Researchers explore their relationship with their cultures. Likewise, their stories give space for important aspects of their identities to emerge and be reaffirmed (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Thus, autoethnographies call for researchers to be descriptive, evocative, reflexive and vulnerable, while also being academically rigorous. This means rooting the analysis of text and experience within a sociocultural context.

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe a few main steps for the autoethnography.

(1) When researchers do autoethnography, they identify significant and transformative experiences in their lives. Researchers will consider how these significant moments, or "epiphanies" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3), are contextualized by culture.

(2) Likewise, autoethnographic researchers must consider how their experiences – used as the primary data – explain or reveal new dynamics or processes within the culture they are studying. This to say, researchers connect these epiphanies to the larger research question or phenomena. Not just any important story will do. Rather, researchers identify and focus experiences on the exploration of a specific question.

(3) Researchers can elucidate the data in numerous ways. They can explore how one's cultural identity was defined by a significant moment in the researcher's life. The researcher can also interview other members of the culture to learn how a cultural identity can be co-constructed with others. The event may highlight certain cultural values and practices that were salient to the story.

(4) Following this process, researchers will use their background and analyze their stories while rigorously tying it to the relevant research (Carolyn Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Researchers can reference their conversations, interviews, their field notes, and other materials to gain insight into their cultural experiences and to connect it to the literature. Many autoethnographic researchers highlight the importance of evocative writing that is descriptive and heartfelt. All of this is done to gain new insight into the construction of a researcher's experiences and understanding of the research phenomena and one's relationship to a community.

As in narrative inquiry, many scholars doing autoethnography utilize personal narratives to explore the sociocultural experiences and the systems of power that delineate them. As noted before, Coates (2015) and Fanon (1976/2008) anchor their memoirs and theoretical critiques respectively in their lived experiences. Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* (1952), wrote *Shadow and Act* (1964), a non-fiction collection of essays that focus on his critique of Black-White racial dynamics, Black-American culture, and his identity as a writer, among other notable experiences. As Ellison levels his critiques against dominant culture, he shares his narratives to reveal his frustration as a Black-American and to highlight that his frustrations are also communally shared by other Black people. In his essay "The Fire Next Time", Baldwin (1998) similarly critiques race relations within America in the form of a letter written to his nephew. Baldwin studies his own identity and conflicts amid the rising political tension between Black and

White-Americans. Hooks' narratives (1994) address the intersection of race and gender and the formation of her identity as a Black woman and feminist. Hooks addresses the importance of understanding one's self-narrative within a culturally-bound world as it informs one's pedagogy and, as consequence, it assists in her critique of academia. A last example is that of feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1984), who incorporates her personal narratives and experiences in her analysis of oppressive systems to demonstrate the complexity of experiences that arise from a congregation of intersecting identities.

While many of these scholars are not considered autoethnographers, their writings on identity and culture through their stories show the importance of a heartfelt autobiographical approach that is anchored in the cultural world. Yet, while these writers reference their experiences in the context of culture, it is the job of the autoethnographic researcher to critically analyze these experiences. That means wielding the appropriate tools and methods to take one's personal stories and to question, dissect, and critique its relevance and situate it among current literature. Specifically, the researcher should consider how her narratives are reflective of larger cultural phenomena, while also considering and questioning the relationship between the two (Ellis et al., 2011).

The autobiographical component of the dissertation allows me to write and reflect on past experiences and relationships, including the one with myself. This process furthers my own awareness and sensibility to work with the participants. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) see the process of writing our narratives as a reflective, revelatory and insightful movement into our histories. This reflective, narrative process allows the participants and I to highlight events and personal knowledge related to racial narratives of sexuality for Black men.

I use autoethnography to engage with the topics of race and masculinity presented earlier in the methods section. This part of the project will be developed through personal narratives, which are "stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Chapter five explores my cultural and individual experiences that have been impacted by racial narratives. Personal stories and experiences can also serve as a tool to connect with my participants. The use of a field journal was instrumental to trace my own thoughts and experiences throughout the project (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Doing Narrative Inquiry and Reflexive Autoethnography Together

In this dissertation, I opted to use narrative inquiry and autoethnography as both methods emphasize the importance of socially-constituted components of experience and identity. The methods provide an approach to discover how individuals create their worlds with others. (Crossley, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Murray & Sargeant, 2011). Rather, it is important to shed light on the participants' experience and personal interpretations of culture. Both methods also emphasize the usefulness and interpretative power of narratives for researchers and participants alike.

An important overlap between the two methodologies is that both require researchers to be reflexive and aware of the fact that they are participating in the project with the participants (Gemignani, 2011). Duncan (2002) claims that bringing questions of culture, specifically issues of the researchers and participants' culture, to the foreground can open a dialogue that can provide information regarding the culture. Likewise, he adds that reflexivity "[makes] visible the invisible relationships that characterize racial oppression by redirecting the focus on our perspectives and

to fostering a consideration of the multiple viewpoints that may come to bear in the social construction of reality" (Duncan, 2002, pp. 96). With regards to this dissertation, a reflexive stance works to illuminate the intricate and subtle dynamics between participant and researcher, wherein narratives are co-constructed through shared cultural identities.

Likewise, using both methods together forces me to turn inward in a comparable way to that I requested the participants to do. The lines between participant and researcher, while there, are blurred and reasonably so, as a qualitative research project requires the reflexive considerations of the researcher to explore their relationships with others (Gemignani, 2011). Joining narrative inquiry with autoethnography makes me ask myself, "What events in my life motivated me to wonder about Black masculinity and sexuality?" I situate myself as a subject who experiences and performs his identity with his own audience. The combined approach allows me to take the interactive and reflexive stance one step further in the entanglement among authorship, representation and embodied experience.

So, how would a researcher use both methods? First, the researcher will take the initial steps of narrative inquiry, gathering stories and experiences from the participants and getting a sense of their narratives. Also, he would ask questions regarding the participants' identities, how they defined them and how they experienced them. Throughout the process, the researcher would remain reflexive and make note of any reactions (i.e. questions, emotional reactions, curiosities) that came up during the interview process and data analysis (e.g. Have I experienced anxiety or confusion elsewhere during this project or outside of it? Why did I ask that question at that time? Why did I have that reaction to that comment? What did I expect going into this interview and when was I surprised by a participant?). Then, after attending to those reactions, the researcher would explore what the reactions meant to them. Lastly, the researcher would identify the salient

stories in that process and connect them to the participants' narratives and to larger cultural phenomena. The researcher can attend to one's history, cultural identity, and experience throughout the project to gain deeper insight into the participants' experiences and thus glean richer information. Also, this approach could enable the researcher to check and avoid false empathy (Duncan, 2003), wherein one would only superciliously and superficially relate to the participants. These experiences go beyond reflexivity and into autoethnography in their connection to cultural phenomena which will also be anchored within literature. Thus, the researcher uses their experiences to answer the research question, to highlight new processes, to consider how these processes may open new areas of exploration or insights in participants' experiences and consider how these insights or the researcher's presence impacted the research process.

I wonder about my own positions of identity throughout the research project. I am also curious about the identities that give rise to this project and how that space engenders my dissertation. This calls for a consideration of my narratives that are the basis of the research question. All of us bring our biographies with us; they give an indication of our fluid memberships in cultural arenas.

While overlaps of autoethnography and narrative psychology may be small, they point to a central similarity between the two – elucidating the meaning behind specific experiences and the constructive role of representations and being represented in defining our objects or concerns. Thus, a combined method gathers interpretations and descriptions that are specific to the individual and the cultural context, while also exploring how these elements frame one's personal experience to create a meaningful, cultural world. This also requires the researcher to do the same. Thus, I

will use autoethnography to explore how I interpret my own culture and how it has influenced my understanding of my world, especially regarding masculinity and sexuality as a Black man.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

I began the recruitment process after Duquesne University's IRB committee and my dissertation committee approved my research protocol. The research protocol summarized my research question and research procedure and included a consent form that I provided to each of the participants. Recruitment, information on consent, participant, and interview details are presented below.

Recruitment

My means of recruiting participants was through word of mouth and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique wherein a group of informants identify and recommend other potential participants (Morgan, 2008). When I gained IRB approval, I spoke to members of the African American communities in a mid-size northeastern city, local universities, local community organizations, work colleagues, acquaintances, friends and family members. The study was not advertised anywhere, and all recruitment was conducted specifically through word of mouth. In speaking with different people about the project, I asked if they would be willing to reach out and ask Black men they knew if they were willing to participate in the study. I recognized that using friends, family members and acquaintances could have impacted the study and it could bring into question how the participants engaged me. Specifically, the participants could hesitate sharing personal details with me due to how well we may know each other. Or, the participants could manufacture details to produce an answer that they believed would satisfy me. Likewise, the relationship could skew how I responded to their answers. However, Blichfeldt and Heldbjerg

(2011) suggest that the being previously acquainted with the researcher (e.g. friends, relatives, and colleagues) could have positive effects. Specifically, participants would be more inclined to disclose information they would withhold otherwise with a stranger (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011; Harris, 2002). A major factor of this was trust and rapport which served to improve the conversation between the researcher and participant who knew one another (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011; Harris, 2002). Rapport cannot simply be conflated with the intimacy that may be present between friends and family. That said, I decided that allowing friends and family members to potentially participate in the research project would be beneficial to learning about Black masculinity and sexuality. Additionally, I felt that the relationship could allow for powerful stories to come to the surface.

After I spoke to people about my study, I started to hear back from potential participants. The initial contacts reached out to other African American men who in turn contacted me in person, through phone, or through e-mail. During these conversations, I informed the men about my study, my research question, and I shared with them some of the questions from my interview guide. The discussion about the project was straightforward: during our conversations about my research or about other matters related to African American cultures and communities, I mentioned to the participants that I was studying how Black men experience and express their sexuality and masculinity. As a result, participants were gathered from three informant groups: (1) the first informant group contained my initial contacts (as noted above). Two participants were recruited from this group[12]; (2) The second informant group was comprised of references made from the initial informant group. Their initial contacts asked them to reach out to other men who were

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[12] See the section on participants.

interested in the study. One participant is from this group. (3) The third informant group was comprised of references from the second informant group. Two participants are from this group.

Overall, I spoke to 20 African American men in total. While overlapping across race, gender, and sexuality (African American, heterosexual men), they also differed in terms of race, class, age, education, marital status and employment (e.g. ages 20-40, biracial men who stilled identified as African American, no college education, white-, blue-, and pink-collar jobs, single, or single-fathers). Out of that 20, five men agreed to participate in the study. The remaining men voiced their interest in the project and initially agreed to participate but did not get back to me regarding scheduling or backed out. When the men backed out, they explained that they could not dedicate the time to the project. While I do not know why the other men didn't respond to my messages, I imagine that they were too busy to participate.

Eligibility

The eligible demographic population for this study was African American, heterosexual cis-gender men. This demographic was informed by the research question, and prior research on Black masculinity and sexuality.

The theoretical research that focuses on the construction of Black masculine and sexual identities (Collins, 2005; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Staples, 1982; West, 1994), focuses on Black, heterosexual- and cis-gender[13] men. Likewise, theoretical research on the construction of the mythic, hypersexual, sexually dominant Black male narrative also focuses on African American, heterosexual, cis-gender men (Collins, 2005; DuRocher, 2011; Ferber, 2007; Hobgood, 2000; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2004; Laing, 2017; Saint-Aubin, 2002; Staples, 1982; West, 1994). Additionally, when Black, heterosexual, cis-gender men are the focus of

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[13] By Cis-gender, I mean someone whose gender identity is congruent with their assigned sex at the time of their birth.

research that explores sexuality, their perspectives on sexuality and sexual practices are often seen as problematic (Bowleg et al., 2017). This research is relevant and important to highlighting some of the gender and sexual discrimination issues within the Black community, but also lacks the significant qualitative work to provide a more nuanced understanding of these positions. Research on Black psychology, including Black masculinity and -sexuality focuses on African Americans more so than other Black cultures (Angel-Ajani, 2002; De Walt, 2013; DeWalt, 2011; Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015). Though the research could apply to Black men of different ethnicities, it would be irresponsible and reckless of me to generalize their experiences. Furthermore, despite the frequent presence of African American, heterosexual cis-gender men being the focus of the theoretical research, they are underrepresented within qualitative research focused on Black culture[14].

Marginalized groups and identities deserve and need to be represented in research. Indeed, oppressed people are often overlooked in favor of dominant groups. My decision to focus on this population is therefore also to broaden and deepen the body of work that focuses on Black heterosexual men, and well in a way that acknowledges multiple and different intersecting identities.

Participants

Out of the 20 African American men I spoke to about the project, five men between the ages of 26-40 agreed to participate the dissertation. All the men identified as African American and heterosexual. Two participants were connected to the initial set of informants. Some of the participants and I knew others as acquaintances through some of the local university communities. One man heard about the project from work colleagues, another participant heard about the project

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[14] African American men make up 12% of the population in the United States, yet they are underrepresented in psychological research (Bowleg et al, 2017)

from one of his older brother, and another heard about the study via a family member of mine. All participants were anonymized: they were given pseudonyms, all names provided in the transcripts were de-identified, and all potentially identifying information (e.g. organization affiliation) was removed.

Khalil – Khalil was 26 years old at the time of the interview. Khalil was originally from California where he lived until he was eight years old. He came from an upper middle-class background. A graduate student at a local university, Khalil worked towards his master's degree in fine arts at the time of the interview. He was an avid poet and was dedicated to his improvement and growth as a writer. At the time, he wrote a book that focused on blackness and Black identity. He was in an ongoing, 2-year long relationship with a White partner

Khalil was from the first wave of informants. When I began to ask my contacts if they could reach out to other African American men that could participate in the study, Khalil said he was interested in the interview and agreed to be a participant. He was one of two participants I knew prior to the interview.

Tariq – Tariq was 29 at the time of the interview. He lived in a diverse neighborhood in a mid-size northeastern city and was raised in a predominantly African-American neighborhood outside of the city. He had his bachelor's degree in English from a local university. Tariq worked as a library technician and part-time bouncer and bartender, though considered returning to school to pursue a degree in computer science. Tariq spent a lot of his time outside of work socializing, learning more about his city's literary scene, other and different subjects, and teaching martial arts. He was single at the time of the interview.

Tariq was a volunteer from the first wave of informants. When I asked him and other contacts if they knew of any African American willing to participate in the project, he voiced his interest in being interviewed. He was the second of two participants I knew prior to the interview.

James - James was in his 40s at the time of the interview. Born in Kansas, he came from an upper-middle class household, though hesitated to describe himself as upper-middle class during the interview. James worked as a social worker and provided care to underserved families. He thoroughly enjoyed learning and trying new things, considered himself an avid reader and lover of languages and knew conversational Spanish. James had an interest in African American studies and feminist philosophy, and frequently read texts from various scholars to improve his treatment with his clients. He had a daughter in her 20s, though James was unmarried and single at the time of the interview.

James was part of the second wave of informants and agreed to participate in the research project after James heard about the project after I made initial contact with some of my colleagues at a large organization. After he heard about the project, he voiced his interest in the topic. I had no contact with James prior to the interview.

Brandon – Brandon was 28 years old at the time of the interview and worked as a sales consultant. He received his bachelor's degree in business and worked for a couple of years before he opened an optical store which he ran for a few years. Brandon was newly-wed and highlighted his wife and 20-month-old son as the primary motivation for the job change as he wanted to provide for his family.

Brandon was part of the third wave of informants and agreed to participate in the project after hearing about it from a sibling, who knew one of the initial informants. As stated above, I asked the initial informants to reach out to other African American. The initial group asked other

African American men if they were willing to participate and they were also asked to reach out to other African American men who could be interested in the topic. Brandon heard about the study from his brother, who was part of the second informant group, putting Brandon in the third group of informants.

Theo – Theo was 26-years-old at the time of the interview. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in business and worked as a sales manager. He stated that his focus was establishing himself in his career. He described himself as a devout Christian and a very family-oriented person and enjoyed spending time with his partner of seven years.

Theo was a part of the third wave of informants and agreed to participate in the project after hearing about the project from his mother (who was part of the second group of informants). Theo's mother was a member of a church and she knew one of the initial informants.

While the 20 men I spoke to represent a diverse group of African American men, the participants of this study overlapped across key demographics, namely race, gender, class, and education. Thus, while they did speak to experiences of blackness, masculinity, and sexuality, they only provided their stories across those dimensions. Is safe to say, then, the participants speak to a fraction of experiences where, while still valuable, do not represent the whole of African American experiences.

Because the participants overlap across key demographics, it is important to note that the participant's narratives told here reflect a story of an African American experience, rather than the whole story.

Location

The participants and I agreed to meet at locations that were comfortable to them. As such, interviews took place in coffeeshops and homes located throughout the city's east end. I informed each participant that we could talk anywhere they felt comfortable (Elwood & Martin, 2000). This included telephonic interviews, coffeeshops, participant home, and researcher's home.

An interview's location can speak to the inherent power differential that exists between researcher and participant (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011; Elwood & Martin, 2000; Harris, 2002). This power differential highlights that researchers often influence the course of the research and can persuade and portray participant experiences and responses how they see fit. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I felt that it was imperative for participants to feel comfortable, hence I agreed to participants' requests for locations without question in an effort to empower them (Elwood & Martin, 2000).

Consent and Confidentiality

Prior to each interview, I informed the participant of my research question, and asked them to talk about, and share stories, related to their identities as Black men and sexuality. At the time of the interview, each participant was given the informed consent form which described the purpose of the study and reintroduced the research question. The form also iterated the sensitive nature of the conversation and highlighted the potential benefit of contributing to a project that could be helpful to the Black community. The consent form also informed participants that their stories would be confidential and that they had a right to withdraw from the project at any time. All data related to the participants would be deleted within two years following the completion of the project, and participants were informed that they would not be compensated for the study but would also suffer no monetary cost for their participation. All interviews were audio recorded

88

using a voice recording device, for which participants were asked permission, and for which consent was reiterated and recorded thereafter.

Interview

The interviews took place during a single session, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Before each interview, I familiarized the participant with the dissertation project, provided them with the semi-structured interview guide, and allowed them to ask any questions about myself and the topic. The conversation prior to the interview helped to establish rapport between the participants and myself. This rapport was important for our conversations, as it allowed us to breach sensitive topics and helped me to decide what questions to ask them. Furthermore, when I consider the importance of our rapport and its effects on the interview, I am considering the importance and power of the researcher as the audience and the ways that the researcher can co-construct narratives (Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2003, 2005). Using narrative inquiry as a primary method, I used semi-structured interviews to gather stories from the participants (Murray, 2003). These interviews served as the raw data for my dissertation. The semi-structured interview guide contained the following questions and directions:

- Please share some information about yourself and how you prefer to be identified.
- What does it mean to you to be a man?
- Please share a story that demonstrates or reminds you about being a man.
- What does it mean to you to be Black/African-American?
- Please share a story that demonstrates or reminds you about being a Black/African-American.
- What does being a Black Man mean to you?
- What does sexuality mean to you?

- Please share a story that expresses or demonstrates sexuality as you express or define it.

- Does your race and gender play a part in how you express your sexuality? If so, how?

The interview was used to gather stories related to race, masculinity, and sexuality. I chose these questions in this order for two reasons. First, an interview focusing exclusively on Black-American men and sexuality can result in re-objectifying them as merely sexual objects. By focusing on other identities that intersect with sexuality, I aimed to avoid simplifying the participants' identities. Likewise, the interview guide followed a similar format to the literature review and focused on race, gender, and sexuality. Sexuality is considered in the ways that it intersects with other identities such as a race and gender (Collins; 2004; David, 1983; Fanon, 1976/2008; Hall1992a; hooks, 1992; 2004a). I did not ask all the questions during the interviews as a lot of the content was already discussed through the interviews.

Because my research question was an intersectional one, I wanted to understand the participants' identities as it related to their sexuality. So, I asked about their Black masculinity and their sexuality and what it meant to them. I asked questions about stories pertaining to their identities to gather information about how they experienced and expressed them. During the interview, the participants and I would also discuss how these identities played a role in the ways in which they related to other people.

Likewise, I asked questions outside of the interview guide, depending on the content and progression of the conversation. These questions were individualized and reflective of our dialogue. For example, my conversation with Brandon produced questions regarding his son who was frequently referenced in his stories. Likewise, during my conversation with James, I asked a few questions regarding his work with his clients, as they were featured prominently throughout

his narrative. Additionally, the questions are embedded within the raw interview data which can be found in the appendix.

DATA ANALYSIS

I used two models of narrative analysis to explore the texts after the interviews were transcribed: interactional analysis and performance analysis (Riessman, 2005).

Interactional Analysis

The interactional components highlight the relationship between the storyteller and the researcher who is acting as one of the audiences. Interactional analysis considers how the storyteller and listener contribute to the narrative process. This form of analysis focuses on "storytelling as a process of co-construction" (Riessman, 2005, p. 7) and can become useful for speakers of contrasting sociocultural or professional backgrounds as it can highlight the importance of the relationships in the selection and narration of stories (Riessman, 2005). Thus, the researcher's role in the conversation becomes important, and the interactional components requires them to keep track of the flow of the conversation, which might include interruptions, breaks in speech, pauses, and other aspects of a conversation (Riessman, 2005). Furthermore, the researcher's "social locations, subjective, and frameworks of understanding" (Riessman, 2003, p. 6) can come into play within the narrative process (Josselson, 2011).

During the analysis, I considered my own identities and remained attentive to what the stories evoked in me as I analyzed them. Likewise, I remained attentive to how I engaged my participants throughout the interview process. This was important, as I was able to remain attentive to my biases during the interview process albeit with the understanding that I could never attend

to all my biases at a given time due to my investment in the topic. This was especially important as I interviewed participants whom I had known in some capacity prior to the study.

So, when considering the intersectional portion of the interview, I did the following:

(1) Throughout the interviews, I kept field notes to monitor my curiosity, surprises, and general reactions to my participants' narratives. When I analyzed the interactional elements of the interview and the narrative, I used the field notes to inform my understanding of what took place between my participants and me.

(2) I re-read the interview and identified notable questions or responses from me. Similarly, I listened to the audio recordings of the interview for the breaks, pauses, and other interactional elements I might have missed in the thick of the moment. These moments marked points of curiosity or surprise. Also, I located the moments when I self-disclosed information about my own experiences during the interview. These moments allowed me to identify the instances where I related to the participant's experiences.

(3) I considered my own positions as a researcher, and as a Black-American, heterosexual male. While considering these positions, I asked myself the following questions.

- How does the participant narrate his story to me?

- How do I co-construct his story as a listener?

- How do my questions help in the production of the story?

- How does my presence and the participant's relationship with me serve the production of the story?

- How do my identities function in the production of the story?

Considering the socio-cultural elements to my project, it is important to consider how my participants and I are positioned within our stories (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012; Murray & Sargeant 2012). I acknowledge that the stories that I am asking and providing for the project are sensitive and can focus on narratives of oppression. I must acknowledge that these narratives are imbued with a certain political, historical and racial power. Thus, the intersectional analysis served to monitor what I experienced amid these interviews.

Performative Analysis

Performative analysis approaches stories "as a performance – by a 'self' with a past – who involves, persuades, and… moves an audience through language and gesture, 'doing rather than telling alone'" (Riessman, 2005, p. 208). However, what is most important in a performance analysis is the "how" of the story and the narrating (Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkles, 2009; Smith & Sparkles, 2010). Specifically, how is an identity or identities created and performed in and through the telling of the story? How are identities experienced and expressed through the characters in the story? How are identities experienced and expressed through an audience listening to the story? The focus on storytelling's performative features makes it an ideal approach for considering how one's identity is developed over time (Riessman, 2005).

After I gathered the raw interview data, I read the transcription to locate the stories. I located the stories using Murray's (2003) definition as criteria. The stories refer to the "organized interpretation of a sequence of events. This involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events" (Murray, 2003, p. 113). When I analyzed the participants' stories, I used guides informed by the work of numerous narrative researchers (Bell, 2002; McLeod, 2006; Murray, 2003; Murray & Sargeant, 2011; Riessman, 2003, 2004;

Riessman & Speedy, 2007; Silver, 2013; B. Smith, 2007; B. Smith et al., 2009; B. Smith & Sparkes, 2009). I will use a story from a participant, Khalil, to illustrate the steps I took during the data analysis:

(1) I read and re-read the complete transcription of the interview and identified the stories in the process.

> "My first year of my writing program, I was at a Writers of Color meeting. And, the poet Yona Harvey was there. And everyone was going around talking about their experiences writing about their race and I was really quiet. So, she was like, "what are you quiet about?" And I was like, "Well, I've grown up going to schools with White kids my entire life. I don't speak the way you would assume, stereotypically, a Black person speaks, even though I knew that was bullshit anyway. I don't do a lot of the other things the Black people I know do or have certain experiences. So, sometimes, I don't feel like I have license to write about blackness because I don't know if I've had a Black experience." And she just stared at me, and she's like, "But Khalil, you are Black. So, all of your experiences are Black experiences." And, for some reason, that was the most earthshattering thing I've ever heard. I was like, 'thanks for setting me straight.' [laughs] So, why I always go back to that to kind of define my mental landscape of race is that I feel like… I know what I am, but I don't always feel like I am that, and I feel like I'm sort of a chameleon depending on my surroundings."

(2) After I identified the story, I looked at the participant's meaning of blackness, masculinity, and sexuality to see how their stories were framed by each concept.

For Example: I asked Khalil about his blackness (e.g. what did it mean to him?) He provided descriptions and information which generally pertained to blackness or helped me to understand his experience of blackness in different contexts.

- "I feel most me when I'm around family. Though, I hesitate to put a color racial label on it, because to me it's just family. …my brother is White-passing, and I'm the darkest one in my family.... I don't know, it's all over the place" – Suggested that his blackness often felt in flux, or that being Black was just a matter of self-identification based on his complexion.

94

- "When I'm around White people, I can also forget I'm Black sometimes until there are certain experiences like going different places in public, or talking about certain things in media, or those one-off, really quick, low-key- 'didn't you know that was racist?' comment that comes out." – Suggested that he felt his blackness when attention was called to his race in White contexts (When people reminded him of it).

- "On the one sense, I do feel Black, but in the other sense, I only feel Black when it's kind of thrust upon me." – Suggests his relationship to blackness was difficult to anchor or define, even for him. Could also suggest that was most often felt when it was at the center of someone's interpretation of him. "Thrust upon me" suggested his blackness was sometimes forced upon him, which led to different results.

(3) To identify the themes of the participants' selected stories, I asked myself the following questions as they pertained to the performance of identity:

- How does the participant express or perform his blackness? masculinity? Sexuality?

- Does the participant identify any racial stereotypes pertaining to his identities? If so, how does he respond to them?

- Who are the other people in the participant's stories? How do the other characters play a role in those stories? How are they positioned to each other? To the participants?

- How does the participant position himself in relation to the other people?

- Are there any other identities at play?

- Who is the participant's audience?

o How does he narrate his story to himself?

o Who does the participant imagine is listening to his stories?

Going along with these steps, I made note of the following:

- In his story, Khalil expressed some conflict around his blackness. He knew he was Black based on his complexion, though said he felt his blackness shift in different contexts.

- In his story, Khalil referenced stereotypical Black like African American vernacular. He believed that because he did not perform the way other Black people did, he had no claim to his subjective Black identity.

- Other characters in the story are poet Yona Harvey and other poets of color. Everyone shared their experiences about writing and race. They highlighted Khalil's discomfort at that moment. Khalil felt like he had no right to write about blackness unlike the other characters. They were people who felt comfortable enough about their race to talk about it and served as a juxtaposition to Khalil.

- Some of the information about how Khalil experienced his blackness suggested that the Writers of Color workshop was a place where his race was salient. He felt like his blackness had shifted to a point where his race was merely a fact and that he, unlike others, could not justifiably write about it or share his experience of it without criticism. Khalil suggested that his sense of blackness often relied on others to make note of 'how' Black he could be at that time sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

Once I made sense of what took place within the story and the different interactions and processes at play, I summarized them and focused on the participant's performance and experience. As I moved onto other stories, I followed the same format, but also looked at how the stories 'interacted' with one another and how I could connect them. This enabled me to trace common threads across a participant's narrative. When I reached a story that addressed how the participant explored their sexuality, I used the results from the previous performance analyses to gain additional insight into the participant's experience. I used that information while I conducted another performance analysis on the participant's story of their sexual experiences. For example:

> **"Yeah. With B---, second girlfriend. I had a sense, especially coming off the heels of dating M---, I had a sense that her family probably had a similar reaction. I told her upfront "If my race is going to be a wedge in this relationship then let me know. Let's not even worry about, I don't want to cause your family problems." She reassured me. We pressed on. It became a problem. And I always thought it was a problem I had to be insulated from. It's funny. I went over to her house like three or four times. And her mother always put on this front of being polite but didn't like to look at me. Her younger sister really didn't like to look at me. I have a memory of her… when the new iOS came out, she asked the room "How do I do this?" And I was like "Oh, I know exactly how to do that." And I went over to take her phone, and the look she gave me when she handed me her phone was like "Why the hell would you ever touch my phone." …I don't think she wanted me to be anywhere near her. And I remember very deliberately doing that, thinking that maybe it would be a way to break the ice… And I ended up not being able to do whatever it was, which was funny. There was something about her phone that I wouldn't fix. But I was like, this is what you could do, you could read it here. And she just said "thanks." Super reluctant to acknowledge that I was a person. And every time I would leave, that's when the drama would start, and her mother would start sobbing. And she'd tell the younger sister why she was sobbing, but she wouldn't tell B---. But, B--- went and confronted her and her mom would just keep saying "People are going to judge you. People are going to judge you." And I don't think B--- wanted to believe that but being told that enough drove her to reconsider what was going on."**

- In this story, Khalil identified his race as a potential source of conflict for his interracial relationship.

- There was some indication of racial stereotyping from his partner's parents as evidenced by Khalil's anticipation of race as an issue. He also indicated that he

felt like they saw him as sub-human (e.g. "Reluctant to acknowledge that I was a person.")

- Other characters in the story are White people: his partner and her partner's family. Khalil noticed that the family was uncomfortable around him, indicated that they were standoffish. The family warned his partner that people would judge her for her relationship.

- Khalil was positioned as the outsider in the story, someone who was a threat, an intruder, and someone who could possibly harm their daughter in some way.

At this time, I asked myself, "Are there any other identities at play?" With Khalil's descriptions of blackness in mind, I noticed the following:

- This was an instance when Khalil felt as though his blackness was thrust upon him.

- He identified himself as Black, but he entered a White-space, his partner's family saw him in a different way. He experienced his blackness insofar as he was an intruder and a danger to their family.

- Khalil performed and experienced his sexuality in a subdued way to make the family feel comfortable and to gain their approval.

At the end of the analysis, I summarized the content and highlighted how they connected to the other stories. I highlighted the tensions within them and the connected experiences across identities. This process allowed me to weave and intersect the various identities on which I focused during the interviews: specifically, blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. The performative analysis also considers the interaction between narrator and interviewer, and how identities can be co-constructed through their exchanges (Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown & Sparkles, 2009,

2010, p. 9). The interactional element to the performative analysis is important to exploring the participants' narratives.

Organization of Themes in the Participants' Narratives

After I analyzed the participants' stories and narratives, I went back to the summaries and stories for each participant and re-read them. Following Josselson's (2004) guide to identifying narrative themes, I looked at how each of the participant's narratives spoke to their experience of their sexuality. Because all the participants had different experiences, I looked at where the participants' stories came together broadly around similar challenges, points of tension, successes, and conflicts. I focused on where these experiences appeared within other narratives. I looked at their stories of themselves, how they were positioned with other people, and extracted the feelings and experiences that arose within the text. For example, I noticed that some of the participants made note of the tension they experienced with their partners, friends, and family. These responses included feelings such as anxiety and frustration, or a sense of resignation as they had to modulate their experiences for the benefit of others. At the end, I named the following themes: exhaustion, fragmentation, anxiety and vigilance, objectification and fetishism, agency and recognition.

Analyzing Autoethnography

After I transcribed the participant narratives, located stories, and proceeded through the narrative analyses, I began the autoethnography. I picked stories that answered the question "how do African American men experience their sexuality." Like the participants, I chose stories that pertained to the interview questions: "Share a story that demonstrates or reminds you about being a man"; "Please share a story that reminds you about being Black/African-American"; and "Please

share a story that expresses or demonstrates sexuality as you express or define it." My decision was motivated by hooks' (1994) suggestion for educators. She explains that educators who expect their students to be invested and vulnerable but avoid doing so themselves risk becoming intimidating and inaccessible. Even though I am not an educator, I believe that it is important for the researcher to reflect on one's experiences and to consider how those experiences play a role in the research process. As such, the questions I asked myself mirror those I asked the participants.

When I conducted the autoethnography, I went through the following steps as informed by autoethnographic researchers (Ellis, 1999; Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holt, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Wall, 2008): After the data analysis, I selected the salient and heartful stories. By salient and heartful, I mean that I selected three stories about blackness, masculinity, and sexuality that I felt were pivotal to my experiences as an African American, heterosexual and cis-gendered man. The three stories were moments that I evoked some degree of anxiety, resentment, guilt, and shame, and that I believed were overall influential to my experiences of sexuality. Based on my affective responses, the resistance I felt when I decided to include them in the dissertation, and how much they spoke to the research question, I determined that these stories were appropriate for the project. When I finished each story, I did a performance analysis and connected them to the relevant research and reflected on the specific cultural phenomena that were present in each narrative.

Then, I considered how these stories and memories opened new avenues to understanding the participants' experiences and identities (Carolyn Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Finlay, 2002). This means re-considering how the process is co-constructed and how my experiences allowed me to identify with the participants.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, "validity" refers to the believability of the data and analyses in the study. A question readers may ask is, "was the information portrayed accurately and honestly?" (Ellis et al., 2011; Golafshani, 2003). To assess for this, I frequently reflected on what the participants told me, or I tried to summarize and paraphrase what they said to me to make sure that I understood them. When I conducted and wrote up the analysis for each participant, I stuck closely to the words and terms they used throughout the interview as a way of tracing themes across stories. I also attempted to reflect this back to them frequently. Additionally, I attempted to assess my biases and reflected on potential blind spots that hindered the research. I made note of these experiences, where they took place, and accounted for them in the interactional analysis of each participant section (see chapter 4).

Throughout the project, I also checked for reliability. "Reliability" refers to the overall trustworthiness and dependability of the qualitative work (Ellis et al., 2011; Golafshani, 2003). Some scholars note that reliability is achieved through the rigor and strength of validity. This is to say that the tools and steps by which researchers gather their data, analyze their data, and accurately compose their results confirm a project's reliability (Golafshani, 2003). Throughout this dissertation, I described methods, delineated the process for methods, outlined the steps for the analysis, and provided proper search literature to support the findings. Likewise, multiple steps were taken to ensure that the content of the narrative analysis was accurate as noted above.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

As a reminder, my analysis proceeded from the main research question: How do heterosexual African American men experience their sexuality? As described in the previous chapter, other related questions served the purpose of establishing a guiding dialogue with the participants:

- How does the participant express or perform his blackness?

- How does the participant express or perform his masculinity?

- Is the participant's Black masculine identity apparent in his sexuality? How so?

- Does the participant identify any racial narratives pertaining to his identities? If so, how does he engage them?

- Who are the other people in the participant's stories? How do they play a role in those stories?

In addition to considering how the participant performed his identities, I also considered the listener of the stories:

- Who is the participant's audience?

    o How does he narrate his story to himself?

    o How does he narrate his story to me?

    o Who does the participant imagine is listening to his stories?

Lastly, I consider the following questions in relation to my positions as a researcher, and as a Black-American, heterosexual male. I asked myself the following questions.

- How does the participant narrate his story to me?

- how do I co-construct his story as a listener?

- How do my questions help or hinder in the production of the story?

- How does my presence and the participant's relationship with me serve or frustrate the production of the story?

- How do my identities function in the production of the story?

This chapter focuses on the selected narratives of the participants and the results of the performative analysis. As the reader will find, I focus on the topics of blackness, Black Masculinity, and finally Black sexuality. These topics connected the question of Black masculinity and sexuality together and allowed me to interpret the participant's narratives in a multidimensional way.

KHALIL'S SELECTED NARRATIVE

Khalil and I met at a coffee shop in a small neighborhood in a northeastern city. The neighborhood was predominantly White, with a large Jewish population and people of color making up 30% of its demographic. While not considered the most diverse neighborhood, its main streets were lined with restaurants that celebrated cuisines from diverse cultures. Moving to the area at an early age, Khalil considered the neighborhood as his home.

Khalil was a 26-year-old African American man at the time of the interview. He was working towards his master's degree in fine arts and a manuscript that touched on blackness and identity.

As we conducted the interview, the setting was of two Black men in our twenties, sitting in a coffee shop surrounded by White people. Behind the register coffee was brewing, and at the table we were typing away on our MacBook's, the likes of which lent an air of sophistication to our presence there – or so we thought. Khalil and I had spoken before about topics of race and finding ourselves in "White spaces". The street where the coffee shop was located was visibly

diverse in numerous ways at the time: people from diverse racial backgrounds walked by, all with different fashionable attire and hairstyles, and I could hear bits of different languages breaking through the otherwise ubiquitous American English spoken. Yet, the coffee shop itself was mostly entirely White, with Khalil and I as the exceptions. Now, we edged around our words with what I perceived to be careful vigilance. I set up my recorders and we began our conversation.

Blackness – "In Flux"

Khalil said that he knew his racial and ethnic identities were fixed: he was African-American and that is undeniable. His family experienced their blackness in their own way and they had a rich history that included involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He explored his blackness in a variety of ways as he grew older; his poetry was one of the major avenues with which to do so. Yet the way Khalil experienced and performed his blackness, and the way the world perceived him as a Black body, were different. This made him wonder whether he had "authentic, typical" Black experiences.

For example, because of his predominantly White social circle, he felt as though his claim to a Black experience was always susceptible to scrutiny, measured and challenged by other Black people. Khalil noted his conversation with poet Yona Harvey (KN #1) as an "earthshattering" moment that "set [him] straight."

> "My first year of my writing program, I was at a Writers of Color meeting. And, the poet Yona Harvey was there. And everyone was going around talking about their experiences writing about their race and I was really quiet. So, she was like, "what are you quiet about?" And I was like, "Well, I've grown up going to schools with White kids my entire life. I don't speak the way you would assume, stereotypically, a Black person speaks, even though I knew that was bullshit anyway. I don't do a lot of the other things the Black people I know do or have certain experiences. So, sometimes, I don't feel like I have license to write about blackness because I don't know if I've had a Black experience." And she just stared at me, and she's like, "But Khalil, you are Black.

So, all of your experiences are Black experiences." And, for some reason, that was the most earthshattering thing I've ever heard. I was like, 'thanks for setting me straight.' [laughs] So, why I always go back to that to kind of define my mental landscape of race is that I feel like… I know what I am, but I don't always feel like I am that, and I feel like I'm sort of a chameleon depending on my surroundings."

Khalil explained that he struggled with accepting whether he had "license" to write about blackness, because he did not identify with many of the commonly associated characteristics or experiences of Black people, like Black-English vernacular. As such, Khalil was unaware of which racial narratives his race generated and which narratives he could own. Harvey helped him to realize that, by being Black, he automatically had authorship to experiences as a Black man. In the past, being able to express blackness required Khalil to perform it by "acting Black" in a stereotypical way. His initial experience of his blackness was felt insofar as it was a fact of his personhood. It required another Black person to help Khalil understand that all his experiences were Black, based on his complexion alone.

Yet, on a few occasions, he only consciously experienced his blackness when other people highlighted it. Khalil felt "pulled into blackness," and tethered to it by others. Being tethered to it meant that he could be aware of "Black" actions and how to perform them. He emphasized his blackness around other Black people through codeswitching, or when he confronted White people when they made racially insensitive jokes or comments. Khalil noted, on one occasion, being at a wedding mostly filled with White people and being expected to dance well (KN #2).

"Probably one of the easiest ones is when there's a wedding, or it's a bar, or anywhere there's music being played… Unspoken, this is super uncanny, but people I've never even met before or people who have only known me briefly… As soon as music comes on there's always this look at me like, "Oh, you're going to start dancing, right?" Or like "You're gonna dance really well," or like that's a thing that people will know about me before even knowing that dancing is a thing that I like to do and that I do well. And that's always really weird because I'm like "what in the world could drive you to think that aside from my skin color? Like, there's nothing else… like

I'm not standing around bragging like "I'm gonna tear it up on the dancefloor. So, I don't know what people… that's always something that comes up."

Khalil knew how to dance, but he didn't know the people who made the comments, and they didn't know him. Khalil felt stereotypic Black narratives were attached to him, regardless of how he felt about these narratives and stereotypes. In this way, other people pulled him into certain racial expectations and roped him to his blackness in a negative way.

However, Khalil accepted these potentially oppressive events as one mode of experiencing blackness among other positive positions. He experienced his blackness through his family and their history, through spirituality, and a wealth of other avenues, and the positives motivated him to overcome these challenges. He likened it to "an accessory" with certain "[vital] functions." By donning the accessory, he experienced blackness with confidence, using the strength and depth of his history to position himself as an arbiter of blackness. It allowed him to comment on Black experiences and to challenge other people for their assumptions.

This position highlighted an important theme for Khalil – locating himself in (his) blackness. He resisted stereotypic interpretations of blackness, accepted characteristics of it that resonated with him, and he negotiated what other people believed to be his responsibilities to Black culture. For Khalil, the spectrum and shades of blackness were vast, and emphasized in diverse ways in relation to different people. Khalil constantly tried to locate and define his identities for himself, a task that proved difficult in many venues, impersonal and personal.

For example, Khalil's Black identity shifted in his relationships, where he expressed his Black masculinity in some ways with his partner and opted to avoid it in others. He described himself as being "in flux," and he had difficulty locating his blackness in relation to himself and others. He shared a story involving his partner, G--- , to illustrate this fact. Khalil described her as

someone who was socially conscious of the impact of power and privilege on the lives of marginalized groups, and who openly advocated involvement in social justice movements, whereas Khalil, due to his constant attempts to locate himself, did not always relate enthusiastically or comfortably to the movements or its supporters. He related an incident watching the BET Music Awards with G---, and a speech delivered by the actor Jesse Williams (KN #3)

"the [Black Entertainment Television] Awards on Sunday, Jesse Williams did a speech that I really liked, but I have this switch to hyper activism where I'm just not interested. […] [G---] saw the Jesse Williams thing and loved it. When the Justin Timberlake thing came up, especially because Justin Timberlake tweeted to a Black follower of his, her immediate, critical lens was like "How interesting is it in that in trying to support what Jesse Williams was saying, Justin Timberlake took it from a Black Lives Matter to an All Lives Matter thing and then said that to another Black person. And she's telling me about how messed up that is. And I'm like, I didn't even do my research that much, I didn't look at the icon, or who the guy he tweeted at was, or notice that he did an All Lives Matter sort of argument. I also wasn't generally bothered by what he said, though I can see why it's messed up. In that sense, she is more hair-triggered to have those things. Like, the tripwire of her sensitivity. Whereas I shrug off and I think it's because I'm not sure how and when to locate my blackness that I haven't always been consistent in looking for the same triggers because I don't view the triggers in a racial context or racial sense."

Khalil noted that though he liked the speech, he was not as invested in Williams' "hyper activism" which lent itself to a form of Black militancy. Likewise, G---'s vocal support of Williams elicited discomfort in Khalil as he felt pressured to be aware of certain political events based on his race. His uncertainty about where to locate himself highlighted discomfort with subsuming racial narratives and beliefs that he believed were contradictory to his experiences. Khalil preferred for his blackness to be "like a sweater" and as something he owned, but something he could opt to wear or take off, depending on the "weather" of the day.

Khalil's experiences and performances of blackness were multidimensional. He identified and appreciated how Black-American history framed his upbringing. He saw himself as a Black-American and successful poet. Yet, Khalil's performance of blackness showed how difficult it was

107

for him to locate himself within it. While he initially defined his blackness based on his self-identification, he still struggled to understand exactly what that meant among other people who attempted to define it for him. Though he tried to define it as "pride," and "overcoming adversity," he still struggled to know exactly what they felt like in relation to his blackness. As such, his blackness could only be defined beyond his race insofar as it was an identity always in flux. He wanted to define his Black experiences on his own, but also understood that other people would evaluate him on their beliefs about Black men.

Masculinity – "…Gray, traditional notions of masculinity…"

Khalil mentioned that his idea of manhood, while fluid, was also traditional. Like his blackness, it was something he tried to locate, though he had an easier time defining it. His gender performance was highlighted particularly in his relationships with his partner, G---, which he viewed in a "much more heteronormative and patriarchal" sense (KN #4).

> "I have very gray, traditional notions of masculinity in me. I am noticing that even with me and [my partner, G---], Thursday was our 8-month anniversary and I was just thinking about how I went to the ATM and pulled out a whole bunch of money and paid for everything and left a ridiculous tip. And, even though one of the first things we talked about when we started dating, one of the things she insisted on is "I hate when people pay for me. I will always make you split the bill with me." … I'm in a little better financial situation than she is through the summer, so I've offered to take care of her and doing that is very rewarding to me. Everywhere we go if we drive, I never let her drive my car. She doesn't ask. I also don't ask her too, I just do it. So, I always feel like I'm shepherding her. And I view our relationship as a much more heteronormative and a patriarchal sense. I have a much bigger drive to be a provider and in every facet of the relationship I'm looking out for that. But, I also manipulate the idea of being a provider in more presumably feminine ways whereas like I always like to be the emotional provider to ask how you're doing more and to listen more than I talk because I generally hate talking about myself sometimes.
>
> I think about myself when I feel like it's asked for, when it's relevant and relevance has a lot to do with it. I guess somewhere along the lines I got very paranoid about talking about myself too much to the point where people are like, "I really don't care and now I don't like you." Whenever we hang out, she'll ask me things. I think I talk about myself in different ways. Like, if I write a poem I'll get very excited to share that with anyone around me, especially her. So, sharing

108

her is like doing that. But I'm very reluctant to be like "here's how my day was, this is what I did" because most of my day is moderately interesting so I don't know why you'd think it was interesting. But G--- is very reluctant to those sort of traditional gender roles, even though we fall into them all of the time. Like she loves to cook, so she always ends up cooking at her place or my place. But, the way she circumvents that is, though it's not like not I'm allowed, she'll call me into the kitchen to talk so I don't leave the kitchen and sit on the couch and drink a beer or something. She hates that. Not that it is necessarily harming anyone, it's just that it's one of her ways of managing that."

By financially providing for G---, Khalil performed his interpretation of manhood, while also supplementing the heteronormative display of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) by "presumably feminine ways", as in being the "emotional provider". For Khalil, endorsing his sense of masculinity was important, and G--- allowing him to do so, despite her independence, reinforced his pride. He said: "I have a much bigger drive to be a provider and in every facet of the relationship I'm looking out for that." This became the bigger performative action of his masculinity.

Yet, Khalil pointed out that he wanted to complicate the presumptions of the "provider" identity as he was insecure about being too rigidly masculine. He wanted to resist stereotypic interpretations of what it meant to be a man. He wanted to avoid coming across as self-centered and so he would inquire about another person's experiences. As he said: "I guess somewhere along the lines I got very paranoid about talking about myself too much to the point where people are like, 'I really don't care and now I don't like you.'" He recognized that, despite G---'s attempts to avoid traditional and fixed gender roles that they would inevitably be performed. Their relationship highlighted for Khalil the ways in which his previous relationships were founded on taking and accepting traditional masculine positions.

Khalil's attempt to locate himself with his Black masculinity involved being aware of traditional masculine positions, taking the attributes he wanted, and resisting others. I asked him, "Being a man of provision is a very important thing for you… where in your life do you think that comes from?" "My mom," he said. Khalil's descriptions of his mother's role in the development and performance of his masculine identity, insofar as his sense of fatherhood, were interesting. He said that his mother showed him how to be an adult, a father, and a partner **(KN #5)**.

"When I was a little kid and he was still working as a doctor, he was bringing in money. And he wasn't around because he worked ridiculous hours, but my mom raised me all of the time. She would take me to my sporting events and areas where you would think a dad's there. Not that he wasn't, but when I think back to those things, I think of my mom taking me to get my [ice] hockey pads when I was younger or whatever. And then when we moved from California to Pittsburgh, he didn't… he was like "I'm not going to get a job." […] He sat around the house pretty much. But, he didn't work for 14 years. And, my mom paid for everything. Everything. And because of my dad's cerebral, and therefore closed off, nature, all of my emotional experiences and major milestones in adolescence and growing up usually have my mom's fingerprints over them. So, she's always my model for how to be an adult and a parent. Which is to be involved in everything, to be providing, to be always accessible, to be generous to make things happen or to make people happy. And I don't think the way she did necessarily had a masculine tinge to it. But, I take what I learned from her and I think these are the ways that I need to be a man in my relationship to G---, even in my relationship with my sister and my brother. Like the way I try to take care of them because I feel, for a lot of reasons… like my brother doesn't have beyond a high school education, he's been a musician, a struggling musician, feel like he's not the older brother, but I'm the older brother. I am like the caretaker of the siblings"

To Khalil, though his mother took him to his sporting events and got him hockey pads, she was still being a mother. However, his initial assumption was that his father should be doing those things. His mother was doing what a father should and seeing her in "areas where you would think a dad [is] there," helped him to attribute certain characteristics to fatherhood. This is what reinforced his traditional and heteronormative positions of masculinity in his relationships. He stated that "I take what I learned from her and I think these are the ways that I need to be a man in my relationship to G--- even in my relationship with my sister and my brother….I am like the

caretaker of the siblings." Khalil supplemented these lessons with examples of good men he saw on television and sought to model himself after.

However, Khalil felt that his endorsement of traditional masculine values was not at all an endorsement of all, particularly negative, patriarchal ones. He was open to the reinterpretation and fluidity of masculinity and engagement with, as Khalil previously said, ""presumably feminine" ways of expressing it. In my field notes, I noted that Khalil was very careful about describing his masculinity, wanting to make sure that he didn't give the impression that he was beholden to one way of being, and was open to being challenged by others. He spoke slowly, and his careful wording – like "presumably feminine" – suggested that he understood that such qualities, though associated with femininity, was also accessible to other genders and wasn't rigidly fixed to women. Also, though he rejected "macho masculinity" and was weary of men who acted that way, a way he associated with his father, he noted that other men have "their [own] construction of masculinity.

Khalil and I both wondered about ways his masculinity identity might have been influenced by his experience with and of his mother. At least in some ways, she showed him how to walk a fine line between being a man and complementing his gender roles with what he considered to be "feminine" characteristics. He wanted to be, in flexible sense, a man who "has his shit together." Khalil described such a man as someone who cannot only financially provide, but someone who "emotionally opens up to someone," "realizes the error of their [strict masculine] ways," and who has a sense of "obligation or duty to his family."

Khalil said, "I like a masculinity that is accountability-centric because my dad isn't that way."

Khalil developed his masculinity by observing his parents, and, like his blackness, experienced his masculinity in shades by playing with the presumed expectations of manhood and wanting to bend them to more "presumably feminine ways." Khalil said that these ways were akin to being an "emotional provider," in addition to being a financial one.

He explained: "I manipulate the idea of being a provider in more presumably feminine ways whereas like I always like to be the emotional provider to ask how you're doing more and to listen more than I talk."

Khalil saw this as a response to his father, whom he described as emotionally distant and "cerebral." While other people would attempt to regulate his masculinity for him, he felt most comfortable in a relationship that helped him to play with the boundaries of masculinity. His Black masculinity benefited from these experiences.

"When would be a moment when you take advantage of it?" I asked,

Khalil explained: "When the notions of Black oppression and therefore society at large is almost a pedestalization[15] of Black people because they've been oppressed works in my favor. Whenever someone makes a joke or slips real quick, I can jab because that's a freebie. Or, when I have the opportunity to say that 'your perspective is a little messed up because you aren't considering what my people are going through.' Even if I don't feel offended by what's happening or what's being referenced, because I can claim I just claim it."

Despite Khalil's difficulty with locating himself within his Black identity, his models for Black masculinity provided him with a map to being his ideal interpretation of a Black man – one who has it together and is accountable for his action. Khalil felt that his Black masculinity provided

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[15] By pedalization, Khalil is referring to the romanticizing of Black society "overcoming" oppression. Khalil's point is that this narrative flatly glorifies Black people and their endurance, but also inevitably situates them as eternal victims. He is able to use the binary glorification and victimization of Black people to speak authoritatively about it.

him with instances of strength in the face of numerous obstacles in the Black man's way. Khalil explained, "My mom raised me all of the time. She would take me to my sporting events and areas where you would think a dad's there.... my mom paid for everything. Everything. And, my dad's cerebral, and therefore closed off, nature, all of my emotional experiences and major milestones in adolescence and growing up usually have my mom's finger prints over them. So, she's always my model for how to be an adult and a parent." Successful Black men were celebrated, and his mother's lessons on how to be a good, successful Black man allowed him to strive for it.

By selectively occupying the positive areas of Black masculinity and related narratives, Khalil believed he could weigh in on issues related to Black men and go "two shades darker." To go "two shades darker" meant that he could unapologetically embrace the more traditional and stereotypical narratives of Black-American culture and Black masculinity. However, Khalil was aware of how his Black masculinity was still gathering negative narratives which he attempted to negate through his speech and through his fashion. . He said, "I think that's why I carry myself in certain ways, why I talk in certain ways, why I dress in certain ways, because if I don't I feel like people will reduce to me other things I don't want to be… But, I always want to be on time, I always want to dress the right way, or act the right way to wait staff or to be quiet in a movie theater, or not taking up space. I realize more and more how visible how being a Black man is, and I try to take advantage of that when it's beneficial and fun and every other instance reduce it." By monitoring his appearance and his behavior, Khalil attempted to mitigate criticism he could receive from non-Black people.

Black Sexuality – "I don't have any say in amending the story."

113

The way Khalil experienced and expressed that his Black sexuality was anchored in his own personal experience. He stated he saw being a man and being heterosexual as "tethered" to one another and difficult to separate. This was like the sentiment we expressed about his blackness, which he was similarly fastened to, even as he occupied it in different ways and in different spaces. Speaking of sexuality, I said "You've told me in other ways that your gender is [also] locked into that."

"I think so," he said, adding: "When I think of 'Black,' I don't usually have a space in my thinking for other sexualities… knowing they exist just as often in other races. But, unless it's super obvious when I see another Black person, another Black man… I assume he's straight."

For Khalil, sexual identities and sexual fluidity were open and more accessible to White people. Non-White men had to be more overt in their expression to be anything other than heterosexual. I asked him for examples. What needed to be on display to tell him that a Black man was other than heterosexual? "Dress, body language, tone of voice, all very stereotypical, but those things," was his reply. He continued that a queer couple of color is "notice(d) longer," and he tries to "figure out" how they experience their sexual identities or gain access to a spectrum of sexuality inaccessible to him. "Like, where did you learn to do that? To me that does not enter my realm… probably because my realm of blackness has way more things that have to do with me that don't include other genders and sexualities."

Khalil saw blackness and masculinity as a delimited spectrum wherein he could play. Yet, while he constantly attempted to locate himself with those identities, allowing some measure of flux and flow, his sexual identity seemed more certain and entrenched. A rather peculiar and interesting dynamic interplay emerges where, even though blackness and masculinity are, for Khalid, somewhat open to movement, those very aspects of himself also gives in and informs a

sexuality that is much less dynamic or flexible. Whereas Khalil believed that many other races had the freedom to experience their sexuality as they saw fit, a Black man's heteronormativity was so dominant and pervasive that the exceptions to it were difficult to imagine.

Black men were straight until proven otherwise; overt signifiers were required for Khalil to think otherwise and even then, the alternative sexualities were "learned", and tied to a different way of being with which he was unfamiliar. Indeed, he felt his experience locked him into heterosexuality.

Khalil learned that being a Black man meant operating within a sexual and sexualized narrative where his character was seen as dangerous, scandalous, forbidden, and virile. In some of his previous relationships, Khalil experienced his sexuality as a source of conflict. His interactions with a former partner's family showed him that his presence was unacceptable and that his partner's associations with a Black man would cause trouble for her and her family (KN #6).

" Yeah. With B---, second girlfriend. I had a sense, especially coming off the heels of dating M---, I had a sense that her family probably had a similar reaction. I told her upfront "If my race is going to be a wedge in this relationship then let me know. Let's not even worry about, I don't want to cause your family problems." She reassured me. We pressed on. It became a problem. And I always thought it was a problem I had to be insulated from. It's funny. I went over to her house like three or four times. And her mother always put on this front of being polite but didn't like to look at me. Her younger sister really didn't like to look at me. I have a memory of her… when the new iOS came out, she asked the room "How do I do this?" And I was like "Oh, I know exactly how to do that." And I went over to take her phone, and the look she gave me when she handed me her phone was like "Why the hell would you ever touch my phone." …I don't think she wanted me to be anywhere near her. And I remember very deliberately doing that, thinking that maybe it would be a way to break the ice… And I ended up not being able to do whatever it was, which was funny. There was something about her phone that I wouldn't fix. But I was like, this is what you could do, you could read it here. And she just said "thanks." Super reluctant to acknowledge that I was a person. And every time I would leave, that's when the drama would start, and her mother would start sobbing. And she'd tell the younger sister why she was sobbing, but she wouldn't tell B---. But, B--- went and confronted her and her mom would just keep saying "People are going to judge you. People are going to judge you." And I don't think B--- wanted to believe that but being told that enough drove her to reconsider what was going on."

115

B---'s family suggested that Khalil was dangerous. Even though he attempted to be courteous and appreciative, it wasn't enough to negate their impressions of him. But, Khalil tried to perform his identities in different ways. This meant making himself known as someone of value, like in trying to fix a computer setting. Or, he told me, he changed his attire to look "less Black": tighter clothes, less baggier appearance.

Khalil attempted to located himself within a Black, masculine, sexual identity. In response, he was perceived as forbidden and dangerous, and pressured to change his behavior and appearance to be what he thought was more "acceptable", more "palatable". Yet, as he felt pressured to be a certain kind of Black man to a White audience, he also felt pulled into blackness in ways that made him uncomfortable and leading him to retailor his blackness for the sake of those around him, and to "break the ice." Thus, he attempted to locate himself by avoiding any negative assumptions about Black men.

Khalil also noted that other partners experienced his Black sexuality as "unclean", as evidenced by their assumptions about biracial children. This echoed Fanon (1976/2008) and several other commentators who have identified the organizing trope wherein Black bodies are seen as "dirty" and "unclean" (Gray, 1995; Hall, 1997; Harper, 2009; Hodes, 1993; Saint-Aubin, 2002). Khalil mentioned that another former partner, M---, wondered if their children would be "splotchy." Khalil's blackness posed the risk of contaminating a White woman's child if they had children. Regardless, Khalil felt like his Black sexuality was mostly a political point that drew the ire of his previous partners' families, wherein they were concerned about Khalil being dangerous and troublesome. He said that his relationships themselves were mostly devoid of "super racial things," and, if anything, would arise around how they joked with another in private. He said, "There was a lot more mutuality to those jokes. She'd make them. I'd make them." While he

acknowledged his openness to exploring how his Black sexuality is experienced with his partner, he still acknowledged that the misconceptions of Black sexuality were numerous.

Yet for Khalil, the people most intrigued by his Black sexuality were White boys and men who commented on his semen or his penis. He recalled a time in high school when a White boy asked him if his semen was black: "[This boy] turned to me and was like 'Is your semen black? …Do you come black?' …he really was curious, needed an answer, needed me to tell him." Later, the same boy would casually claim that Khalil had a "big black dick." Khalil mentioned that he believed this kid's perspective of Black men probably came from pornography, which itself simply reflects and plays up a broader stereotypical cultural narrative.

The people in Khalil's life showed him some of the boundaries of his Black sexuality and the manner of its portrayal. It informed his experience of his blackness in different contexts, and he understood that people saw him as problematic in some arenas and were curious in others. Yet, Khalil wanted to counter narratives that portrayed Black men as dangerous or unclean. He sought to portray himself as a Black man that was supportive of his partners and their families. In other ways, he located his strength through his identities.

This important shift in Khalil's Black sexual identity came in relation to his body. He experienced and expressed his sexuality by understanding what his body could do. He noted this particularly with sexual practices: "I think of a Black man making love to a woman versus a White man making love to a woman; I am thinking of the Black man being better at it." He reasons: "[I don't know] if it has to do with my thoughts in general, [Black] cultures are more accepting of bodily movements, and it's more fluid and loose and less rigid than White culture… I feel like people of color have more physical body intuition and those things are more practiced."

For Khalil, sexuality meant a sense of strength and attunement to one's body. "I feel like people of color have more physical body intuition" he explained. Khalil performed this sort of powerful sexuality through martial arts and dance: He said, "Knowing my body is something I take a lot of pride in. Knowing how it moves, knowing when it moves, expecting it to be in certain places, whether that's running, whether that's dancing, whether that's karate, knowing how to do salsa dancing, even just strength." Khalil's position echoed the familiar racial narratives about Black-American men. His interpretation of people of color recalled narratives of Black men as hypersexual and dominant (Collins, 2005; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 1992, 2004; West, 1994). Yet, Khalil's confidence in his strength and body suggested that he attempted to reinterpret the narratives to "regain" his claim to his body. He said, "I think I just take pride in having a very capable strong body and I've probably attached that to other things. Creating that mythology about myself and other Black men around me ." Khalil explained that there was more pressure to conform to those expectations, to perform and dance sexually because he was a Black man and because there were sexual narratives swirling around him. Khalil said, "You have to confirm those because if you don't [then the] other stereotype is, you're a bitch. And so, there's that pressure to avoid that." In other words, to eschew confirmation meant that Khalil was at risk at no longer being a man. Thus, Khalil was adamant about locating himself within his Black sexuality through power associated with it.

Khalil shared a story where we had gone to a predominantly Black club together with a predominantly White group of people (KN #7).

"So, there's the time, my going away party, when we ended up at Levels and we're upstairs… because I don't remember this the same way… and it's funny how often I don't remember things the same way other people remember them… But I remember we were upstairs and C---- was with us, and you were dancing with T----, and I was dancing with C----, and I know

that, in the moment, we were really into dancing and pushing me background, like that's how into the dancing she was. I remember you and I exchanged glances and we laughed about that. Ever since then, that story evolved from C--- was like dancing crazy with you, to C---- had you backed up against basically walk fucking you. I don't ever remember reaching the wall, because in my memory it was covered with other people. But, in my head, what I experienced was one level of sexualized dancing, but the story has jumped up seven pegs to like basically sex on a wall. And that's the way it's always told me. And I don't have any say in amending the story anymore, so I go along with it."

For Khalil, when he danced with a White woman, he was on display. How he performed his sexuality differed from how people retold the story of his experiences. Khalil's feelings echo the literature on the myth of the hypersexual Black male, and Black masculinity and sexuality as presented in chapter 2. He explained, "In my head, what I experienced was one level of sexualized dancing, but the story had jumped up seven pegs to like basically sex on a wall. And that's the way it's always told me. And I don't have any say in amending the story anymore, so I go along with it."

I noted that he was "transformed by the gaze of the other," and became a spectacle for other people in the group who opted to stand aside and watch. Khalil noted that sexual empowerment was about sexual liberty and embodying the strength he associated with Black masculine sexuality. However, he also understood that his personal sense of empowerment was limited. He understood that his experiences could be taken, reinterpreted and manipulated by witnesses. His identity was accentuated by these circumstances when he was reinterpreted for someone else's pleasure. For example, Khalil noted that his story about dancing became a story about sex when people interpreted him through sexualized narratives. . Likewise, his friends enjoyed and frequently retold this story. Khalil's experiences echo many other scholars who speak of Black men being sexually objectified (hooks, 2004a; West, 1993) and, in some instances, being taken as literal sexual objects for another person's entertainment (Allain 2013; Cooper 2015; Foster, 2011; Hodes, 1993).

Though Khalil did not feel physically forced into performing any sexual acts with his dancing partner, his presence served as a narrative prop for his White friends to discuss. This once again highlighted a common sentiment for Khalil who experiencing himself and his identities in one way but was fixed to reductive views of his identity by other people.

Black Masculinity in Relation to Sexuality – Khalil's Summary

Khalil's narratives highlighted his efforts to define his Black masculinity and to express himself in an "authentic" manner. A central theme for Khalil was location – he tried to find out what his identities meant to him amid various perspectives and notions of Black men. Sometimes, he doubted whether he could write about his blackness and convince other people of his experience. This was apparent in his story with Yona Harvey where she suggested that his racial identity and membership to Black culture was all he needed to write about blackness. Khalil suggested that his upper middle-class upbringing and lack of behaviors he described as stereotypically "Black" added to his sense of disconnection to his racial identity. His blackness went as far as complexion and he started to learn over time that his subjective experiences in the world could inform and help him to interpret his blackness. Khalil experienced his blackness as fluid or in flux, and this allowed him to embody distinctive characteristics and attributes he enjoyed, and he discarded the others at any given point.

Other intersecting identities like his masculinity and heterosexuality anchored him and provided him with direction in his attempt to locate himself, though he found himself trying to combat the negative impressions associated with Black masculinity. As such, Khalil's narrative shows his attempt to intelligently find ways to embody what he considered to be positive and powerful characteristics and narratives as a Black man to better define himself.

The shades of Khalil's Black masculinity were complicated by his sexuality. His black masculinity was self-focused enough to render other sexual orientations as footnotes. Yet, like his Black masculinity, he tried to adopt what he considered to be "powerful" stereotypic attributes, specifically physical strength, intimacy and prowess, while eschewing others, like promiscuity. Khalil often tried to take hold of his identities, and to claim and re-claim his body. He understood people would try to take it from him based on racial narratives that painted him as dangerous and sexually insatiable.

However, Khalil found himself opposing how other people saw him. He shared numerous instances where oppressive racial narratives were active in his engagement with others. Some people sexualized him, saw him as threatening, or dehumanized him. Khalil had to find different ways to assuage the anxiety of others or navigate a terrain where people saw him as uninvited. Where he often tried to locate and define his Black masculinity for himself, he often found people, specifically non-Black people, returning him to his blackness, locating it for him and keeping him restricted within confined expectations of being dangerous, contaminated, or hypersexual.

Khalil's narratives highlight two additional audiences (in addition to me as researcher as noted in the interactional section); it speaks of his attempt to locate his identities, and thus he speaks to help himself understand how to navigate his terrain. Additionally, his audience comprised other Black men who could possible empathize with his experience. Likewise, Khalil saw White people as his audience, specifically those who were unsure of the sort of complexity that came with being a Black man. In such a case, it serves as a resource for those who need it.

Khalil's stories demonstrate his attempts to continuously explore his identities as a Black-American heterosexual man. His position on his sexuality was one of strength and freedom, wherein he could define his identities and his sexual expression. His narratives show his efforts to

resist negative racial narratives and to retool or endorse positions that he found enlightening, empowering, or liberating.

Co-Constructive Narratives – Interactions

In my field notes, I mentioned that I related to Khalil's experiences and was drawn into his stories. In one instance, I was even a peripheral character in one of his stories. I was an audience member as a researcher, but also a Black man and a peer. As such, we both shared experiences where we had to navigate predominantly White spaces, like our friend groups, schools, or even our relationships with White women.

Before I met Khalil for the interview, I was nervous and anxious. I wrestled with my roles as researcher, Black man, and peer. I was concerned about what sort of follow-up questions I would ask, what important points I overlooked, and honest answers. Though the questions swirled in my head, my main concern was what I would reveal about myself with my questions. I was motivated to provide a respectable amount of space to secure trust. I wanted to make the interview comfortable. I was determined to be an "objective" researcher first but, by the time Khalil and I made it to the coffee shop, I knew that was impossible. I was a Black man and I was scheduled to interview another Black man. We planned to talk about Black men and sexuality, after all. We planned to talk about Khalil's identities, and I knew something would resonate with me.

Because I identified with and shared many of Khalil's experiences and interpretations, some of my follow up questions and reflections were inspired by my own feelings regarding the subject matter. This was my attempt to empathize and connect with what Khalil was saying and to also build rapport and reaffirm the camaraderie between us. I was fascinated by my attempts to re-establish rapport because it was established before in our interactions. While it seemed to work

and provide for a nice interview, I could also sense when I was guided more by my feelings than Khalil's experiences. In the main, though, I was aware of my feelings and tried to keep them in check; I observed them, named them, and wrote them down to reflect on later.

Though I worried about my own reactions, our rapport did allow us to speak deeply to each other. Khalil shared his stories casually and with notable ease. Likewise, we joked around during the interview, laughed, and I had even shared thoughts and opinions tenuously related to the conversation. Khalil engaged me with these detours. This produced an interview where we spoke freely without fear of misunderstanding one another.

Because I related with Khalil's experiences and interpretations, I also avoided questioning some of the things he said that made me uncomfortable. These moments were particularly difficult as I was also a peer. For instance, I was surprised when Khalil explained that sometimes he thought that Black men were heterosexual until proven otherwise. As a researcher and clinician that explored multiculturalism, I knew that his statement was common. I knew that people in positions of privilege often saw their privileged identities as normative. I knew that heteronormativity made it so Black men of other sexual orientations were marginalized and heterosexuality was considered the default. Yet, I related so much with Khalil that when he mentioned that other sexual orientations being more available to other races, or that non-heterosexual Black men surprised him, I opted not to follow up.

There was a struggle here. As a researcher, I wanted to keep the comment. It was Khalil's experience and he was being honest. Our relationship probably allowed him to share something that was problematic to both of us. There was an honest temptation to portray Khalil in the most positive light. Yet, I knew if I gave into that temptation I would betray Khalil's narrative and, ironically, his honesty. The statement surprised me and ran counter to how I experienced the world.

123

But, it reflected one of his perspectives and it reflected how some people interpret Black bodies and sexuality. I turned my attention to other bits in Khalil's story rather than trying to make sense of his position. In hindsight, Khalil's statement about Black men being heterosexual until proven otherwise reveals his heteronormative position. Despite my surprise, and even when looking back on this moment, I wonder if Khalil's heteronormative comment was referential to the familiar, hyper-masculine display of Black-American men wherein one of the central characteristics eschews what is presumably feminine to demonstrate patriarchal power.

Additionally, I asked Khalil questions to which he gave surprising ^^ The surprise was due to how I anticipated he would respond, for example, when Khalil told me that his mother was his model for fatherhood and masculinity. I had mistakenly assumed that, based on what I learned about Khalil, that his father would have served as the predominant model for his sense of masculinity. This mistake highlighted my own biases during the interview, specifically a bias that narratives about gender identity are reinforced by those of similar identities.

The overlapping experiences between the two of us turned me into a resource for generating stories. As an audience member, he shared his stories with me and referenced me within them. Likewise, he told his stories with detail but also left out small points as though he trusted that I could fill in the blanks. Most importantly, Khalil generated stories where he felt I had some prior knowledge or experience in the subject. Specifically, I was a peripheral person in Khalil's story about dancing with a woman at a club. As a researcher, I wondered about this moment and considered if I could use it for the project. It made me nervous, as the story demonstrated a frequent problem for Khalil – his sexuality was appropriated, reinterpreted and made perverse. I identified with the story, though not from the position of a peripheral character. Rather, I could locate stories

124

of my own where I felt like my body was "taken" and reinterpreted into something perverse. I empathized with Khalil and felt angry, confused, and upset for him and, in some ways, for myself.

After the interview, I reflected on my role in Khalil's stories. While he included me in some of the descriptions, I was not a focus in his story about the club. That said, I wondered how my presence helped to evoke that specific story at that specific time. Likewise, I wondered if he would pick a different story with someone else. These questions highlighted how I presumably hindered the interview due to my affiliation with Khalil.

While my reactions were genuine and honest, I restrained myself when I asked to follow up questions. At times, I avoided them because I was concerned about what I would learn from someone who, at this point, was more than just a participant.

These shared experiences highlight how I aided in co-constructing some of Khalil's stories, wherein our similar identities and at times overlapping experiences, provided a context wherein these stories could be told.

TARIQ'S SELECTED NARRATIVES

Tariq, a 29-year-old Black-American male at the time of the interview, met me at my home. Tariq worked two jobs as a library technician and a part-time bartender and bouncer. He also taught kung-fu during the week. Using my home as a location for the interview was unconventional. The idea came about from Tariq who felt uncomfortable talking about Black masculinity and sexuality in public. He added that he was uncomfortable around his roommates and thus wanted to avoid his place. When he asked to come over, I agreed. Though this was the first time he had been to my home, I vowed to remain attentive to the ways this setting may have impacted the research. Tariq

came over after work. We spoke about representations of blackness, the difficulty and anxiety of beginning and starting projects and how "weird" it felt to be recorded discussing something that we had unapologetically and abrasively discussed before. The privacy of a living room made it, so it was easier to talk about potentially sensitive issues with a degree of candor that might have bothered people in public

Blackness – "I got to make sure these White people know what I'm talking about."

Tariq saw blackness as an identity and a form of expression. This expression was emphasized by the way he could take situations, like work or meeting with friends, and "Black it up for everyone." This meant that he was at ease behaving and speaking in ways that are commonly or stereotypically associated with Black people. This was amplified by the presence of other Black people and he felt his best in those moments. Tariq said that being in a group of Black people produced a "group mentality [that] just ramps itself up because now we feel emboldened… We can be more Black." Tariq felt free enough to be himself. Yet, around White people, he had to learn how to navigate White spaces. Sometimes, this meant being the spokesperson for blackness in which he had to weigh in on discussions his non-Black friends would have about Black people. Likewise, he would suppress "blackness". He did this through reducing his use of African-American Vernacular English, and by controlling his reactions. He explained: "I… just learn to navigate White spaces as a Black person. Because, for a long time, I would just codify language, tame my reaction to things, tame my description to things. But, little did I know I was still coming off Black as hell, but I was just coming off as Black-lite." Tariq wanted to avoid coming off as aggressive and unintelligible and so he tried to avoid his association with reductive stereotypes (Collins, 2005; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 1992). Specifically, Tariq's position among other White

126

people meant that he had to quell his blackness or, in another sense, quell his definition of blackness.

I told Tariq that his description of blackness reminded me of the comic book author, Dwayne McDuffie (2010), who commented on an unwritten rule of popular media. That rule dictated that if there were three or more Black people in a show, movie, or the like, then it qualified as definitively Black. The rule was a way of regulating Black bodies in media; too many Black people meant the work was inaccessible. Likewise, Tariq believed that being "more Black" or Black dominant spaces made White people uncomfortable. Tariq stated that he could model his strategy for other Black people and enable them to look out for one another when he learned how to navigate White spaces. That vigilance in White spaces allowed Tariq to remain alert for other silenced Black people. However, strategies also restricted how 'normal' Tariq felt when he was in White dominated spaces. He said (TN #1)

> "When I first started hanging out with S---, and B----, and K---- and them and they were introducing me to their friends, and N--- was the only one that was not White. Didn't know, because upon talking to her you just think she's some British chick. And I had to sit [and] I was like, "This seems like a crew I'm going to be rolling with for a long period of time." So, I gave them small doses of chocolate, you know what I mean? And in those spaces, I found myself saying shit, and because it clashes with my preconstructed White-people-safe mode, it felt awkward coming out of my mouth. Those two parts of my behavior don't talk to each other. So, it's like you have two programs [that], whether this is right or not, don't operate the same way. They operate in contradictory ways. And then when they try to work together, they clash, and it seems really awkward. And maybe they don't pick up on it, maybe you're the only one that feels that way, but it still happens. And that way, you feel really weird being normal….
>
> […]I was at that bachelor party and I was the only Black guy. I would say shit and they would be like "What?" So, it stopped being "ha ha" or "that's a good point," to "What the fuck are you talking about?" You know, and that kind of reaction to things, especially if you get it on the regular, it makes you feel weird. Like you're not… like there's no one there that could understand, and you have to consciously taper everything you say. You have to edit everything you say because you're like, I got to make sure these White people know what I'm talking about." Gotta know your audience."

In his narrative, Tariq identified a tension he experienced in White spaces. His "White-people-safe-mode" referred to one of his internal "programs," wherein he had a mode of suppressed-docile performance of blackness. The first part of Tariq's narrative indicated a different type of concern where he was surprised by his level of comfort around non-Black people. This concern illustrated that he could let his guard down and become "okay". Yet, because a feature of Tariq's blackness is his vigilance for himself and others, the second part of his narrative illustrated the feature's importance. The second part of his narrative shows Tariq's attempts to regulate his blackness to appease the White people around him. White spaces continually reminded Tariq that he would be evaluated, and his stories highlighted his attempt to sustain a level of blackness that felt authentic to him.

Thus, "knowing the audience" meant that Tariq had to sacrifice feeling like himself in non-Black spaces. It meant understanding that people would take his experiences for granted, or that there would be a gap in how people related to him. For him, the performance of his blackness was the vigilant navigation of a world that was without a safe zone of Black people. Easing people into his realm was imperative to build a relationship with others and to make himself comfortable. The second part of Tariq's story highlighted that he had to taper his language because otherwise no one at the bachelor party he attended would have understood him. Likewise, developing these skills allowed him to relate to other Black people who felt in the same way and who remained silent due to fear of criticism by non-Black people. Thus, his blackness was defined by a sense of authenticity and a sense of vigilance. As such, more Black people allowed him to be himself and more Black, and White-spaces disrupted him.

Black Masculinity – "Easy Rawlins"

Tariq's definition of Black masculinity was always in progress. He took inspiration from various figures, fictional or otherwise, and incorporated them into his identities. He referenced Easy Rawlins, a fictional African-American detective created by author Walter Mosley, as an idol and model for his Black masculinity. "Part of me really idolized Easy Rawlins because of the way he communicates with White people… the way he talks to them, the way he operates with them, he's just fucking on it." For Tariq, this meant being unapologetic about his blackness however it appeared. It meant never compromising: Tariq added, "He doesn't play dumb, but he never shows his entire hand. Something about that I respect the fuck out of. And it's not like he's this mastermind, he's just this Black dude trying to find a way to survive in one of the most racist times since slavery. He's emotional, he's not afraid to get angry and scare the shit out of White folks. He's a straight up man, but most importantly Black man. To me, the Black man that I want to be is one that I've been most recently… if there's shit that needs to be said, I'm gonna say it. If there's something that needs to be done, I'm gonna do it. I don't want White people to be comfortable with me because I'm doing something comfortable. I want them to be comfortable with me because I am myself."

He continued: "They need to understand that Tariq is Black, and Tariq is going to do Black shit all of the time." The details he shared expressed the core motivation behind the performance of his identity. It was a drive to be himself and to be a Black man unfettered and freed. He wanted his possibilities to be open. Tariq's description of Easy Rawlins suggested a type of persona that he wanted to embody. He saw Easy Rawlins as a man that was conflicted but displayed confidence at a time in U.S. it was dangerous for Black man to defy or resist White people. Tariq shared experiences when he had to 'suppress' or 'rein in' his blackness in White spaces. But, his adoption

of the Easy Rawlins persona allowed him to change that and find a sense of confidence in his Black masculine identity.

Tariq talked about how important it was for him to don this Rawlins persona. He also talked about how important it was for him to be a resilient and confident Black man. He wanted to avoid internalizing reductive descriptions of his identities. The stories he told were stories about how other people's perceptions of his race and masculinity restricted him. In one story, he recalled being sixteen years old and a teacher asking him to remove an afro-pick from his hair (TN #2).

"When I was coming up at school, I remember teachers saying you aren't going to do this, you aren't going to do that, you're not going to be anything. I'm not going to pretend like I know all of the reasons why they say that, and I don't know how personally I can take it. But, it came from a place of "You act like all of the other little Black boys that end up in jail." Even though that probably wasn't true, it definitely wasn't true, but it was one of things where I get profiled based on what they think they know about Black people, what they think they know about Black kids. I heard this talked about many times before but, White kids don't know to do deal with Black kids. Never had that been more true to me than looking back at school, and just the reactions they would have to the things that I did that weren't different to what the White kids were doing. In those aspects, I remember being explicitly being treated differently because I was a black kid…

High school, so freshman, sophomore, early junior year. And Ms. Andre would have a problem with it. And maybe in hindsight it was because she was threatened by the black power first at the top of the handle. Maybe, I don't really care. [I – what happened?] She was like, "Take it out of your hair" "Why, I'm not picking my hair. I'm not getting my hair leavings on anyone's chair. It's just there." "Well, it's against the rules." Where? Show me in the rulebook where that is. And if it's in the rulebook, I'll take it out. So, she was like "Just take it out for now and we'll check it later." And I'm like "No, I'll keep it in now until because I don't know if you're telling the truth." This went on for months. I think after two weeks, she went to the principal, and he was someone I was cool with at the time. And he was like "Can you just take the pick out of your hair?" and I'm like "No. I'm being a nigga, no." Especially at that moment, I felt like that was the first time there was an explicit attack on my blackness and that made me double down. I don't know if I could articulate that at the time, but that's what it felt like in hindsight. Looking at things and how I reacted, I was just like, no. But also, the fact… and I still do this, I find out where the lines are, where the rules say I can go and I bend it and tow it."

Tariq's reaction to the teacher was based on the felt sense that she was attacking his blackness by asking him to remove the comb. While it was framed as a rule, Tariq never heard of

that rule, and no other teacher had approached him about it. Tariq heard and interpreted the teacher's command through the commentary he heard in the past. He believed that she saw him as a little Black boy destined for jail. He felt criticized and he felt different from other students because he never saw the teacher interact with any kids the same way. His statement to the principal ("No, I'm being a nigga") suggested that his interpretation of a Black boy required him to "double down." That is to say, Tariq believed that people saw him as a bad Black boy that needed to be controlled and he wanted to assert his independence.

Tariq's story, especially when he told it, fascinated me on two counts. First, I asked him to share a story that demonstrated his interpretation of being a Black man. In response, he shared this story. There was a singular mention of Black masculinity (via the reductive narrative "little Black boys that end up in jail") and then suggestions of race and gender throughout (outside of his own race and gender). What made this story one about Black masculinity was Tariq's interpretation of the experience and his attributions to the teacher's command, intentions, and perceptions of him.

"Do you feel like you've been profiled or stereotyped recently?" I asked.

"I know it has happened, but it has happened so predictably… You're at some function with a bunch of people that you don't know, a bunch of older White people, and you start talking about stuff," he began. "[Then] Someone drops that age old, famous 'this-is-how-you-know-I'm-racist' line. 'You speak well!' And you go 'hmm, saw that coming at point tonight…"

It was that expectation and prediction of the implicit affront that made these experiences notable for Tariq. It was attached to his Black masculinity in a way that once again communicated the guidelines that he and others of his ilk were expected to follow. Tariq's stories followed from a reductive view of Black men that saw them as aggressive, defiant, and unintelligent, and he often felt profiled along those lines. He wanted to avoid looking like an "angry Black dude with a chip

on his shoulder." He knew his audience, so Tariq remained vigilant, and he saw the frustrating exceptionalism in the person's comment: "You speak well." Those guidelines told Tariq that, in White spaces, people expected him to be aggressive though he was also expected to fall in line. .

Tariq felt that his Black masculinity was used against him, as some people felt that his attempt to follow the Rawlins philosophy of self-affirmation made him confrontational. He shared stories of a co-worker who thought he was racist against White people because of his criticism of police officers and their brutality against men of color, specifically Black, Latino, and Hispanic men. Tariq said, "For a while, J--- thought I straight up hated White people. But now, he thinks that as a soon as a White person does something in a vaguely Black space that I'll think it's racist. So, he thinks now that I'm that angry Black dude with a chip on his shoulder and that anything White people do towards Black people is racist. He thinks that I unjustly hate the cops. I don't hate the cops, but I don't trust them. I don't think that it's a requirement for me to trust the police."

I asked him if there was ever a moment when he felt like the co-worker saw him that way.

"He explicitly said it. All of those things I said, he has explicitly said at one point or another." Tariq added, "The police thing, he was like... and this is even further undercutting of Black people period, but he was like "You have so little trust for the police, you view them as such a threat and opposite to you, that now you think they're all bad."

"Around the Michael Brown case… [co-worker J---] was like "Now you can't even tell when a cop is innocent." He said that, and he harps on it, and I don't think there's anything wrong with this, because he has a soft spot for cops. He just doesn't understand why Black people have a problem with this… But now, he views me as the type of person where anything White happens to Black people or absent of Black people that's automatically racist. I'm like "No, I don't do that." And he says things like "If you keep calling things racist it's going to keep losing its power as a word" And I'm like, "No it's not, it's not. Maybe it's just that it is actually racist, and we keep encountering racists things." What happened last year no wonder everyone heard that shit

everywhere they went. It's not too late in 2016, but he said that I'm like, no, the shit is racist and just because you aren't sure what the definition of racism is doesn't mean that I don't know what racism is. I know when something is racist.

But… we were talking about other random shit. We were talking about how people who play video game are violent. And I dropped this line, and I knew it was a honey trap, I knew it was a honey tray when I said it, and I said it any way… I said: " I find it weird that people can judge an entire group of people based on some shit, their worst elements, and then you find out that they don't know anyone in that group." And J--- goes: "That's exactly what I say about the police you guys always say that they're blah blah blah and it's the same thing with the cops." And then there was a pause, and I'm thinking, "We're about to drag this mother fucker." And in my mind I'm like… "Differences…" and in my mind I was thinking about how we were talking about Muslims, and I'm like "The difference is that Muslims repeatedly don't condone violence, they don't condone terrorism, versus cops where they have one of their own that has deliberately killed someone, deliberately raped, blah blah blah, no other police station in Tulsa when the Orlando shit is happening, they aren't going to call that out. Cops don't call each other out, they close ranks. So, when you have one that does wrong shit, you're not gonna have someone that calls that out. That's why we shit on cops, because they don't do what they're supposed to. Then people said some other shit and people " He just sat there and said "hmm" because he had nothing. He's constructed, based on his psychological-skills, a persona of someone who hates police, hates his job, doesn't want to do his job, and is like… and this is what I'm gleaning from things that he has said, but over-protective of Black culture. But, actively guarding Black culture, like a gatekeeper. He's had enough exposure to me that he would have an understanding of what I'm like, but what he thinks is the opposite of what I am, but the spaces I operate in now are so routine that I don't come across too many people that would be dumb enough to not know, you now? So right now, I'm in this weird spot when I don't have to worry about being profiled."

His co-worker believed Tariq was overprotective of Black culture. J--- saw Tariq as a racist and he was critical of his opinions. Also, as Tariq pointed out earlier, J--- interpreted Tariq as a "Black dude with a chip on his shoulder." Tariq, however, felt as though he had an obligation to protect the interests and the spaces of Black people. So, he disagreed and argued with J--- and critiqued his beliefs about racism, police brutality, and religious oppression. Tariq displayed a level of confidence that showed he was able to comfortably and assertively disagree with J---.

The different personas echoed a challenge Tariq overcame in the past. Specifically, he wore the persona of Easy Rawlins – conflicted, emotional, angry, smart and assertive. Tariq believed this persona was influential and he donned it to say anything he felt needed to be said to anyone. Yet, Tariq thought people mistook this persona for a reductively aggressive, hostile Black man

(Collins, 2005; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 2004; Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2004; Jackson, 2006). An interpretation of the story is that Tariq tried to don the persona to push against J---'s positions. Such an attempt allowed him to perform his Black masculinity in a way that embodied the unapologetic display of blackness. He wasn't a stubborn Black man, but an Easy-Rawlins-inspired man. His co-worker's expectation of Black people insinuated that Tariq and other Black individuals were hyper-reactive and inclined to distrust authority for no reason. The co-worker framed an understanding of Black men based on Tariq, and Tariq wanted nothing to do with this stereotypical attribution. Tariq often found that the audience would constantly throw him back into the unspoken and unwritten guidelines for Black men. Speaking of being profiled at a hockey game, he noted that his appearance and his attire attracted the attention of a security guard who believed he needed to be inspected.

> You know what, though, the first time I went to a Penguins game, I had my black hoodie on and they both had sizeable purses. There was a group of three girls that had big purses. As soon as one of the security guards saw me, the next five people went right past with no issue. He had a wand, didn't even wand them. All I had on was a hoodie and maybe a durag [headwrap]. And he specifically pointed me out, our group got up, let K--- and her friend go by. He's like "what's in your pocket?" and I'm "keys and some gum. And my phone." And he was like "empty your pockets." And I do it and he's like "what's in your back pockets?" and I'm like "nothing" and he goes, "Show me." He made me empty out of pocket I had. Had to unzip my hoodie, open it up, and I'm like "He didn't wand those girls," because everyone up to that point got wanded. And as soon as he saw me, none of that shit mattered. I was being cool about it, but he's like "Empty your pockets." And then I get in there, I'm like, I guess I see why, because I was the only nigga there. There may have been one other dude there. But all of the other Black people there were working.

Tariq said, "All I had on was a hoodie, and maybe a durag. But, he specifically pointed me out, our group got up, let K---- and her friend go by."

Tariq's vocabulary and speech did not serve him in that moment. His proximity to other White people did not guard him. Being targeted and isolated from his group, his Black masculinity

134

was on full display and targeted by a White security guard who saw Tariq as suspicious. While Tariq experienced his blackness with unquestionable power and confidence, he also recognized many instances where the audience witnessing his performance would want to continue reframing him through negative racial narratives: as an aggressive Black man who was a threat and therefore deserved criticism and inspection. Tariq's experiences echo the literature on the racial, oppressive narratives of Black men that pain them as aggressive and dangerous (Clark & Clark, 1939; Fanon, 1976/2008; hooks, 2004b; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004).

Despite his frustrations, Tariq accepted that people would throw him back into oppressive beliefs of Black men. However, he would continue to express his Black masculinity without apology. Likewise, even as he entered spaces that were White, he continued to operate in a way that felt authentic to him. Translating his slang or mitigating how powerfully he expressed his opinions was one way of doing this. But, Tariq made a conscious effort to keep his Black identity centered on himself despite remaining vigilant and regardless of how people evaluated his feelings.

Sexuality – "Shallow End of the Pool"

Regarding his sexuality, "I'm Black and I'm a straight guy," Tariq said. "There's not a bunch of identity wrapped up in being a straight man… There's no depth there." He explained: "In terms of sexual preference, you're at the top of the chain in terms of socially acceptable, socially powerful. No one has fetishes about straight people, nobody has weird ass ideas that are prevalent and harmful to straight people. It's one of those things where I'm like, straight male, done. There's no depth there, it's like being at the shallow end of the pool."

Tariq's description of sexuality sans intersecting identities was a description of heteronormative orientations. I took this to mean that his heterosexuality was an easy identity to

navigate, as the privileges that were afforded him allowed Tariq to experience his sexuality without much thought or conviction. For Tariq, he believed that he would avoid any persecution and oppression due to his sexual identity. He believed that no one would shame him because of his sexuality. As a result: "there's not a bunch of identity wrapped up in being a straight man… there's no depth." For Tariq, this statement meant that his heterosexuality was plain and simple and, as his later stories showed, it is only complicated when his other marginalized identities came into play. Though he described heterosexuality as lacking depth, he touched on the profound and colossal reach of it. He explains: "In terms of sexual preference, you're at the top of the chain in terms of socially acceptable, socially powerful." This awareness of sexuality as a status differs from how he performs his heterosexuality wherein he "tries to make it an extension of [himself]" and tries "to be true to [who he is]." He highlights that sexuality is more than physical intimacy, but also recognizes his tendencies to separate himself from his sexuality. Where his Black masculinity was integrated, his sexuality was insulated. Tariq says, "I find myself behaving the way I normally do, and then trying to reserve the intimacy for the bedroom. I'm not sure how to navigate that." Tariq believes that sexuality "should be all-encompassing," but it often falls short for him (TN #6).

"Perfect example, [V--- and I] were at Kings. I hugged her and kissed her whenever she came, and I didn't sit close enough for her to wrap herself around my arm or some shit, because I kind of hate it. I didn't make any reference to the fact that we're kind of together. She was there, and I treated her like she was there. We get back to my place and things are a little bit more tender. We're talking TV and she's like got her arm wrapped around and I'm like… This would be easier if it were on the couch, but I still don't know if I'll be any more comfortable. For me, sexuality is one of those things that needs to evolve if I'm going to be a in certain space. But, because it's something that I don't regularly practice, it's one of my weaker attributes. I find myself considering it a weakness of mine, because it is. But also considered a social weakness in the ways that I can be considered emotionally weak. And since it's one of those barely used aspects of my personality, I can get away with it until someone shows up. And then I have to be in overdrive to be

accommodating, but so accommodating that I start giving off more permanent things. So, sexuality is one of those things that I do that I'm not entirely sure about."

I reflected back to him: "While you hold the general idea [that sexuality should be all-encompassing], you don't know how to explore the ideas. You're used to exploring those ideas purely through sex." He agreed. Tariq struggled to find emotional depth within his sexual relationships though he believed that a multifaceted view of sex and sexuality were important to a relationship.

 In Tariq's world, sexual practice was how he experienced the intersection of his race and sexuality. I asked him, "Do you feel like your sense of yourself as a Black man influences how you experience sexuality?" "I think it does," he responded. "And I can say that it does in a Black love sense; in the sense that I notice a difference between how Black girls have sex and how White girls have sex."

This distinct difference is also the stage where Tariq can perform. His sexuality shifted and was experienced in diverse ways with women of different races. Like Black men, Tariq saw Black women as fierce, unyielding, and powerful. "I feel like there's this homunculus of sex[16] versus when I'm with a White girl." Though, he reminds me that these differences are not better or worse, just different for him. He is aware of the beliefs affixed to his body and he becomes anxious, hyper-aware of how he is 'supposed to' perform, and unsure of exactly who to be. These moments with White women echo the vigilance he experienced in White spaces. However, his relationships with Black women allow him to be mindful of the moment. It was at these moments where the racial narrations regarding Black men and sexual prowess crept up on Tariq and he began to evaluate himself.

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[16] Presumably, Tariq meant that there was a mutually created 'homunculus' that was nourished by the sexual relationship he had with Black women.

"With a White woman, you have to be more aware of what you're doing."

"What do you mean?"

"White women are more content to be in one position, whereas with Black woman, they're more likely to move," Tariq said. "And maybe it's just the people I'm with… White girls will move, but I feel like they don't take the initiative all of the time until they get comfortable." He later added, "I'm more comfortable with Black girls."

"You're more comfortable?" I remarked.

"When I'm with White woman, I'm conscious of it, and I'm worried about it. At the same time, I'm mad, because I know I shouldn't be and it's not fair for me to feel that when it doesn't seem like they do." This disclosure suggested the tension that arise from Tariq's interracial relationships. He understood that his White partners were not direct contributors to his anxiety. Rather, they were audiences who provided commentary on Black men. He felt that White women evaluated him. His stories about sex highlighted this distinction between his White partners and his Black partners. Although his experience is powerfully racialized, he also acknowledges that his sexual partners, and specifically his White partners, never overtly made direct comments about his race.

"They never mention it as if its expected and they're talking about it like, 'Ooh about to get that good Black dick' kind of deal."

"Like it's preemptive," I replied.

"Yeah," he said. "At least they never voiced those things." He goes on to explain: (TN #7)

They're like "Oh it's pretty big." And I'm like, "Really?" Because to me, I mean obviously I wouldn't know what other dicks look like, so I can't get a good… it's not like breasts or a booty when you can see, "Oh, those are some big ass titties or that's a fat ass." I have no idea what the average is. But, across the board, it's been "yes, you know, big dick." It's fascinating to me. I

wouldn't attribute big dickness to me, but I wouldn't attribute small dickness to me. I just thought I have an average sized dick. But apparently, I don't. And it's always weird to hear them say it, because I never asked. They just say, "oh, it's a lot to take it" or "you go a little far." And I'm like, "Oh." That affects me because I'm like big dog with a little dog complex when you don't realize how big you are and you're running around like you're little. Like that plays a part, because even the way… I mean only the most recent [relationship] is where it's been an immediate issue…

The racial overtones in Tariq's stories played with these boundaries. His identity as Black, heterosexual male, was active and at play, swirling amid the racial narratives. But, because the racial overtones are never explicitly mentioned, he can only question their existence intellectually. The "Big dickness" his White sexual partners highlight was only ever that as far as explicit comments can go. The performance of Tariq's Black masculine sexuality could only implicitly allude to racial narratives about well-endowed Black men.

Yet, Tariq's stories of T---- showed a different performance where his sense of Black masculinity and sexuality were a given and simply existed as they are without vigilance and without scrutiny. "It feels safe… there's a level of security [with T----] where it doesn't have the burden or whether or not it would be okay." This safety allowed him to be himself.

People still stereotyped Tariq or alluded to racial narratives when they were around him. He cited a co-worker who would make overt and subtle sexual remarks to him and pertained specifically to his body (TN# 8).

When I started working at the university, I did get the "You're always a big guy, so I imagine you're pretty big." From the married woman. So, there's an interesting story there.

…So, you know me, I wouldn't encroach areas I wouldn't encroach in. So, when I first started working there, randomly I would have discussions with me, her, and S. And we'd be talking about shit, like sex, drugs, alcohol, and whatever the fuck. And, every now and then, penis-size would pop up in the conversation. And, sometimes, I got the vibes that she was down. So, one week, she said "Oh, you're a big guy, I'm sure you got a big dick." I was just like… I never knew what to do with it, I just thought, "You're married…" Like what are you doing, am I reading this right? Should I be reading this at all, and we'd have conversations that go that way, and she'd always ask me things that would go down that hole. And I would just stand there, like "I don't

know…" But then she'd tell me things like "Oh I have a clit piercing." And I'm like… [Tariq shrugged]

…Yeah, but more than a few times she'd remarked …. She thinks I have a big dick, and I never had a problem with that. But, at the same time, I'm like "You don't know… and you're basing this off of physical things." And… she's not racist so I never… I had a hard time taking it that way, but at the same time, I knew it was based on it, or part of it at least. But that was also like a weird few years where I'm like, "I bet if we had a half hour, we could make some significant headway." And then like she'd make comments about how I never compliment her ass, or because she didn't have one, I wasn't interested in her ass. And I'm like [sigh] "You're married though." And I think if I didn't have that hang up like maybe I would've started pushing for shit to see what happened, but yeah, that was one of the few times where it was like, "Oh explicit statements of blackness and big dicks." But that was only like for a year or so, then I was in the safe zone once she had a kid. Then I was like "Okay, now the sexy phase is over, maybe she'll settle down and find something else to talk about." But then were some comments she made where she'd say stuff like "Oh, before I had a kid, I'd have an orgy." And I'm like, "I knew it!"

While his thoughts wandered ("I bet if we had a half hour, we could make some significant headway"), his resistance to diving into that relationship revolved around his own unknown desires and wanting to avoid endorsing additional racial stereotypes. Without trying, Tariq was the subject of hypersexual narratives whose assumptions were attached to him without his choosing (Allain 2013; Cooper 2015; Davis, 1983; Fanon, 1976/2008; Foster, 2011; Hodes, 1993).

Tariq saw himself as unquestionably Black and he used his assertiveness to celebrate his identity and interpretation of blackness to inform everyone around him that he was an unapologetic Black man. Yet, non-Black people would intentionally or unintentionally quell his fervor, and they either believed him to be hyper-militant or hypersexual or made comments that implicitly referred to larger racial narratives, which left him wondering about the content of their thoughts. Tariq noted that he struggled with the implicit comments, as it caused him anxiety and confusion as he tried to determine if he had a right to be hurt by what they said to him. Tariq's narratives of his Black masculinity sexuality illustrated his attempt to defend against oppressive statements and to his proactive effort to feel confident about himself.

Co-Constructed Narratives – Interactions

As researcher, I served as one of Tariq's audiences. Our shared identities and cultural experiences as well as being in the same age cohort helped me to resonate with his stories. However, I noted that Tariq's vigilance and confidence was different with the ways in which I experienced my identities. This contrast encouraged me to inquire about many of his experiences out of curiosity as a researcher and another Black individual. Thus, as Tariq spoke as a way of exploring his own identities, I sat as a member of his audience that learned how to be confident and assertive. In this case, I related to the unnamed Black people Tariq mentioned in the interview. Those Black people were probably silenced, but Tariq wanted to make them feel empowered with his support. Thus, because I related to him, my questions were motivated by this curiosity and I felt comfortable letting him speak uninterrupted.

Likewise, the shared identities and our acquaintance made it, so Tariq could speak unfettered. I understood his colloquialisms and how he wove slang throughout the interview and opted not to inquire about certain descriptions for the sake of an apparent clarity. Like Khalil, our rapport allowed me to interject and share thoughts and references that I considered relevant to Tariq's experiences. In fact, he invited me to share my own. Tariq took those ideas and reflections and expanded on them with his own ideas. Additionally, Tariq's stories referred to people he told me about prior to the interview, and thus he shared his stories with the expectation that I could fill in the blanks, which I did. Overall, our relationship provided Tariq with comfort and space to share stories he may not have otherwise told me.

That said, as I noted that I was interested in Tariq's confidence, I reflected that I was also looking for some moment of anxiety in his sexual expressions. Thus, my line of questioning regarding his sexuality became personal when Tariq began to talk about racial anxieties. I

empathized with this and his concerns about performing for White women and being anxiously unsure of what racial narratives are consciously at play in the relationship.

As noted, Tariq had requested to meet me at my home and he said he felt comfortable speaking to me in private rather than in public, or at his home where he had two White roommates. I had checked on Tariq in the middle of the interview to ask him how he felt about our discussion thus far, and he said that he was fine and comfortable as our conversation gave him the opportunity to "talk about Black shit," which he felt was rare in his life. That said, while Tariq did request my space for his interview, I made note of the possible power differential between us. Specifically, I wondered how the location could have primed him to respond to me in a favorable way.

I was comfortable with the arrangement and I took Tariq's statement to be true – he shared his stories clearly and provided many examples that felt unfettered. This was determined by both the detail of his stories and how he told them. As stated, I felt that his candor expressed a sense of confidence that he began to embrace, especially when he donned his Easy Rawlins's persona. This candor and confidence enabled him to speak freely, supposedly without fear of judgment from me. I felt as though the shared identities and previous history of acquaintanceship helped him to comfortably settle into the topic and helped him to provide clearer answers he may not have given if I were a White male researcher (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011; Elwood & Martin, 2000; Harris, 2002).

That said, I did consider whether this location hindered the process. Specifically, Tariq said that he was comfortable and could speak freely in my home. This was good. However, this presented a missed opportunity to explore in the moment how Tariq experienced the world when he felt out of his element. My home provided a safe space, but his home or a coffeeshop had the

potential to add another layer to the conversation. The opportunity to explore Tariq's potential anxiety was sacrificed to provide him with comfort.

Black Masculinity in Relation to Sexuality – Tariq's Summary

Tariq experienced his Black masculinity with confidence. He embraced his blackness and wanted to vigilantly support other Black people whom he considered afraid to be themselves. He anchored his Black masculinity in the philosophy of Easy Rawlins, which motivated him to perform his blackness with authority, with power, and unapologetically. This meant speaking out and defending his integrity when he saw the need.

Yet Tariq still battled the impressions of other people, which ranged from teachers, to co-workers and strangers. Because of his appearance and his actions, people saw him as confrontational, defiant, and dangerous. Likewise, even in innocuous cases, people questioned his language, unsure of the slang he used, or they were surprised that he could be articulate.

Tariq's Black masculinity showed a similar dynamic in regard to how he experienced his sexuality. While he considered intimacy one of his weaker areas of expertise, he noticed that his lived experience changed depending on his partner. Due to the assumptions about Black men and their sexual prowess, Tariq felt more uncomfortable with White women due to the risk of receiving negative racial narratives. Because he felt like Black women allowed him to be himself and to be comfortable, he felt more at ease with them (Bowleg et al., 2017). Tariq's Black masculinity endorsed an experience of sexuality that was authentic, but he still experienced racial narratives that positioned him as a promiscuous Black man with indomitable sexual prowess.

In his stories, Tariq positioned himself as his own audience. Doing this allowed him to use his stories to articulate his personal goals for himself (to be unapologetically Black like Easy

Rawlins) and highlighted the challenges he faced. Tariq shared stories that demonstrated his goals or showed a desire to achieve them. Tariq's stories served as a way for him to assert himself, and gain insight into other people that he mentioned during the interview.

Tariq's stories also highlighted other Black people as an audience, specifically Black people who feel isolated in White spaces. His sense of self came across as strong, and Tariq believed that by providing an avenue for community, he could unite and encourage other silenced Black people to feel comfortable. Likewise, Tariq named some White people in his stories as his audience, specifically pointing out the ways that narrating or performing for them made him feel like he had to scale back his blackness. By mentioning this, Tariq showed the anxiety that comes up for some Black men in White spaces. Additionally, his mention of Easy Rawlins demonstrated a desire to resist in those spaces.

JAMES' SELECTED NARRATIVE

James and I met at an office in a large northeastern city. He was a 40-year-old African-American social worker and unmarried. I met James after I moved from Pittsburgh to my internship and we became acquainted through another co-worker of mine. I had told them about my dissertation and they called James over to speak to me about it. After I asked him if I could interview him, he followed up with me a few weeks later. When we met, we talked about my project, his foci in college, and his general interest in topics of Black masculinity.

The day of the interview, we took an hour and a half out of our schedule to speak. Sitting in the small office, our interview was punctuated by voices outside of the room and sirens from the street. Pedestrians greeted each other outside on the corners as I set up the recorders.

We were two employees in a predominantly Black business that served people with psychological needs and with little resources. Our status as clinicians was one of the few similarities that allowed us to be introduced to one another. Before we began, we framed our conversation by covering different topics like how Black men are portrayed in the media, such as the common images of Black men as cold, aggressive, and hypersexual that was displayed with such shamelessness that it felt like a fact. I introduced the research question. He signed the consent forms and we began.

Black Masculinity – "Authentic Self"

James described his masculinity in tandem with his race. For him, his masculinity was a fact for who he was and an identity in the kaleidoscope of his personhood. He woke up experiencing his humanity before there was any emphasis on his identities. It was when he encountered the world that he began to be reminded of his race and how the world saw him. "I walk out into the world and people remind me that I'm Black," he said. It was a powerful statement that demonstrated that his identity was experienced in relation to himself and to others. He understood his masculinity in both ways, where the world would thrust expectations and narratives onto him and he would do his best to resist some and integrate others to define himself. This was something that he tried to do at an early age.

One of the first stories that James shared with me (JN #1) demonstrated his curiosity about gender dynamics.

> "Being a man… to me it's interesting. I think I've always tried to understand other people's perspectives. When you gave me the frame of questions, I thought of one of the defining moments when one of my brothers teased me when I was younger. And my mother was arranging a party for me and I looked at the birthday list. I was very smart and in the 3rd grade, I had an 8th grade

145

vocabulary. I looked at the list, I said "Mom, where are the girls? You can't have a party without girls." And it's like, for me it was all about the balance. So, when my brothers would bring girlfriends home and they'd talk about them, I'd always try to stick up for the girls. "You can't do that to her, she has rights too" So for me, being a man has never been a part of 'You need to be a part of a certain group.' I never cared if the guys hung out with the guys. I just wanted friends. Whether they were female or male. I don't care if you agree with me as long as I have a group of friends that do.

His understanding of his manhood as a child was experienced through the rules of a birthday party: boy birthday parties were exclusive to other boys, and the same for girls. This rule was confusing for James. He said, "I never cared if the guys hung out with guys. I just wanted friends whether they were female or male." James simply wanted friends. Presently, James attempted to define himself "on a daily basis," pushing boundaries and defying norms on the singular foundation that his identities were fluid and could be performed in any way he saw fit. While people would attempt to regulate his performance, he continued to try to find new ways to experience his masculinity. I told him, "It seems like a foundation of who you are is accessing fluidity. You are who you are and who you want to be at any given moment." In this case, James saw his Black masculinity as varied and he believed that he could experience his Black masculinity in numerous ways, rather than conform to a static and stereotypic construction of men (Bearman, 2000; hooks, 2004b; Shrock & Schwalbe, 2009). In his narrative, that meant pushing against oppressive conversations directed at women, which also served as a way to subvert rigid masculine norms.

"It's true," James said, and he compared his identities to the dynamic states of water. In another story (JN #2), James detailed how he experienced the fluidity of masculine expression.

"I'm an emotional person, and I'm a social worker. "Well, that's not a man's job." What's a man's job? Is a man's job to work? Well… 90% of the men on the planet would say yes. So, whether or not you like my work… we need to have a voice at the table for a lot of things people

146

say we shouldn't have. I thought about taking a job as an OBGYN, which as a field it's like "Why as a man are you going in there?" Well, why not? So… Yeah. I think my education has allowed me to use language and allow me to embrace my ability to be really sad and cry in moments of pure sadness and be okay with that. But it took some time for me to realize that my tears can be my strength. I can experience my emotions and I don't care what anyone says because to be a man and to cry at a funeral may be okay. But, to be a man and cry at wedding? "What the hell is wrong with you?" According to who's looking. I cried at someone's wedding because it was a beautiful wedding. It was on the beach, it was at a Cape! I was overwhelmed. And people were like, "You don't even know the couple." And I'm like "It's a beautiful occasion!" You can't be happy about? Maybe you can't capture the moments and you can't be truly happy with yourself. My life experiences have allowed me to do certain things, and their experiences have put them in a box. And they don't even know they're in a box and that's terrible."

"I'm an emotional person and a social worker," he said, insinuating that his profession both calls for and allows him to embody non-hegemonic gender descriptions. He refused to allow anyone to keep him in a box. "What I believe in is trying to be your authentic self, and sometimes as much as your confusions can be confusing, they're telling you about yourself."

Those words were central to James' experiences. Fluidity was a crucial element to his masculinity as it allowed him to move in different ways that felt comfortable to them. This allowed him to find new ways of being a father and gave him space to provide for his daughter in a way that pushed back against stereotypes such as the cold and unavailable father, or the absent, Black father. Being true to himself was key. In such a regard, James acknowledged that certain racial beliefs would be associated with him and he made considerable effort to reject them. He believed that oppressive racial narratives restricted his potential as a Black man. Likewise, his experiences highlight how racial narratives became affixed to him; In such cases, while James would receive information from other people that he was supposed to be fixed in one category or another, he opted to resist it, regardless of criticism. James experienced his Black masculinity without shame.

Blackness – "The Flavor of the Universe"

James' theme of identity totality was a core value, and he believed that he could express himself in any way that felt comfortable and congruent with him. While he avoided behaviors, he thought was reprehensible by his own values, he felt like his position of identity totality allowed him to appreciate himself and others who were something other than model citizens. James saw blackness as a point of pride and as "the flavor of the universe," which hinted at the widespread influence of Black-American culture. The story he shared, however, focused on how racial narratives of Black people were commonly formed to undermine them (Davis, 1983; Fanon, 1976/2008; Hall, 1997; hooks, 2004b) He recalled a moment (JN #3) when he was a child and another student asked him about "Black people [growing] tails at 12 o' clock." James told his classmate that what she heard was a lie and that the person who told her was a liar.

"[Being Black] is a point of pride. I wouldn't trade being Black for being anything in the world. Not that not-being Black would be… I don't know how other people exist in that. But I like being Black. I like being, not necessarily the underdog, but the flavor of the universe. The lies that are told about people of color are just amazing to me. There's an ongoing narrative... I had a friend in elementary school who asked me "Do Black people grow tails at 12 o'clock?" "No, we don't grow tails at 12 o'clock" and in my advanced mind I thought "yeah and I fuck your mom with it." [laughs] And this was elementary school, so you can imagine how much I knew then that it was going to get me in trouble of I said it. But this is my mind at this age processing: tails? At 12 o'clock?" who says that? I said who told you that? And she goes "My Dad" and I'm like "No he's lying." And when he came to pick her up, she slapped him and said "You lied to me? Why would you tell me that Black people grow tails at 12 o'clock?" Why would you pass on this legacy of foolishness? And there are all of these lies that we pass on in our community about being Black, let alone outside of the community about being Black. And I think the reason I like being Black is because I see beyond the narrative. You remember *Booty Call*? [I – Yes!] It also came out with at the same time as the movie *Love Jones*. [laughs] In our local radio station had this call in about "is this the narrative? Is this the narrative?" And I traveled to Virginia and I had come from the Maryland, Virginia area the year before. My brother had been getting a degree down there in law. I called in and said "You know what I love about that? I love both of them." "Why?" "Because we got people like that and people like that in our community. That's the beauty of it. Why can we only be the pimps and the hoes? Why can't we be the preachers and the prostitutes. Let's be honest. We have all of this. We are a community, not a monolith."

For James, this demonstrated a challenge to how he experienced his blackness and once again represented a moment when the people in his story, directly or indirectly, tried to locate and fix James within an understanding of blackness. That perspective was incongruent with what he knew about himself and other Black people. Saying "No" became definitive and calling the narrative a lie allowed James to push against it. James told me that the pride and flavor of his Black identity comes explicitly through refusing the limitations set on Black expression. He highlighted this by citing two films that appeared at the same time, *Love Jones (1997)* and *Booty Call (1997).*

James expressed his appreciation for both films as portraying blackness as a spectrum as opposed to a monolith, where it showed the Black community as sexual, affectionate, and passionate in diverse ways. He noted the misogyny of *Booty Call* and the sexual empowerment of *Love Jones* and avoided heralding one over the other. For James, the experience and performance of his identity came through studying other Black people who expressed themselves in a myriad of ways and therefore provided a diverse context of blackness. Likewise, he continued to inform people of the historical development of blackness in America, of race dynamics, and used himself as an example of Black totality and diversity.

Yet, James' examples showed how often he must demonstrate Black totality by resisting negative, singular impressions of his race. One of his common performances of blackness came through mitigating the false descriptions and narratives of Black people and Black men. In another story (JN #4), James deflected impersonal and intrusive questions where he felt like his blackness caused someone to "ask [him] about [his] pedigree," while ignoring every other White person in the room.

"I enter a room as an advocate or a social worker and I'm the only male and I'm the only Black person in the room and we're sitting around, and people are identifying themselves.

Someone asks me "Oh, where'd you go to school." And I said "Boston" and I do this particularly because I've heard "James, you're not like other Black people." Like, how many other Black people do you know. I mean, you're right, I'm poorer than some and better than others. Who do you know? I'm like… do I have to walk with my diploma out like Jim Crow laws? What's going on here? And, I say "Boston." "What school?" "One of the better schools in Boston." I'm being vague intentionally. "you don't understand the question." "No, I understand the question, I really just want to know why you're asking me about my pedigree." I'm always looking at what people are trying to read into me. Whenever I leave, I go into meetings with a shirt and tie. Proper and clean. Other people go in a t-shirt. Like who is doing this? But, I know I need to go as the advocate, so I go with whatever other people are comfortable with, and people call me Mister because I want them to know that my parents gave me a name and I come from a lineage of something…

James stated that in situations where he is the only person of color, he must style himself in a certain way to perform the professional Black man, an intentional act that speaks to the limits he experiences due to his race ("Other [social workers] go [to meetings] in a t-shirt."). His performance of professionalism allowed him to advocate for the underserved, providing him with the opportunity to deflect negative racial impressions and to demonstrate new, proactive, and positive images.

James' experiences in meetings continued in another story (JN #5), in which a social worker made a joke about a Black boy ending up in jail when he was an adult.

"I encountered a co-worker who… this is me not seeing what they weren't seeing. And so, we were talking about a former client and I was like "I want to see him in ten years." This dynamic, smart, had some developmental issues, but gregarious, young, brown brother, and I was very happy for him. I saw a picture of him in a suit and he looked like he should be president of something. And I saw the folder and I said, 'I want to see him in ten years." And this co-worker of mine, said "I hope he's not in jail." And I'm like… social work lens… Black man in the community lens… father lens… it's like I had to go back to all of my scopes and see where this person is getting… I had to peel in my mind. They laughed nervously, and I was really struck by this. So, I had to talk to someone about this because it was stirring something up in me and I wanted my message to be heard enough. And I didn't care if it offended because sometimes we have to offend. I wanted the message to get across, and I didn't want to be the angry Black man. Because, if you're a social worker saying this, where is your unconditional positive regard? If this is a child and you're talking about their future, why does it have to be a dark future for a dark child? He's a member of my community, that's another offense. He's a male, that's another offense, you're a woman talking about a little boy going to jail. Why does that have to be the only story. All of my stuff came out.

So, when I approached her, I told her "I had to tell you, I was offended by what you said." And they said, "it wasn't because of skin-color" and I'm like, "You can't separate his skin color from who he is. That's a part of his reality. You may not see it, but everyone else may see it. So, why not say he's doing well, or I hope he's not in jail or incarcerate. Or I hope he's getting treated, I hope he's successful." In 10 years he'll be in college, so "I hope he'll be in college." …it would've been like "You think good for him." He's got to be in jail. Well, she didn't say dead, which was also a positive, too.

The comment caught James off-guard, and though it was directed exclusively at the Black boy, it resonated with James and offended him. He began to explore the comment through different affected lenses – "social work lens, Black man in a community lens, father lens... I had to peel in my mind." The comment highlighted the ways through which other people perpetuated the racist narratives and impressions of Black men, thereby confining them to fixed roles. For James, his identity was attached to the narratives and his effort to resist them in his own life meant that he had to defend the Black boy from any comment that painted him as a failure. This was James' way of showing the social worker that, like him, the boy could achieve more. "Where's the unconditional positive regard?" James asked of the social worker. "If you say that now about him, how does that inform your treatment?"

James understood that the racial narratives, even mentioned as jokes, colored how people saw Black people and Black men. His identity as a social worker helped him to resist internalizing a lot of the negative impressions that framed Black boys as dangerous. James also reflected that performing his blackness in an open, fluid way still came with difficulties, as he and other Black boys and men are boxed in by rigid racist beliefs.

Sexuality – Expanse of Sexual Expression

James saw and experienced sexuality as a range that allowed him to express his admiration and affection for anyone. He said, "I always tell people that Prince is the most beautiful man I've seen in my life," a way of demonstrating a fluid sexuality removed from fixed expressions of his sexual orientation. Finding a man attractive was never a challenge to his heterosexuality. Likewise, he was resistant to descriptions of sex that remained rigidly placed within sexual practices. James saw sex as an intimate relationship that involved learning about someone else by spending time with them, conversing with them, and many other activities outside of engaging exclusively in sexual practices. He explained, "if you're in a relationship with someone and you're exploring them, they're exploring you… it's ongoing and negotiable." James continually returned to his core belief that human expression was fluid and that people should be open to exploring the totality of being human.

This description of fluidity helped James to reinforce his value for himself and served as a way for him to continuously resist rigid and static descriptions of his identities. As such, sex was more than just fornication and Black men were more than misogynistic, hypersexual beasts (hooks, 2004b). Thus, he performed this heterosexual fluidity by claiming that a person was the most beautiful person he had ever seen or, in other cases, by rejecting someone who came on to him. It came in wanting to hold someone, or to cater to them, and enjoy sex with them. He constantly pushed against expectations of hypersexual Black bodies, which once again allowed him to reinforce his values of identity totality and fluidity. In such a case, James wanted to demonstrate how he could enjoy his sexuality openly and in a way that was authentic to him, while also showing that sexuality was accessible to Black men and again demonstrating that they are simply more than sexual objects (hooks, 2004b). His narratives serve as a way to resist oppressive racial narratives positioned against many Black-American men.

James shared a story (JN #6) of going to a gay bar with his girlfriend at the time.

> "So, I'm a heterosexual male, I know… [laughs] I have an ex-girlfriend who I took to a gay bar. "What, you don't want to go to a club?" "well, you want to go dance? That's where the best parties are when I go with my gay friends. They're getting it in. She's like "You took me to a gay bar." "Well, why not? They're dancing, there's music, you can dance with me, and they make killer drinks." Oooh you see, 'they make,'… The club in particular made killer drinks. Not gay people. It's a whole point of I want to have a good time, you want to have a good time, my gay friends have great times. Not only, but whatever. In the community, you have to have these sorts of conversations. Some people are just ready to pounce when you say something that may or may not, in the right context written out of color, but sometimes it is.
>
> Again, and the tip was half the price of the drink because it was like three drinks. And she was like "are you gay?" "why would you come here?" "Why not? It's the same music you hear everywhere else. I feel very safe. I feel very welcome. I like to have a good drink. I like to have some good music. A party is a party." I don't control who goes to the party. "do you go here all of the time?" "Sometimes." "do you go here without me?" "Absolutely. It's a bar." I am who I am, if you like me, I'm showing you how I am as an individual. Your small time in my life does not completely define the roads I have trotted to come and be with you. Why do you think I'm this narrow sliver… it's like a whole plot and there are 4 dimensions. It's all there.".

James's story shows the continual pressure from other people who tried to regulate his identities. He performed his identity by moving against expectations and entering spaces where he was unexpected. A gay bar was not an assigned space for heterosexuality, according to his partner. Yet, by entering it, James demonstrates the ways through which his heterosexuality could be expressed by continually doing things he believed some heterosexual people wouldn't do. He performed his sexuality when he defied norms and embraced a spectrum of experiences.

James resisted descriptions of sexuality that reduced it to sexual encounters. He saw sexuality as "part of a relationship dynamic." He explained that, "There are all sorts of way of being intimate with a partner that are not sexually intimate and they're emotionally intimate and probably more satisfying." He saw those relationships as providing their own sense of sexual gratification. He cited a specific friendship (JN #7), where he could express this intimate and dynamic sexuality, where the depth and vastness of the relationship was more satisfying than sex.

> "I had a friend, only a friend, I knew for a couple of decades. Our initial encounter – if I gave her name she'd probably kill me – but our initial encounter was in a classroom. She was doubling over in pain and I had no idea why. So, I offered my hand and said, "If you are in pain, take my hand." I don't know where I saw it, but we're now both doubling over in pain. She's squeezing the hell out of my hand and digging her nail in it because she was having cramps. That was the initiation of our friendship. We've been this friend for this long period of time. […] We talked about the sexual exploits. She's dated friends of mine. We talked about the stalker I had, the stalker she had. Literally stalker, people who wouldn't go away. But, we'd go through this thing where people were like... you're not dating? You're not married? You never had sex? No, but we've had intimate moments. A lot of them. And we've had borderline sexual tension moments. It's insane. But our relationship is so rich and so full. It'd devalue it. You've gone back to the base intimacy that gets overridden with these other high-impact, emotional, supportive, moments…
>
> so, that relationship has never gone sexual and we've never dated, never married. I think we swam around the pool one time. She was like "We should move out together and go to another state. But, if we do that we would end up having sex." And later my adult mind was like, "Man, I could've done this." But the relationship to me was more expansive than that.

He explained that, though the sexual tension was present, it would have undermined what he and his friend experienced. James resisted the impressions from other people that saw his sexuality and sexual expression and tried to reduce it to sexual practice. To jeopardize his relationship with his friend would have undermined his identity as it had made the sexual practices a central value of their relationship. For James, the friendship was "more expansive than" sex, and he expressed his sexuality by embracing the tenderness and depth of his feelings in the moment.

Yet, James understood that his experience of his sexual identity was partially linked to how others viewed him. He explained that he had felt sexually objectified in the past (JN# 8).

> "Hate to admit it, though, there are relationships that I have had that only want to be defined by the sex. I had one girlfriend who re-interjected herself into my life. I told her "I value you as a friend." We had great sex and a great relationship and there were a lot of highs and lows for that various reasons. But, I told her "I don't know if I can be in that type of relationship." Because it had caused a lot of problems. The sex… it was what was gluing it together, but it had a lot of challenges. And she was like "If we were going to have a relationship, we have to have sex." "Like even if it's just a friendship?" "We still got to have sex." What? That doesn't make any sense, I never had a friendship where I had to have sex. So, but my social work curiosity was now like, let's talk about that. Let's figure out why this has to be a component. For whatever reason, she

kept going back to the sexual thing. And I'm like "We can't have sex." "Well, let me give you a goodbye blow job." What? [laughs] … At what point did this… like, who did you get your counsel from? This is the same person by the way who wouldn't want to watch rated-R movie because it was too gory. So, like, where did the hypersexuality come from?"

Those instances showed James that, though he tried to define his sexual identity through a myriad of experiences, looming racist interpretations still wanted to regulate or "discipline" his body. James' experiences reflected the ways that the narrative of the hypersexual Black male oppressed Black men by categorizing them as dangerous and virile or by sexually objectifying him (Davis, 1983; Fanon 1976/2008; hooks, 1992; hooks, 2004a; Saint-Aubin, 2005; Staples,1993; Wiegman, 1993). As such, people expected him to a dangerous and perverse man, or someone who commanded great sexual prowess. He explained that his "first experience of blatant racism" was when he visited a former partner' home, an Irish-Italian woman, and her brother accosted him. He noted that the people who sexualize him are commonly White women. James continually tried to push against the expectations, but admitted that he stumbled, perpetuated the negative narratives of Black men, and willingly took up the role. He said, "I think I've played into that role at times. Like, of course this is what is expected of me. Like I'm supposed to be a rap star. I'm supposed to be a gangster. I'm supposed to droop my pants." He added: "You do consume some of that stuff and play it out in your mind…. And sometimes it can become a part of your authentic repertoire of self."

In reflecting about his experiences, James acknowledged that internalizing the narratives of Black masculinity and sexuality was one of the many ways that people could experience their race, gender, and sexual identities. For James, though he accepted those perspectives at the time, he continued to perform his sexual identity through the simultaneous adoption and rejection of the norms projected upon him. Rejecting the standards, he once accepted taught him what he

appreciated. James' performance showed that he was the one who dictated how he could express himself. Though he felt pressure to conform to the racial narratives of Black men, and at times did, his narratives show his attempts to exercise control over how he developed his stories about himself. In doing so, his narratives served to take stock of the different ways he could express himself in the world and the power he had in taking control of negative, oppressive narratives. Thus, James could take a narrative of hypersexuality and transform it into a narrative of intimacy that reflected his values. Outside involvement was to be kept to a minimum.

Co-Constructed Narratives – Interactions

I served as James audience as a researcher, though this involved me being a researcher with shared experiences. We were both Black-American, heterosexual men and, additionally, we were both mental health clinicians. It was apparent that our shared experience as clinicians provided a mutual understanding of therapy and the underpinnings of a therapeutic relationship, namely unconditional positive regard. This was apparent through James' language – his use of clinical terms without defining them, and the fact I didn't ask him to define them, showed a mutual understanding of our field. Likewise, I identified with James when he said that he sometimes walked into rooms where he was the only clinician of color. I didn't follow up on those moments and, perhaps mistakenly, I took them for granted because I felt as though I understood. This mutual understanding of our role as therapists enabled James to share narratives without much background.

The shared cultural identities allowed some of James' stories to resonate with me. I disclosed or shared personal details pertaining to my identity or how I felt in that moment. James responded with stories of his own. I frequently reflected with him on what stood out to me in his

stories, as I was impressed by his description of "a Black totality." Likewise, I told him that I liked certain descriptions because I found them illustrative and I related to them This could have encouraged him to continue to share stories of his totality and how he tried to exist on a fluid spectrum of Black masculinity. I also appreciated how James' stories showed the integration and intersection of his Black masculinity and sexuality. Again, I didn't follow up on the stories he told, but I was intrigued by knowing their details. Like his other audiences, namely other social workers and Black children, it felt as though James was modeling his Black totality for me.

Black Masculinity in Relation to Sexuality – James' Summary

James experienced his Black masculinity as a spectrum or a totality, and he enjoyed placing himself anywhere in that realm. He wanted to experience everything and felt undaunted by the attempts people made to regulate his race or his gender. James was aware of the racial narratives that portrayed Black men as threatening, deceitful, bestial, and promiscuous objects, as well as negligent fathers. However, he was adamant about deconstructing them with his experiences, embracing his faults and his sensitivity considering dehumanizing impressions.

James' perspective of Black totality allowed him to embrace his sexuality in the same way. He was heterosexual but experienced his sexuality through a love of people regardless of gender. Likewise, he entered spaces others believed were inaccessible to heterosexuals, due to stigma. James experienced his sexuality by engaging with it while also refusing to be reduced to damaging representations of Black men. He also refused the notion that black men cannot or should not enjoy their bodies due to the vigilant glance and criticism they could receive.

As his own audience, James reaffirmed his sense of a Black totality and provided stories that demonstrated the expanse of his experiences. James showed how he attempted to resist stereotypic and negative impressions of Black men that didn't fit with him while also acknowledging that it was okay for Black men to be human, even if it meant confirming those narratives. James was willing to sustain the dialectics of a Black experience and his Black identity, embracing his strengths, weaknesses, and the moments that helped him to define his identities.

Likewise, James saw himself speaking to other Black boys and Black men who felt bound by oppressive narratives. His narratives served to model the complexity of his identities, while the rest of his interview served as an exposition of dynamic Black masculinity and sexuality. By encouraging a diverse way of being, James promoted a sense of, in his words, "Black totality" that avoided pigeonholing Black boys and men. For James, "Black totality" described his view of blackness as an expansive identity that could be expressed in any number of ways without restriction. James saw Black totality as a position that allowed him to explore many facets of blackness without feeling as though he had to conform to a rigid, stereotypic description of blackness – whatever that would be.

Additionally, James spoke to other mental health professions as his audience. In this case, he pushed to remind his audience to hold unconditional positive regard for marginalized children. His stories showed how destructive racial narratives can be in the hands of people with power and that they can reduce one's possibilities in the world. Thus, his stories challenged his audience to think differently and to see the children they work for as multidimensional, multifaceted individuals instead of expecting those children to fail.

BRANDON'S SELECTED NARRATIVES

Brandon was a 28-year-old Black-American man working in sales in a mid-sized north eastern city. He was a newly-wed and lived with his wife and 20-month year old son in the city. He invited me to his house for the interview, after work. We agreed to meet after his older brother suggested that he should talk about his experiences. Brandon was part of the third wave of informants. After a potential participant backed out, he notified another potential participant. The second participant also backed out due to reasons he did not disclose. This participant recommended his brother, Brandon. I called Brandon after a few days, and he told me that, while he forgot to reach out, he would be open to meeting.

On a summer evening, in his living room, we talked about my impending move to Boston and his aspirations to move to a new job and to continue to provide for his family. His wife sat in another room with their son, entering and exiting throughout the interview. His son giggled in the background as he played with toys. Brandon was hospitable and energetic, curious about the questions I asked, and punctuated a lot of his comments with jokes, sarcastic remarks, or laughter.

After telling him about my dissertation and the interview and providing him some space to ask questions where he saw fit, we began our conversation.

Black Masculinity – "Prove people wrong."

Brandon described his Black masculinity as an identity that was versatile and empowering as it gave him the opportunity to "prove people wrong" and challenge "how people view [his] race as a whole." He knew that Black men were stereotyped, but he didn't care. He wasn't going to readily assume that someone was going to judge him based on those beliefs. He expressed his identity by challenging the negative narratives and the stereotypes

Brandon shared a story about meeting an elderly White heterosexual couple in an eyeglass store he once co-owned (BN #1).

"I come in, and I'm 6'2, 230, Black dude. Your first thing you may think is, "Who the fuck is this guy?" But I go in, "My name is Brandon." Blah blah blah. That first impression is how you change someone's thinking. So, I feel like that first impression is key and if you can change the way someone thinks by the first impression, the rest of the conversation can go your way… So, remember when I owned the eyeglass store? So, I'm at the eyeglass store, I'm sitting there and a White couple walks in and they're like "We're looking for glasses." I'm like "Yeah, I can definitely help you." "Do you take our insurance?" "Yeah I take your insurance. No problem I can check. I'll see how it covers…" blah blah blah. And they're looking around and say, "This is a pretty nice place, but who is your manager?" So, I stop right there. Like, why can't I be the fucking manager? You don't know who I am? I can't own it? So, I go, "Oh no, I don't have a manager. I'm actually the owner."

And they're like "Oh really?" "

Like, when I last checked, I owned this mother fucker. You just bought glasses off of a Black man. But, I was like "Yeah I'm the owner with a partner of mine. We're co-owners together and he's another African-American. So, we started this out the trunk of our cars and came up this way…" and they were so amazed by me doing it. I don't think they'd be as amazed by a White guy, you know? I think that my initial reaction after they said "Really?" could've gone one of two ways. I could've said "What the fuck do you mean? Get out?" but I walked them through and it gave them another view of me. And now they always come back.

What was that going to accomplish, saying "fuck you" or "get out?" What would that accomplish? I'm trying to get their money in my pocket, that's number one, number two, how could I change how someone views me? And that's how someone does it? I don't write everyone off as racist, they're just ignorant. They don't understand."

This story demonstrated how he expressed his identity as a Black man that challenged the perceptions of others. As he told the story, we joked about it. Though it wasn't explicitly stated, Brandon's story felt like a common story many Black male professionals had. We laughed about this, but it highlighted how Brandon experienced his blackness and his professional growth as something that stood out in presumed White spaces. He understood and accepted that he was always going to be prejudged in some way based on his race. Brandon talked about his experiences with such unabashed honesty, humor, and masterfully precise use of 'fuck,' which exemplified his confidence in himself and his goals.

160

More importantly, as Brandon continued to challenge the perceptions of other people, I wondered whether fatherhood had influenced his position at all, or at least what he decided to impart to his son. So, I asked him, "Are there any key things you want to teach him about being a Black man?"

"I think the things I want to teach him is respect," said Brandon. "You have to show respect. Because, being a Black man, your word is your bond. Your word is your word. I have to show you how to respect not just Black people but White people."

Brandon challenged people's impressions of him by making the effort to establish respect for himself and towards them. Respect and accountability allowed him to move through dangerous situations. He added, "And this is the biggest thing that he needs to know being a Black man, and it's fucked up, but I have to teach him what he needs to do when he gets pulled over. And that's fucked up."

"Yeah. The rules are not the same."

"They're not the same for us and everyone is trying to sugar coat. If you get pulled over and you're Black, there's a risk that they're going to blow your fucking head off.[17]"

As Brandon talked about his Black masculine identity, it is evident that how he experiences himself, and how he performs his identity, is as much about challenging perceptions of him as it is about reading a situation. During the potentially dangerous and uncertain moments, he must navigate a list of rules to come out unharmed. Encounters with police officers, for example, can be tense, though Brandon reduced the tension by being clear about his actions and polite with his questions to avoid being threatening.

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[17] Around the time of Brandon's interview, Philando Castile, a Black-American man, was shot and killed by police officer Jeronimo Yanez in Minnesota during a traffic stop (Domonoske & Chapell, 2016). After handing Yanez his license and insurance card, Castile lawfully informed Yanez that he had a license to carry and a gun in his glove compartment. Seconds later, Yanex opened fire at Castile at point blank range, killing him.

Black Sexuality – Intimacy and Throwing it Down

Brandon described Black men as being "the most sought-after piece of meat out there," which drew a laugh from us. "[We] throw it down the best." Joking aside, Brandon saw that common impressions of Black, masculine, heterosexuality and sexual expression was anchored in the sexual objectification of Black men. Brandon explained, "I feel like we feel exotic to them. I think, like a Black man and sexuality, we don't care… We're very open. There's no boundaries. I feel like, us being free enough to do that gives us a lot more diversity and, aside from sex, I feel like we can have some fun." While Brandon's Black masculinity required him to understand how he was being viewed to challenge those views that restricted him, his Black sexuality was marked by curiosity and openness to possibility. Sex was a common image that popped into mind, but for Brandon, sexuality involved more than just sexual practices. Indeed, like James, sex expanded to intimate moments spent getting to know his partner, doing things for them, and spending time with them. These sentiments echo hooks' (2004b) description of a Black masculine sexuality that resists problematic, hypersexualized racial narratives. In this case, Brandon's narratives about sexuality allowed him to demonstrate that Black men weren't seen as singular in their thinking about sexuality, although he recognizes it is a common fault. Indeed, Brandon's descriptions of Black men and their relationship with women reflect this fault.

"The Black man knows how to infiltrate a woman," Brandon said. I noted that his statement was sexually provocative, and his stories regarding the subject felt conspicuously guy-like. He spoke with nonchalance that felt debonair. Brandon's statement echoes the internalization of the racial narratives as highlighted by scholars such as hooks (1992; 2004a), West (1994) and others (Collins, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Staples, 1982). This statement acted to reify the positive,

stereotypic, and problematic aspects of the Black male hypersexual narrative, specifically the belief of Black men and their innate sexual prowess. Likewise, Brandon's narratives served to reinforce his identity as a Black man. Yet, Brandon's sexual identity was experienced in the preparation of sexuality, making big and small gestures through the day to express his interest in his wife. Prowess was demonstrated through more than just intercourse, but in meaningful experiences with his partner.

"If you like someone you like someone, you can even take into consideration, you can use my wife for example. You know, when I first met her she didn't like me. She thought I was a regular old little nigga, little Black dude. I don't blame her. I expected it. What I did, was… my first impression, it probably changed her thinking. I came at her a certain way. First time I met her, I said Hi and walked away. I talked to her for a quick second. Then, days couple days went by I've seen her again, "Oh hey how you doing? All right all right cool, nice to see you again." Walked. I just kept throwing little jabs out there. Just the little stuff we were talking about, just little jabs, little jabs, got her number. Then, I would just walk her to class, carry her book bag, all of that little shit. I did that, and then… two months in… So, the thing about it is, and I'm not saying that because I think I'm smooth. I'm saying that because I plugged away and did the little things and after that, she was comfortable enough to say, "this dude, he's all right." It's all part of sexuality, because there was an attraction there, I knew I was trying to get some, she knew I was trying to get some, she made me work for it. Now look what we got, we got a one year old. [laughs] So, I think that, if you want another one. I can't give one, it's a little vulgar. I won't say it. I think the example I gave you with her, it's probably my best one, I really did put in work as far as wanting her. I just played it to how I rock. And, how I plugged away, all of the little things that played a part in getting her and I still have to do that to keep her."

Brandon opted to take on some of the Black male sexual narratives and amplified the areas he deemed positive and useful. His outline of how he approached his wife, how he courted her, how they finally got together, expressed his sense of Black men as adaptable and attuned to women. Yet, the adaptation allowed him to emphasize multiple aspects of dating and beginning a romantic and sexual relationship. He was adamant about not reducing the relationship between him and his wife to just sex. I told him "It sounds like you're saying Black men have the space to be as sexually expressive as possible." Brandon saw this as a way to explore one's sexual freedom.

"The restriction we have from all the racism and hate and all of that shit… It's like, 'Oh, we can do what we want now?'" By discovering different ways of experiencing his identities, Brandon found new ways to perform them. This allowed him to challenge his own preconceived notions of his behavior. On a closer inspection, Brandon's description mirrors hooks' description of Black male sexuality and how the performance of sexuality in private provided Black people with a space to explore their bodies and feelings without scrutiny (hooks, 2004a). For Brandon, his stories showed his evolving understanding of how he performed his sexual identity and how he used sexual expression to better understand himself and his partner.

Brandon opted to give stories that related to his relationship. "She thought I was a regular, old, little nigga, little Black dude. I don't blame her, I expected it." He laughed. "What I did was… my first impression? It probably changed her thinking." He described himself as smooth. He wanted to explain how he was genuinely interested. He wanted to show her that sex was anything but the end goal, even though "She knew I was trying get some."

Brandon's sexuality identity was exemplified by emphasizing attraction and intimacy, counter to the presumed narratives and beliefs of Black men and their sexuality. And, even then, there are some things that were left private. As he was preparing to give another story, he stopped himself: "So I think, if you want another one… I can't give one, it's a little vulgar. I won't say it. I think the example I gave you with her, it's probably my best one."

His love for his wife was apparent, and it illustrated how Brandon's sexuality was also expressed through caring for and supporting his partner and his son. "I value her well-being. I want to protect her, and make sure she's cool. I try to do everything I can for them, and I think all of the work that was put in before led up to that day, and I value that."

Co-Constructed Narratives – Interactional

Like other participants, the shared identities of blackness, masculinity, and our sexuality provided instances where my position as Brandon's audience allowed us to mutually share experiences. I wrote in my field notes that Brandon's friendly and humorous personality made the interview feel inviting and encouraged me to disclose details about myself as they pertained to Brandon's stories.

Likewise, Brandon stated that our developing relationship allowed him to speak freely (in this case, saying anything and everything he wanted, however he wanted), as he would be better prepared and, in a sense, would tone down his language if he spoke with someone else. Our shared identities allowed Brandon to be himself which allowed us to dialogue back and forth about our experiences. Likewise, this helped Brandon to share stories that were unfettered and uncensored.

I noticed that, during Brandon's narration, I was motivated to share my own experiences to join his. I felt that Brandon provided candid stories and details because he believed that our shared identities allowed me to easily understand him. Because of this, I believe that the conversation felt like a safe space for us to speak openly about our experiences without scrutiny, mirroring descriptions provided by hooks (2004a). We shared mutual stories of our encounters with police officers which highlighted the common concern about our lives while interacting with law enforcement. I believe these interjections on my end added to the details that Brandon brought to the interview and supported his own narrative.

In also noted in my field notes that I was surprised by Brandon's statement about Black men naturally knowing how to seduce women better than anyone else. While Brandon's narrative pointed to wanting to bend and resist negative racial narratives, he was willing to endorse positive ones. My response was to reflect what he said, though my generalized answer echoed my surprise.

Black Masculinity in Relation to Sexuality – Brandon's Summary

Brandon experienced his Black masculinity through his effort to challenge people's assumptions about Black men. He loved being a Black man and expressed that he wouldn't change it for the world. Yet, he believed that he must first acknowledge how other people saw him if he was going to challenge them. Brandon tried to be as expressive as possible, and his performance of Black masculinity as way of a being unfettered by the criticism of others was key to his success.

Yet, Brandon recognized that his appearance did put him in danger. People could see his build and deem him threatening. It was important for him to head off these encounters by immediately changing people's perspectives of him. Brandon identified the racial narratives attached to him and made it a mission to extinguish them at any opportunity. First impressions were paramount for him.

Thus, Brandon's sexuality mirrored the same sense of liberation (hooks, 2004a) he experienced as a Black man. His method for searching and attuning himself to other people was a model that could amplify his ability to be attuned to his wife. He could continue to challenge the problematic associations with Black men and sexuality by adopting narratives of deceit and promiscuity and changing them to be honest and accommodating. Finding new ways to experience his masculinity created new ways of experiencing his sexuality, knowing odds are stacked against him and finding ways to subvert them.

Brandon's audiences were clear, as he spoke to himself as he reminisced on the construction of his identities, and his family, namely his son. Brandon served as his own audience and demonstrated the development of his Black masculinity and sexuality. He outlined his journey for himself. Brandon's narration was jovial, and he felt grateful, which I appreciated. I felt as

though I was dictating his biography for him, as his stories reminded us of where he came from. His narratives felt progressive and mature, and felt like he was constantly looking forward to the future. He had to be focused on his family rather than others. Additional audiences weren't very important to him.

As a result, Brandon' s stories positioned his family, specifically his son, as his audience. Brandon highlighted that he had to bestow his narratives to his son. It was important to Brandon that his son grew up to understand the disadvantages that would hold him back. Likewise, Brandon's narratives attempted to line his son's future with expectations and advice that would be useful for him as a Black boy and a Black man.

THEO'S SELECTED NARRATIVES

Theo was a 26-year-old African American man who volunteered to help me with the project. He was a sales manager and was in town to visit his parents, relatives, and partner of seven years. He heard about my dissertation from the second wave of informant who shared information about my dissertation at church. Theo agreed to participate in the interview and reached out to me to figure out details. Prior to the interview, I had bumped into him at the bank and we quickly caught up and scheduled a time to speak to one another. He shared that he would be willing to help me and that he found the topic of the dissertation interesting.

When I called him, we touched base about how our respective summers were going. We talked briefly about our plans for the summer and talked about how busy he was, traveling between home and his university with work hours scattered in between. I ran Theo through the consent form and the scope of the project, reminded him of the semi-structured nature of the conversation, and I invited him to take the questions and stories anywhere he went.

Black Masculinity – Strength, Unity, Power and Changing Perspectives

For Theo, Black masculinity was experienced through "strength… unity [and] power." "That's what I see being a Black male. Power, untapped potential that I'm trying to show the world." When he demonstrated this potential to people, he sought to educate himself and focus on college. Likewise, he demonstrated his power by strengthening his body, which helped him to be successful in football. His confidence was notable and, though he spoke with certitude, he was modest. According to him, this confidence was cultural. "You see it from the culture… And it doesn't just come from being a male; it comes from Black people in general. A strength to push beyond our means even though the odds are stacked against us," he said.

The story that demonstrated the performance of Theo's identity revolved around football (TN #1). Football provided Theo with the ability to show his endurance, to demonstrate his power and fortitude in a way that extended beyond the physicality of the sport. Mentally, he had to focus and hone his skills to compete with younger students with more capable bodies. The Mac Award was how the university acknowledged Theo's efforts, but also it also reinforced the values he attached to Black masculinity.

> **"**You know I came into football as a 24 year old man, I hadn't played since high school, and we had a year of training… coming to […] compete with kids six years younger than me in football, so in that I took it personally to compete. To show that I could compete at the level they can. Then I experienced I had a set back where I became ineligible because of grades, and I had to dig myself out of another hole. But, I was able to demonstrate to my coaches that I had enough, that I was tough, that I was… no matter what needed to be done, I was going to sacrifice to get it done, no matter if it was for myself or for my team. In that, I won the Mac Award which was for hard work, dedication, it's all voted on by the couches. You can honor that through my two years of football and school, it shows that people are always watching and the strength and the leadership you have."

Social recognition was important to Theo. It encouraged him to continue to do well, and most importantly, to challenge the perceptions of others. As he spoke generally of non-Black people, he shared his understanding that, due to his size and race, people might be intimadated by him. He said, "They wanna try me no matter what. So, why not just try them with kindness instead of beef with them? …So they could see that this guy and they could think, 'It's not Black or White.' It's Human change."

As a humble person that tried to put his personhood before his race and gender, Theo built a firm reputation beyond those around him. When he was respectful of others, he negated negative impressions of himself. He told a brief story of an encounter he had working as a bouncer (TN #2).

"I had this one friend that I met in school in the first semester, he was in the Navy. I was just talking about this yesterday. And he… I'm not sure where he was from, but I'm pretty sure being in the Navy, you meet a lot of different people. But, we talked a lot, being the same age, so we had a connection from there. We were cool. Flash-forward to this summer, one of his friends was also a Navy SEAL came to the bar… so I'm a bouncer, I had to check his ID, he had a little attitude. Pat comes in and I don't check his ID, I shake his hand, talk to him a little bit, I don't check his ID, and he goes to the bar. He starts talking to the other guy and I guess someone in the bathroom heard him say that… "Hey, is that bouncer cool?" "Yeah, he's a good guy we're real cool." "okay, okay." So, I just changed that one person's perspective about me… I don't think he had a bad perspective about me, but Pat changed his perception of me, because we had a good relationship."

A friend of one of the bar patrons felt snubbed by Theo's actions when he asked the friend for identification. The patron backed Theo up, and confirmed his reputation as a "good guy." For Theo, this meant that his good nature and rapport with a few people extended to others they knew. He said, "I just changed that one person's perspective about me."

Theo's reputation earned him a lot of respect from his peers Theo performed his Black masculinity through effort and he attempted to garner enough momentum to continually emphasize other aspects of himself. The performance of his identity was an attempt to humanize his image, to shed light on a person expected to scare others. Theo knew that other people saw his body and made immediate assumptions based thereon. This vigilance indicated his awareness of oppressive racial narratives of which he was subject. However, his experience of his own Black identity was the constant attempt to prove other people wrong and to give them a unique perspective of Black men.

Sexuality – Love and Resisting Objectification

Theo's sexuality was oriented around who he loved. "That's the best way I can describe it," he said. "Or what gender you choose to love. That's a tough one, too. I've never been asked that question."

"Tell me your personal thoughts about it," I asked him. "There's no right answer to it."

"Sexuality is who you choose to mate with… that's my best answer, man."

Theo's sexual identity was constituted by those around him, as well as how he decided to express himself. As a heterosexual Black man, his sexual expression stood in contrast to his first roommate (TN #3).

"Well, I don't think it does. I do think it's a choice, I don't think you're born that way, I think it's a choice, but… my first roommate was gay, but he was younger, so I was like "I'm not sure…" I didn't question it. He told me. His cousin told me. But, we've never had any problems. He'll watch stuff that I'll watch, so… I do think it's a choice. I do think it's what you're raised around. I think if a bunch, or a lot of women, are around you can come off more feminine. Not saying that you're gay, but I do think it's a choice. Certain things happen that drive you to that point."

Likewise, Theo believed that sexuality was fostered through a family culture. For example, a family composed mainly of women, or a matriarchy, may elicit more feminine behaviors. Or, a masculine-centric family, or a patriarchy, may elicit more masculine behaviors. The cultivation of Theo's sexual identity and how he expressed it via his beliefs of sexual orientation, pointed to a masculine upbringing, and endorsed his assumption that his roommate did not come from the same background.

I wondered about Theo's heteronormative positions being a central tenet to his identity and what that meant for him. Theo's words were unsurprising to me, and he said them carefully. He spoke as though he wanted to absolve non-heterosexual people of judgment and shame. I was curious. "So, you're saying that certain perspectives that people hold may see sexuality as something you're born into. You feel as though sexuality is something that's more environmental and lived and influenced by the people around you."

Theo agreed. He said that we adapt to our environments and the company people kept could influence them. He explained that what people contributed to our identities play a significant role in the construction of our identities, "consciously, subconsciously, it's going on whether it's positive or negative." Theo shared a story of his upbringing where he saw his parents and relatives interacting with one another (TN #4).

"I think the biggest influences are my parents. Them being married and me seeing that all of the time. I always see my parents together. That right there. And then even when it came to my family as a whole, there was no… there wasn't any homosexuality. It was always one man and one woman. So that's how I grew up seeing things and to this day, it's the same way. That's the culture. Not saying that they're going to ban someone for being gay, but that's what we know, that's who we are. Like, there's no way around it. Your culture shapes you. Growing up, everything I'd seen was like that. My parents' friends, they didn't have gay friends. They had straight friends, man or wife, or single. I was always around kids my age and my cousins always played… I had one boy cousin my age, we played together, we were tight. And then I had a cousin that was a tomboy, but we treated her like she was a girl. Even though she was a tomboy, we knew she was

171

a girl. She had barbies, she played with barbies. I'd bring my ninja turtles and beat em up and leave. Stuff like that. So, for me, it was established. Growing up in the 90s that how it was. It's not like how it is now. That's what shaped me."

"There wasn't any homosexuality. It was always one man and one woman," he stated. "[My family is not] going to ban someone for being gay, but that's what we know… Your culture shapes you."

For Theo, his identity was performed via masculinity and that was shaped through his family. Gender roles were defined and thus, so were sexual orientations. Boys played sports and girls played with Barbies. Boys liked girls and girls liked boys. There was never any exposure to anyone who was non-heterosexual. "That's what shaped me," he said.

Beyond family, however, Theo's sexuality was also cultivated by the media, specifically hip-hop and R&B. We laughed about this, as though this bit of information were obvious. As Theo named genres, I said to him, "I was thinking, 'Oh my god, I can think of so many songs where [sex and chasing girls] was the topic of the song'."

"I can think of a song for anything. You can't go wrong," he replied.

Yet, despite those influences, Theo saw his sexual identity coming down specifically around sexual orientation. Black masculine sexuality could be a thing, but his sexual identity was influenced by so many factors that the easiest way for him to think about it was in terms of "gay or straight."

When I asked about Theo's personal sexuality and how he expressed it, his responses were reserved. He spoke briefly of his seven-year relationship and the amount of focus and dedication he has for his partner. Ethnicity or race were not major factors for him. Indeed, Theo could not share stories where they were important. At that moment, he stated:

"I know people that… not like sexual relationships, people that I've known where, just because I'm a black male, they're attracted to me. Nothing about my personality, just the fact I

was a 6'4 Black male who had everything going for him. Or was working hard, that stuff right there, that happened a lot. It also happened because I'm a 6'4 Black male with dreads."

Theo understood that there were racial and racist sexual narratives of Black men that circled him. His approach was to ignore it, or just to shut it down. "People come up to me and it's like, 'Oh, I like them tall, dark, and handsome.' People say stuff like that. It happens all the time. They flirt with you. But it's like, 'all right, not now, come on.' I ain't got time for that." While Theo's narratives reflect an understanding and awareness of the racial narratives that were affixed to him, his strategy allowed him to avoid internalizing those negative beliefs of Black men. Likewise, Theo's reservation about sharing his sexual expression and related experiences highlighted sexuality as a private experience. While he did not say what that privacy meant to him, it echoed hooks (2004a) descriptions of the private arena being a place where sexuality could be freely explored without judgment. In such a case, Theo's narratives show his wish to avoid scrutiny and internalizing problematic descriptions of Black men.

Co-Constructed Narratives – Interactions

I note in my field notes that I had identified with Theo less than other participants and less than I anticipated. I mentioned this in my notes in the middle of the interview and at the end. While I accepted and resonated with his steadfast commitment to guarding his privacy (evident in discussion around sexuality), it also made it difficult to connect with him. This was understandable to me, as I spent less time orienting Theo to my research and I spent less time building rapport. This was due to time constraints which were non-existent or flexible with other participants. As a result, my questions and my responses to him felt bare and mechanical. I felt awkward even as I

173

tried to pull for more information and I did not ask a lot of follow up questions. In turn, this may have contributed to Theo providing small details about how he experienced his identities.

Black Masculinity in Relation to Sexuality – Theo's Summary

Theo experienced his Black masculinity through strength, power, and community, and found ways to subvert the expectations of failure. He was adamant about locating and testing the beliefs people had about Black men and he demonstrated hard work and resilience when they anticipated aggression or mediocre performance. Theo's self-confidence enabled him to perform despite the weight of racial narratives he experienced, and he wanted to use his resolve to become a leader for others. Theo wanted to serve as an example of a strong and influential Black man unfettered by problematic racial narratives to himself as well as other Black boys and Black men. Thus, Theo's performance of Black masculinity, founded upon community, strength, and power, allowed him to internalize those same values and encouraged him to act in accordance to them.

Theo's Black masculinity and sexuality were informed by his family culture where he learned and appreciated the unity they taught him. He experienced his identities as the result of the culture he was born into. Black sexuality was learned and could be challenged like the oppressive racial narratives tossed upon him by other people. Yet, while Theo's Black masculinity was front and center and engaged with the world, he preferred to keep his experiences and stories about his sexuality to himself. This was motivated by his casual dismissal of sexually objectifying racial narratives. He didn't have time for it and didn't want to make time for it.

Speaking to himself as his audience, Theo's stories described his values and positions and served to remind himself of them and how he developed his identities. He reminded himself of his

family and how they modeled masculine values for him. Likewise, Theo's narratives served to remind him to avoid getting distracted by racist perceptions of him and to focus on his own goals.

The chapter covered the review and interpretation of the participant's narratives as it pertained to how they experienced their masculinity in relation to their sexuality. The following chapter acts as a companion to these narratives and expands the scope of the reflexive, interactional element to the performative analysis that I described throughout these observations.

CHAPTER V

A RESEARCHER'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

As outlined in chapter 2, an autoethnography is a methodology which utilizes the subjective experiences of the researcher as data with which to explore the research question or phenomenon. With reference to the present study, an autoethnography might entail the researcher's use of autobiographical material with which to locate intersecting identities and cultural experiences. As a reflexive approach, autoethnography might illuminate a subject's experience using the observations and findings from a researcher's analysis. This role goes beyond "merely" conducting research; rather, researchers must consider how their identities and experiences shaped their work. This position eschews the notion of researcher neutrality that is common to more traditional approaches (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

In autoethnography, the researcher participates directly in the research process, producing a "heartful" narrative (Ellis, 1999), an evocative and engaging narrative pertinent to the research question or interest, but also one which calls for a willing vulnerability on the part of the researcher. The author effectively familiarizes the readers with experiences attached to his or her personal and cultural identities (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), and its intersection with, and import to, the research interest. The narrative is a compelling one, and even as it may be anxiety provoking for the vulnerable laying bare of the researcher's autobiographical details, the researcher maintains a scholarly reflexivity, never losing sight of the exercise as a research enterprise, firstly, as opposed to a "mere" memoir or autobiography. As I noted in chapter 2, many Black scholars and authors used autobiographies to connect their experiences to cultural backgrounds, and to provide meaningful socio-political commentary about the plight of people of color (Baldwin, 1998; Coates, 2015; Douglas, 1845; Ellison, 1964; Fanon, 1976/2008, hooks, 1994; Jacobs, 1861; Lorde, 1984).

These Black scholars, while not autoethnographic researchers, wrote evocative and powerful narratives of Black experiences. These scholars also serve as my models for this autoethnography.

In this chapter, I will share my narratives related to my experience of blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. The questions I am responding to are consequently the same ones I have asked the other Black men who participated in the study to respond to. It is a question that is "mine", to the very extent that it was "theirs", highlighting the impossibility of "removing" in "objectivity" or distance. myself from the project in "objectivity" or distance.

In what is to follow, I share three stories that I identified as important moments regarding my masculinity and Black sexuality. The stories are framed as personal autoethnographic narratives (Ellis, 2008; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), so I will follow the stories with a reflection dedicated to contextualizing them through the literature. These stories act as a researcher's attempt to illuminate certain cultural experiences or challenges that arose for him as he constructed and performed his Black masculine identities. At the end of this chapter, I will analyze my performance of my cultural identities, naming the specific cultural experiences and connecting it to the relevant literature.

Masculinity – Making of a Black Boy

When I was fourteen years old, I was one of a handful of students of color in a predominantly White, Catholic school. If my peers suffered from the anxiety of role confusion, I didn't notice. Instead, I saw White students awkwardly flirt with one another, they told crude jokes, grabbed at each other, and mastered profanity. Our class sizes were small, and so everyone cliqued, though I often felt unmoored amid their fun. I thought I existed somewhere on the fringes of our class. Part of my 'placement' was due to the teachers who named me disengaged, problematic, stubborn, and defiant. They told me to not follow in the footsteps of my older brother before they put me in his shadow.

The other reason for my place at the fringes was because a lot of the White kids made sure I knew where I stood. Some of the White students wanted to put together a Black boy, so they packaged their misconceptions and gave me a manual to study and internalize. I listened to the commentary of other students, tried to find some footing on who or what I was.

White classmates pointed out a Black kindergartener to me and jokingly named me as his mentor. I looked at comedians, actors, and musicians to teach me how to behave. When the students told me that I dressed White, I thought about how to modify the school uniform to mimic hip-hop fashion. Khaki pants became a couple of sizes too big. My lanky arms dangled from the holes of blanket polo sleeves on an oversized shirt. I grew my hair and donned corn rows like the Black men on TV. When kids told me that I sounded White, I thought about how a lot of the Black rappers had a command of slang that the kids often imitated. I practiced my slang in the mirror, mimicked Black comedians to get my lips used to words that wouldn't come out of my mouth otherwise. I thought about rappers who lined their glossy music videos with the bodies of women. I thought about how Black men held their power in their rebellion against authority; their apathy was nonchalant, and all of this was punctuated with swagger. I assembled myself through the measured performances of Black boys and men. Out of the all the students, I paid the most attention to another Black boy in the class, Michael.

When Michael arrived at the school years prior, he grabbed everyone's attention He was the active Black child and I was unofficially his foil, an early point of reference for other kids. My athleticism paled in comparison to his. I was slow where Michael was fast. He was quick-witted, quick to respond and he irritated the teachers. I was quiet and timid. He was sociable. He neutered cliques in any and every way without much resistance from others. I stood and observed his movements.

I tried to rationalize my envy and reframed it as annoyance. I tried to convince myself that his lack of tact was bothersome. I was curious about him like everyone else. I wanted to know more about what made him work. What experiences did he have before that allowed him to move with clumsy grace? How was he able to be so funny, crude as he may be? What allowed him to actively defy teachers, to brush aside the other students? Did confidence look like that?

Michael and I had no problems personally. Our exchanges lasted a few sentences and that was that. Our relationship was forced. We were two of three Black families in the school at that time. People put us together and then we pushed ourselves together and awkwardly drifted apart. So, I opted just to watch him from afar. Michael didn't talk White. He didn't dress White. His tall, lanky frame, his faded haircut, was Black, and I was an anomaly by comparison. He did everything I studied in those videos and movies. I was a replica thing and I watched a real boy.

Michael flirted. He was forward. He was disgusting. But, he got results. He was raw in a way that was so flippant and casual that the girls engaged him. He would talk openly about fucking girls with anyone and everyone. Sometimes, the girls would respond in kind.

Towards the end of a school day, Michael gathered his books and backpack from his locker and sat on a desk in our homeroom. A few of the students gathered around him, myself included. We joked around with one another before Michael called one of the girls over. "Lisa," he said. "I got a question for you. Just really quick."

Lisa stopped talking to her friends and turned to him. "What is it?"

Michael pulled up his pants by the belt buckle and adjusted the straps of his bookbag. "What would you do if I asked you to suck my dick?" he asked.

"What?"

"You gonna make me repeat it? What would you do if I asked you to give me a blowjob?"

Lisa was silent for a few seconds and fired back: "Do you have a condom?"

"What the fuck?"

"Do you have a condom?"

"Why the fuck would you use a condom for a blowjob"

'That's the only way it's going to happen," Lisa replied. "I don't want to get an STD."

Michael laughed, "That doesn't even happen!"

Lisa shrugged and turned back around. Her friends laughed about it. I stood there and tried to process the exchange. There wasn't an ounce of concern or fear. I had no idea how to approach girls and I had no idea how to be as forward as Michael. Forget being appalled – I was undeniably jealous. But, I was also ashamed. I asked myself: Could I do that? Did I have that sort of appeal? Would I ever have that sort of appeal? That's what men are supposed to do, yes? Be that brazen. That bold. All the Black men I watched were fearless. I didn't fit in that realm.

Other boys would imitate Michael and tell each other girls to suck their dicks, or immaturely talk about big Black dildos. But, they were rarely as fascinating as Michael. This kid knew what he wanted. I wondered if any girl would go back to a White boy if they fucked this guy. This boy was the real deal, hood Black boy from the city.

I spent those days floridly hiding the interests and hobbies that threatened to betray my efforts to gain public acceptance. I remained silent if anything related to science fiction books, video games, and anime came up in conversation with my classmates. I tried to learn the basic tenets of basketball, football, and other sports Black boys were meant to like. I digested the music Black boys were supposed to like, forced myself to like the basic beats of mainstream east coast rap over the tunes of jazz and classical music that appealed to me. I held insults and profanities in my back pocket to make sure I could respond with force should anybody, adult or child, crossed

me. Black boys were supposed to be quick witted and defiant. I did everything I could to make sure no one saw me as a basic and fake, off-brand Black boy.

Yet, it never dawned on me if Michael felt that same anxiety that I did. I never thought about whether he held onto his blackness in the face of White assumptions or if he struggled to keep himself together despite what people would tell him.

I went to high school gazed at other Black boys, I gauged their movements, I wondered about their own way of life. I tried to find some way to calibrate myself to a notion of manhood that felt elusive.

Blackness – De-Racing, Re-Racing

By the time I was eighteen, I attempted to peel away every bit of blackness to attain some colorblind revelation. I attended high schools that were more racially diverse, yet regardless of the diversity, my attempts to perform my Black manhood failed to meet expectations. People would tell me that I sounded White, did White things, I liked White things, and behaved like a boy that only really knew White people. I heard them and thought that I didn't assemble the pieces good enough. I didn't tighten the bolts, I attached the wrong leg somewhere, missed a peg somewhere else, and if you applied a bit of pressure to me I would fall apart.

I heard the comments and understood their words to mean "Loosen up your gait. Loosen up your tongue. Lose your hobbies. Don't you know who you are, boy? Don't you know where you belong? Let us remind you." The district of blackness was drawn accordingly, and people let me know. White people called me Black and told me to get back to the ghetto. Black people called me White and warned me that White people would never really accept me. I tried to distance myself

from the comments as I wanted to avoid the small, rigid structures of blackness. I didn't want to put together the pieces of my blackness because it was expected of me.

So, I tried to rebel. I tried to reject what everyone told me about my blackness. I didn't want to be this Black boy that had to do every Black thing. I just wanted to be. So, I committed myself to experiences that resonated with me. Race didn't matter. That only requirement was a visceral feeling that I could never describe. I ditched the branded attire for more form fitting black and gray t-shirts, hoodies, and jeans to avoid comments about how Black boys style themselves. I let my hair down more, though I braided it still because Black hair couldn't fall like glorified White hair could. In my eyes it was the only way to come close to grasping the compliments people gave White people about their beautiful hair. I listened to alternative rock because someone told me it was real music. I listened to "conscious" hip-hop like Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, the Roots and Lupe Fiasco because they were the acceptable musicians that rapped about something other than regal hedonism. They were the ones "with something to say," a comment my White peers would share to paint hip-hop with broad strokes and make note of the exceptional ones. I tried to be one of the exceptional ones, to be something other than Other.

When I was eighteen, I entered my first committed relationship. I dated a former classmate of mine, Taylor, a White girl who agreed that we should eschew titles because who knew what her divorced parents thought. We saw each other on weekends after community college courses that made me feel like an unworthy specimen she wished to tuck away beside her success.

But, Taylor's parents were fine with me on the surface. I paid them the kind of lip service that proved my credentials. I cited the philosophy I read, I told them the basic 101 psychology I learned. I told them about my aspirations to transfer to a proper university. Her parents enjoyed it. They loved it. I was relaxed, and we enjoyed our time together.

Taylor and I dated for a year and over time I would meet her other extended family: Her step-siblings, her half-siblings, her relatives. I spent most of the time around her mother and step-dad. I became entrenched over time. I built a familiarity at their place measured by the extensive shopping her mother would do to accommodate me with food she hoped I liked.

Taylor's step-sister visited their parents every now again. She was ten years older than us and was the mother to a biracial son. The father was unknown in name and location. The boy was affectionate and curious, walked around and looked over and under everything in Taylor's home. When he saw me he would stare, eyes wide and silent for a few seconds before he smiled, and he walked away. Everyone would see this and comment. Taylor found it cute.

The world seemed fine. My relationship with Taylor's parents felt solid and I believed it was. My reservations, when I felt them, were quickly silenced. I was determined to not give them a space in my mind.

One day, Taylor and I spoke on the phone. We followed our routine. We bashfully whispered about our plans for the following week, plans for our ears only. We talked about movies, the happenings in school and the fluctuating stability of her friendships. We did all of this before we broached the subject of her nephew.

"So, guess what my mom and step-dad were saying," Taylor said. "So, they were talking about my nephew and how they're worried about him growing up."

"What do you mean? He seems like a good boy."

"Yeah. Well, they were talking about how his father isn't around and how he just stares at every Black guy that he sees."

"So, what?"

"Well, my mom started worrying about it, saying how concerned she is and how confused he'll be." Taylor's voice perked up as she imitated her mother, elongated the last syllables of words with nasally, whiny pitch. "She was like, 'I'm worried about kids like that. Like how would they even know what to identify as? I wouldn't want to subject my kids to anything like that. He'll be so lost,' and 'It seems so wrong to put a child through that." Taylor mocked and mocked like she wanted to show me how much she disagreed with her mother.

I knew that a comment about this Black and White boy, who was only a few years old, was also a comment about me and Taylor. In her mom's eyes, I was guilty. My proximity to an unnamed man, based on our blackness, was enough to find me guilty of her step-daughter's pregnancy and the birth to a biracial boy. "I can't believe she'd say that," Taylor told me, "it was so shocking to hear."

I had little to say in defense. "My cousin is biracial, he seemed fine, he's not confused!" I stammered and offered my experience and accepted the disapproval, but I knew that what is often unsaid is still audible.

I was surprised once again and caught off guard by another person who, because they were White, believed themselves qualified to evaluate my potential and expectations. "It's so weird to hear that from your mother of all of the other people," I said.

"Yup. Shocked me too."

I sat on the phone and listened to Taylor speak. I was confused, worried, and angry. But most of all, I felt guilty. I thought, 'I could do that to my girlfriend. I could put her in the same distressing position as her sister. Give her a confused, torn child and disappear as Black men do.' I was as much accountable for Black men in the past as I was in the future. My actions were interpreted through many lenses, one of which became the color of my skin. The stories of Black

male bodies intercepted my movement and made it, so my innocence was also restricted by the instantaneous moment I would become ruinous.

I'd see her days later and she'd greet me with a hug and kiss and ask me about how college classes were going.

As I grew older, I continued to feel stuck between two poles. I was supposed be human and Black, but my comfort in my skin brought on accusations of Whiteness. I was always Black first and the weight of the problematic, pejorative narratives that came with me would lock me in. The White people who commented on me knew I was Black and, over time, I learned their accusations were to remind me that I was too far out of bounds. It was always to send me back to blackness. Taylor reminded me of this. No matter how much goodwill and positive memories I accumulated, as soon as I did anything that harmed her and threatened to take away her future, I would be Black and dangerous.

Now, I experience my blackness as all the above and otherwise. The Black experiences that I know, while common to some Black people and unfamiliar to others, still taught me the same fundamental lesson: Some people see blackness as a problem and that was inescapable.

Sexuality – Measure of Value

Over time, I began to appreciate the aspects of myself that I desired to reject. I realized that the narratives about my race were meaningful regardless of their application to me. I began to honor my hair and adore it. I changed my attire to something that felt like me rather than an imitation of whatever I saw in the world. I spoke in a way that sounded like me. But, I understood

that no matter what I do, my body could be taken from me – or, at the very least, intruded upon - at any moment with a gesture or a comment.

As I got older, my body became a site of curiosity, a thing that gathered wonderment and questions that felt fantastical. People, primarily White women, shared their thoughts with me as though they were confessing their sins. Others were less bashful. They explained their pedigree through all the in-vivo research they conducted. On many occasions, women, mostly White women, seemingly approached me due to their curiosity about my body. They commented on my complexion and appearance. They told me that they thought I was well-endowed and that I was good at fucking. If I said nothing to affirm or reject their claims, they told me that I looked like I wanted them, as though they interpreted my silence as affirmation. Some women told me about their first experiences with a Black partner were unremarkable, disappointing, or generally normal. Other people would tell me they had a thing for Black men and that sex with them was generally better. There were also occasions where people shared their curiosity about Black men and their bodies and, in the same conversation, they shared their hesitation to date them because of the potential criticism they could receive from their family.

White men shared their curiosity through their disgust. They highlighted my supposed primitivism, like they sought evidence for their beliefs of Black men being bestial fuck-animals, promiscuous men who ravaged women and leave them devastated. When I dated Taylor, some White guys asked her questions. "Do you have issue holding in your shit?" They asked, "Because he stretched out your asshole?" "Is his dick as big as they say?" "Do you only have anal sex?" "I like you, but you only date Black guys." Or "You're great but dating outside of your race is unnatural." Taylor told me these things that other partners would come to repeat later.

Even with the intrusive, objectifying experiences under my belt and even though I was vigilant, I was still caught by surprise. When I was twenty-three, I went to a few bars with my co-workers. I had known them for a few months and during that time our conversations related primary to work, rarely adventuring into personal territory. If anything, the topics remained stiff though occasionally one of us would share something about school, our pets, or a mutual friend we had on social media. After weeks of talking about it, we agreed to hang out for the first time outside of work. The group comprised of four White women and me, and we went from location to location in Pittsburgh Southside, drinking and talking before we ended up at a club. The women danced, but I didn't, at least not for long.

The conversations were interesting. I got to know each of my co-workers, I learned about who they were and how they enjoyed themselves when we could speak candidly away from our supervisors. We got along well beyond the structure of a work day. We stayed out all night until everything began to close.

We stood outside a bar as the patrons began to pour out. A co-worker got a phone call from her friend and began to ask them where she could meet them. The others stood around, they smoked, talked about something or other related to work or people that predated my arrival in their workspace. I watched everyone leave and waited for the women to finish their cigarettes.

One of the co-workers turned to me, took a drag from her cigarette and, as she exhaled, she asked, "How big is your dick?"

My eyes widened. "Whoa, what?"

"I'm curious, how big is your dick?"

I stammered and struggled before I tried to answer. "Uh—"

"Come on," another co-worker interrupted. "He's Black. His dick has to be huge."

"You're right," the other replied. "That's very true."

"Have you ever been with a Black guy with a small dick? Ever?"

"Nope. They've always had big dicks. Like always."

I stood silently as they laughed with each other. My presence wasn't what was funny to them, it was the fact that someone 'ignorantly' asked a question whose answer she should have known. Every Black man my co-workers slept with confirmed my experience before I could bring any clarity to my life. The women gestured to know my body better than I did, to be experts of Black men better than I was, and that to even wonder about my dick was amateur and novice. I listened as my co-workers presented their well-supported data. My word meant nothing.

I couldn't process the exchange. We were already moving on, leaving to go home or to meet up with other people. I distanced myself from my co-workers, I was unsure of what they thought. I wondered why she was curious. What was it about me that invited the question especially if she presumably already had an answer? I never figured it out.

The following week, my co-workers would speak to me as though the exchange never happened. As confused as I was, I understood why. Their experiences were situated on a fact and why question something so obvious? Why fixate on it? Likewise, as a Black man, why would I be offended? Such statements felt like I should be proud that my body was taken from me with ease, that women could desire what I was and nothing else had to happen.

Admittedly, there was power in the sexuality. Those are the times when I took ownership of my body. I began to find ways to reclaim a sense of myself that was taken from me. If I had the narratives attached to me, I would wield them to fend against any suspicions of my body and any anxiety I experienced thereafter. So, in the future, when people asked about my body and about my prowess, I would actively respond to them, engaged their inquiry with mystery. I evoked

curiosity. During flirty conversations, I looked for any hints of their curiosity of Black men. I listened and waited for their comments on the race of ex-boyfriends. I listened for stories of their family's criticism of them or stories of relatives who dated outside of their race, or when they openly admitted their affection for Black men. I wanted to engage their curiosity of a forbidden Black body.

So, one night some months later, I went out with my co-workers again. It was an autumn night, colder than expected. My co-workers and I stood around in a local bar where the walls were lined with Christmas lights and glasses that hung too low and reflected the light. People huddled inside or shuffled together outside the doors to smoke and talk and do nothing else. My co-workers danced and talked to the bartenders, some of them would tell me about their relationships, with the guys that they knew and mutual friends of ours from some time ago.

"So, what was it?" I would ask. "What is it about them that you liked?"

"I don't know," A co-worker would tell me. Their words lingered and trail off and they smiled. "Black men just know how to do it, you know?"

"Do what?"

"They just know how to do it better," she said. "I don't know, it's not boring. It's exciting. There's something about a muscular, athletic Black dude that I love."

"Like if you fucked a football player, you'd be happy." I said.

"Absolutely." She laughed.

We laughed and continued to talk about it. I asked her, "but, what if it didn't happen? What if he didn't have it all like that?"

"I mean, that has happened. It's been nothing special. But, from what I know, it's been mostly true."

And "mostly true," would be the chorus to a remixed song about Black men. The guys that fell outside of "mostly true" were the outliers. They were statistical anomalies, men who would be forgotten in the stories I'd hear.

"What's your number?" Some women asked. When I started giving out my phone number, they responded, "No, your number."

"Take a guess," I said. And that number was always high. They referenced other men as their point of calibration. I told them they were wrong, or maybe they were off, by such and such a number.

"Nuh uh," they said. "I don't believe you. I never would've guessed."

"Based on what?"

"Just who you are. How you come across. I would've thought otherwise," they said.

I wanted to avoid having my body stolen from me and sometimes that meant equipping arrogance. If my body acted as a site of curiosity, and if that site were open, I wanted to control the narratives that came to me. Controlling the impressions of others and managing their desires through ambiguity became a strength I relished in discovery. I found power in resistance.

Looking Back

My sense of self was held in tandem with social evaluation. I evaluated myself based on the rubric of others, and I experienced tension and confusion in myself. I sought out a repertoire of Black traits to string together what it meant to be a man. I internalized the negative beliefs about Black people to the point that I tried to avoid it through colorblind ideology. I withstood comments that suggested that I could be dangerous. I endured comments about my body before finding ways to strike back against others' assumptions. For Black boys, we became men early, forced to accept

our manhood before we understood our bodies (hooks, 2004a). I felt like the world told me who I should be and how I should behave. I felt like the world told me that people saw me as a man, even as a child, because I was Black and that there was nothing I could do about it. I felt like my body would always be interpreted by others as dangerous, because Black men and, by proxy, Black boys, were dangerous. I felt like I had to embrace my sexuality, as being a man was all about swagger and womanizing. These expectations confused me, and I felt pressured to follow them or a strong urge to avoid them. My narratives focused on my attempts to understand my body as it was framed by different, racialized expectations.

My story about masculinity detailed my attempts to understand my gender roles by watching other boys and men, a frequent practice for some of us (Shrock and Schwalbe, 2009). I developed and attempted to embody my masculinity through the Black masculine scripts (Jackson, 2006) that other White people suggested. My wish for acceptance meant adopting the characteristics and behaviors endorsed by other Black people. I used actors, comedians, and musicians as my models for masculinity, and I tried to understand their use of power, sexuality, and strength as measures of their manhood. I studied Michael's movements to determine my role as I had no idea about it back then. My endorsement of a masculine model, which endorsed the hegemonic perspectives of manhood (hooks, 2004a) was pivotal to my sense of self and led to confusion.

I could only be a Black man and that meant there were essential differences to a Black man than there was to a White man. Indeed, the masculine scripts I found depicted a strong, seductive, aggressive, and nonchalant Black man that was coveted and hated by many (Fanon (1976/2008; Jackson, 2006). The narratives around these Black men were powerful, as they were distrusted as much as they were desired. It was a Black boy's rite of passage to internalize these narratives and

191

traits there were imperative to his manhood (hooks, 2004a). My attempts to measure Michael's performance rather than any of the other non-Black boys in my class revealed how anxious and restricted I was as an adolescent. The Black masculine scripts were all I had to model myself into a person that everyone expected me to be. To be otherwise meant that I was going to be ridiculed and rejected by my White peers.

However, I discovered the contradictions in that desire for social approval. If I transformed myself into the Black boy the other White students expected me to be, then I simply showed them how different I was. I placed myself in a reductive box. I had othered myself based on my blackness and my masculinity. Referencing Fanon, Ahmed (2007) mentions that the way raced people gather narratives makes their presence known in White-oriented spaces. It reshapes and reconfigures us, making us take up space and remain hyper-visible. This hyper-visibility puts us under surveillance as we are now evaluated by those that own the space. The White boys I knew were not restricted in the same way when they delineated my role as a Black boy. Indeed, they could joke about it and reference it and play with the subject of my masculinity and body as though it were their own property. Yet, if I stepped out of bounds, if I "acted White" or something other than "Black," I was stopped, questioned, and told to return to the space they carved out for me. I could only exist in the enclosure of my blackness.

My blackness summoned beliefs, evoked curiosity, and constituted rationale for my behaviors. Fanon explains that, when confronted by a racist Other, Black bodies are transformed by the historical, dehumanizing narratives that are associated with them (Fanon, 1976/2008; Jackson, 2006; Kovel 1984). I understood how I summoned narratives in my relationship with Taylor. I spent years trying to fight against what was expected of me as a Black boy, futilely clinging to the belief that I could divorce myself from the historical and political narratives of my

race. When people told me that I "acted White," I understood it as a call for me to be the singular, stereotypical Black person they knew. I rejected that call. But, even in my resistance, I still pushed for acceptance from White people and reshaped myself in a way that was adequate. Yet, I realized too late that I had identified most things related to blackness as bad. I internalized that colorblind ideology to gain social approval and I derided my race as a result.

I internalized racist ideals to forego rigid definitions of blackness and unfortunately relied on definitions of Whiteness as synonyms for humanity. I tailored to gain acceptance from White people. I shouted down Black-associated experiences and acted under an internalized assumption that blackness was problematic. I fixed my speech to be articulate because "talking Black" was seen as unintelligent or incoherent. I shunned Black music as I felt it "had nothing to say," and implied it was shallow. I ditched urban-styled clothes to avoid "thug fashion," and I desperately tried to behave in a way that appropriate, to prove to White people that I was safe and that I was never a threat. I suppressed myself and tried to be the exceptional one, one of the "good ones," who shouted down so much of Black culture if it meant that I could be human (Cooper, 2006). Yet, as my narrative for blackness showed, I would always be seen through my blackness.

My blackness was a sign that Taylor should be cautious. When Taylor's mother conveyed anxiety and confusion about her biracial nephew, she highlighted the problem of my blackness. To Taylor's mother, I was phobogenic (Fanon, 1976/2008). I evoked fear and anxiety within her as she implicitly tried to protect her daughter. I could put Taylor in the same situation and leave her distressed. I could give her a confused, torn child and disappear as Black men do. I could be dangerous and such fears would be confirmed. I was as much accountable for Black men in the past as I was in the future. The stories of Black male bodies intercepted my movement and made it, so my innocence was also restricted when I would become dangerous. In Taylor 's world, I had

the potential to be a problem. Her conversation with her mother showed me that I was accepted up to a point, otherwise I was out of place and took up space (Ahmed, 2007). My blackness was part of me, it was irremovable. Doing anything to divorce myself from it brought anxiety and confusion and I was surprised when I was reminded of this fact. This was similarly apparent and contrasted in my narrative about my sexuality.

My story of my sexuality focused on me situated as an object of desire and disgust. Many Black men experience this oscillation between sexualized objects and dangerous, lascivious beasts (Fanon, 1976/2008; Davis, 1983; Jackson, 2006; hooks, 2004a; Staples, 1982). The narrative of Black male heterosexual promiscuity casts a large shadow over many Black men. It can construct many of us as potential rapists (Davis, 1983), it describes our sexuality as insatiable but desired, or it can make our bodies forbidden (hooks, 2004a; West, 1994).

I grappled with this tension. My narrative focused how I was caught off guard by people, like my co-workers, making racial assumptions about my body. Their beliefs about my body and their matter-of-fact manner by which they presented their evidence showed their endorsement the narrative of Black male sexual prowess. Likewise, their conversation about the Black men they slept with also hinted at the hypersexuality and sexual liberty of Black bodies. When they suggested that they slept with so many Black men, my co-workers insinuated that so many of us were ready to have sex. Their unadulterated questioning and presentation of their evidence echoed the sexual objectification and lecherous examination of Black slaves (Hodes, 1993). Thus, I had my body mindlessly taken from me, examined, and discussed flippantly without any say in the matter.

Though I spend a brief time summarizing my assertive displays of my masculinity, it says something that my moments of agency came through my attempts to reclaim my body through my

sexuality. I embraced the confusion of racial narratives and engaged in the conversations about Black men and their bodies and used the conversation as a passive aggressive avenue to find power. Like other Black men, I used Black sexuality and the associated narratives to regain a sense of power. This "form" of sexuality made me feel excited, calculated and, at times, wily. I felt even more powerful knowing that I controlled my sexuality and wielded it through conversations rather than any explicit sexual act or intercourse. I felt like I could re-take control of my own body and to take command of the racial narratives some people believed, and I enjoyed it. I spoke to my co-worker to arouse her imagination, to probe her assumptions about me and it made me feel good to leave her curious. At times like that, I felt like I was in control, though I was also manipulative, and it felt good. Likewise, this became an arena where I could perform my manhood (Bearman, 2000; hooks, 2004a; Lunceford, 2008).

My actively engaging in conversations that implicitly referenced my sexuality, I willingly located my power and authority through conquering women. To attain power was to wield the narrative as a weapon that could apply to me. Unfortunately, this meant I ignored the objectification of my own body and the women I encountered. I gained ownership of my own body through flirtation and information gathering. I controlled a conversation that I identified as being in my favor. While liberation was my goal, I tried to achieve it through intellectual superiority rather than a reflection of self. As a result, I endorsed a position of Black masculinity and sexuality that promoted sexuality as a form of oppressive domination (hooks, 2004a)

I continue to struggle with the ways my body is sexualized, as many Black men are. I struggle with the idea that the way people perceive my Black body restricts sexual fluidity, turning my sexual identity into a rigid model of heteronormativity. I recognize the ways in which my body is taken and dictated by racist rhetoric. I see where my body is public and on display for others

195

(Butler, 2004). I acknowledge that my route to liberation came through enacting patriarchal values to achieve my ends.

It is important to consider these narratives in tandem with the participants of this dissertation. In doing so, we shall show the dynamic experiences of Black masculinity and sexuality as they are framed by the literature regarding the subject. As such, we will discuss the narratives as stories about a Black, masculine, heterosexual sexuality that affirms and eschews perspectives of Black sexuality and attempts to use their narratives to locate and embody their identities. In the last chapter, I will present a synthesis of the narratives and discuss the implications of the dissertation's research.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the participants' narratives, and particularly how they responded to the research question: how do African American men experience their sexuality? This chapter is structured as follows:

(1) I reiterate the motivation for this project.

(2) I provide an overview of the participants' narratives which enable me to answer the research question and allow me to show how this project dialogues with current research.

(3) I explore the narratives presented throughout chapter 4. In my discussion of these themes, I interpret and analyze the dynamics presented throughout the participants' narratives.

(4) I look at how the autoethnographic process illuminated different interpretations and provide insight into the participant narratives. I also consider how the process helped and hindered the project.

(5) I address the constraints and implications of the study and provide future recommendations for research on Black masculinity and sexuality.

(6) I share closing remarks to end the dissertation the same way it began: with reflection.

REITERATION OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As noted in chapters 1 through 3, Black masculinity and sexuality is a topic of substantial interest across many fields. Likewise, it is a focal subject of many research studies which explore race and gender socialization (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Laing, 2017; Lease, Hampton, Fleming, Bagget, Montes, & Sawyer, 2010; Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006), Black masculinity, gender conformity, and sexual practice (Bowleg et al., 2017; Crook, Thomas,

& Cobia, 2009), race, sexuality, and STI prevention, (Bowleg, 2004; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009; Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004; Saleh, Operario, Smith, Arnold & Kegeles, 2011; Whitehead, 1995), and Black masculinity and heteronormativity (Glenn & Spieldenner, 2013). Many researchers explore the theoretical construction of Black masculine and sexual narratives and how Black men internalize them (Collins, 2005; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 2004; Staples, 1982; West, 1994). This research is important as it provides a deeper understanding and a multifaceted interpretation of Black men's sexual experiences. Likewise, it informs many aspects of this project and contextualizes it among current research. That said, there are gaps in the research.

First, while some studies do highlight the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (as noted above), these studies tend to offer a restricted view of sexuality. This view describes Black masculine sexuality as problematic, heteronormative. Secondly, the research highlights Black masculinity and sexuality regarding sexual practices such as intercourse, STI prevention, safe sex, and other topics. However, these studies do not consider how Black men begin to make meaning of their sexuality, how they experience it (Bowleg et al., 2017; Crook et al., 2009). As a result, descriptions of Black masculinity and sexuality lack a complex, multifaceted, qualitative perspective. While there is substantial theoretical research that shows how Black men internalize hypersexual racial narratives, there is a lack of qualitative research that considers what the narrative means for Black men, or how they make sense of or experience their sexuality.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS' NARRATIVES

Khalil's narrative detailed his efforts to define his Black masculinity on his own terms and to find a way to express what was most authentic to him. He saw and experienced his Black

masculinity as a fluid identity that was mutable and in flux. This interpretation allowed him to embody distinctive characteristics and descriptions of blackness, masculinity, and heterosexuality that he considered positive and congruent. Likewise, Khalil's Black masculinity was complicated by his sexuality, wherein his positive interpretations of sexuality were an attempt to eschew problematic ones, such as hypersexuality. Although others tried to reinterpret his actions, sexualize his body, and paint him along reductive lines, he made a conscious effort to delineate and explore his identities and his sexuality in the ways in which he saw fit. In some instances, this was beneficial, as he could define what it meant to for him to be a Black man. Other times saw more problem interpretations come to the surface, like when Khalil tried to co-opt the powerful narratives of Black sexuality to become comfortable with his body.

Tariq's narrative showed his attempts to establish and embrace Black masculine and sexual identities that were confident. He discussed how he was influenced by the character Easy Rawlins and wanted to express himself with the same degree of complexity and assertiveness. Despite this, he had to constantly battle against the interpretations of other people who saw him as dangerous and angry. Similarly, Tariq's experience of Black masculine sexuality was marked by his anxiety and uncertainty with White women, wherein he grew unsure of what racial narratives they associated with him. He pushed and endorsed a position of Black masculine sexuality that was intimate and characterized by love yet realized that some people would nonetheless sexually objectify him.

James' narrative described his experiences of Black masculinity and sexuality along a spectrum of interpretations. James was aware of racial narratives, positive and negative, and he knew how Black men could be interpreted as threatening, aggressive, and hypersexual. Significantly, he also realized that they could internalize and interpret themselves that way as well.

199

Yet, James' interpretation of Black masculinity and sexuality as being on a spectrum enabled him to view his identities in ways than ran counter to dominant, restrictive narratives. As such, his heterosexuality did not forbid or disable him from being attracted to or loving someone of the same gender and he refused interpretations that rigidly positioned his sexuality.

Brandon's narratives showed how he enjoyed his Black masculinity even if others would often interpret him in negative ways, such as angry and dangerous. His Black masculinity was an important part of his identity and he wanted to challenge those reductive assumptions. Likewise, Brandon's description of his Black sexuality mirrored that of his masculinity, wherein he sought to challenge the negative descriptions of Black men as hypersexual womanizers. He interpreted his Black sexuality as affectionate and accommodating, focused on expressions of love rather than simply sexual acts. Yet, he still suggested that Black men were sexually dominant.

Theo's narratives showed how his family influenced his definitions of Black masculinity. His family taught him that hard work and resilience were important when it came to confronting and subverting negative interpretations of Black men. Likewise, Theo's interpretation of Black sexuality was influenced by his family, which taught him that unity and love were important to subvert racial narratives that objectified Black men.

As stated, this overview serves to reintroduce the main observations from chapters 4. This will help to provide clearer discussions of themes presented throughout this chapter. It is important to highlight that the participants overlap across key demographics and serve as a small section of the African American middle class. While their narratives offer great insight into some Black men's experiences of sexuality, it is not representative of the whole.

EXHAUSTION IN A RACIALIZED TERRAIN

All participants shared stories wherein they felt constricted by the myth of the hypersexual Black male. This constriction was a powerful process that elicited feelings of exhaustion as the participants struggled to navigate a heavily racially contextualized terrain. The contours of their sexuality was already present within specific cultural dynamics wherein dominant narratives on Black men sharply influenced and constructed the ways people perceived them. Blackness has been a major factor with which to understand gender and sexuality, and noticeably in a visceral and embodied way; participants were racialized, but also and especially through a process of affixing race to their bodies. The way in which participants saw themselves were clearly filtered through these narrative constructions; and they were themselves seen by other people through this racialized screen or filter. Past research often explores how Black men internalize these narratives and endorse heteronormative and sexist positions (Bowleg et al., 2017; Bowleg et al., 2011; Collins, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Crook et al., 2009; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Jackson II & Dangerfield, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Staples, 1982). Yet, this dissertation shows that this process was not linear or straightforward, and participants positioning in relation to racial narratives was complex and led to nuanced performances of their identities. Specifically, the participants' stories illustrate the emotionality and conflicted development of their identities as they are continually filtered through, and constricted within, racially saturated contexts.

The participants were seen in a racially saturated field (Ahmed, 2007; Butler, 1993) that 'dictated' and 'predicted' their maneuvers. Within this field, people referenced racist discourse and interpretations of Black bodies to police them, or to "foresee" what they could do in the future (Butler, 1993). Indeed, the participants were "fixed." (Fanon, 1976/2008, p. 95). The participants were interpreted within a racialized view that was always calibrated towards a White-dominant

perspective. They experienced their sexuality in such a way they were constantly reminded of their otherness. What they experienced was a racial claustrophobia in a space that shrunk as they tried to escape. Truly, the participants could never escape; they would always "feel the weight of [their] melanin" (Fanon, 1976/2008, p. 128). Collins (2005) mentions that Black men could never fully achieve a hegemonic, patriarchal form of masculinity specifically because they were Black. Put in another way, the existence of a White system dictated how Black men appeared within their shadow and how much they could achieve. This is to say that their reach was limited (Ahmed, 2007).

Applied to this dissertation, the participants' bodies were filtered through a racialized field. They were always prefigured around the narrative of a Black, hypersexual male. This limited how far the participants could go; they could only extend their reach so much. Many of the participants shared moments when White people attempted to regulate their bodies. They were seen as defiant (e.g. Tariq's attempts to express an authentic blackness was interpreted as violent and militant by teachers, co-workers, and strangers) and aggressive (e.g. Brandon said that his physique put him at risk of being viewed as hostile by police officers); or they were objectified and fetishized (e.g. Khalil, James, and Theo were all fetishized by others). Likewise, the participants noted the ways in which this constriction inhibited their perspectives on sexual orientations. For example, James noted that some people thought heterosexuality was the default for Black men, a sentiment that other participants like Khalil internalized. There was a limit to the participants' self-expression (i.e., who or how they could be). Even as they tried to expand, they were often pulled back in (e.g. Khalil's attempts to be a good man as modeled by his mother and fictional Black fathers was nullified by the overt sexualization he experienced).

The participants' exhaustion and struggle were clear; they always had to prove White people wrong but were constantly reminded that their efforts were futile. This exhaustion was central to who they were as African American men. They noted how much they enjoyed being Black and they appreciated the culture's diversity could be, but they knew it was always reduced to problematic parts in White spaces (James: "Why can we only be the pimps and the hoes? …We are a community, not a monolith."). This struggle for African American men to prove themselves fastened them to a White other. That is, it made the participants' development and sense of self – effectively their history – a continuous response to the other.

The participants stories showed the extent and prevalence of this constricted narrative of promiscuity: they were configured around it since childhood and this shadow of a Black rapist pervaded all their experiences. This ranged from its animality (e.g. James' childhood story of encountering a White student who asked about Black people growing tails), to its disregard of social decorum (e.g. Tariq's story about his argument with a teacher over his hair), to its contamination (e.g. Khalil's story of a friend of his asking if his semen was black). Likewise, some of the participants noted that they went out their way to set a better example to Black boys as a way of preparing them for the world (e.g. Theo and Brandon).

Indeed, in being prefigured around racist imagery of Black sexuality, the men were made to feel as though their sexuality was often problematic. This problematization of their sexuality made it so the men remained fixed within the racialized space. That is, regardless of how much they attempted to portray themselves as good people, they would always be bound by the mythic narrative. It was hard for them to move and it kept them visible and under surveillance. Furthermore, they were made to feel as though their sexuality was prohibited or restricted in White-spaces. Yet, this prohibition was relegated to everything they did. This prefiguration around a myth

of hypersexuality meant that everything the participants did was prohibited, tethered to a description of sexuality that was perilous. Thus, the participants experience of their sexuality – by way of their blackness – was understood not just based on how they experienced their blackness, but also how their blackness was exhausting and problematic.

All the participants wanted to challenge the violent interpretations of Black men that undoubtedly informed a narrative of hypersexuality. Indeed, they wanted to prove that their sexuality was not harmful, filthy, and destructive. Their goal was to show White people that they were humans. For example, James adopted a philosophy of totality to challenge violent, sexualized assumptions that Black men. This allowed him to 'expand,' to speak to a side of his blackness that was multifaceted: sexual, intimate, aggressive, happy, loving, affectionate, and sad. Brandon and Theo used their professionalism and politeness to structure masculinity in relation to the reductive expectation of violence and hypersexuality. Khalil attempted to reject any categorical, restrictive interpretations of blackness through his language and his behavior (e.g. attire, showing up to places on time, and being generally polite). Tariq experienced himself as "unapologetically Black," which enabled him to feel most like himself. So, he adopted the persona of the conflicted Easy Rawlins. However, in their attempts and their proclamations, the participants simply re-highlighted that, in always having to prove something to someone, a Black man's sexuality was inescapably tied to a White other. They were always trapped in a fixed, racially saturated, filtrated space.

FRAGMENTATION

The many quantitative studies that explore Black masculinity and sexuality frequently focus on issues of sexual practice (Bowleg, 2004; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009; Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004; Saleh, Operario,

Smith, Arnold & Kegeles, 2011; Whitehead, 1995). Theoretical research suggests that Black men internalize narratives of hypersexuality, promiscuity, and sexual dominance (Collins, 2002; Cooper, 2006; Crook et al., 2009; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Staples, 1982; Wilkins, 2012). While these phenomena occur, much of the research overlooks the fragmentation that some Black men may experience. In this study, the participants' narratives highlighted the ways in which their experience of sexuality included a sense of feeling fractured.

This fragmentation occurred within all participants. They were often dissembled (e.g. reduced to big dicks or contaminated semen), objectified (e.g. turned into sexualized toys for the amusement of others), alienated (e.g. made to feel out of place because of their bodies, their vocabulary, and their attire), animalized, and weaponized (e.g. their muscular bodies were interpreted as threatening). The participants were always interpreted before their arrival (Ahmed, 2007); they would always stand examined through a myth and accused of crimes of Black men that they never knew.

This sort of fragmentation echoed the double-consciousness described by Du Bois. The concept illustrated the tension between a Black and American identity, specifically "two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." (Du Bois, 2005, p. 9). Du Bois highlights that such reconciliation is impossible; indeed, the tension between being Black and American is always heavy, anxiety inducing, fractured, and oppressive. Du Bois highlights the Black person's perpetual otherness in this concept and the bifurcation of their experience: it was impossible to be whole in White spaces, one could never forego their overdetermined blackness to attain the privilege, in a sense, humanity ascribed onto White people.

The participants were made to feel problematized, unwelcomed, and untrustworthy. Indeed, in being filtered through the racialized gazed, they felt the tension between their identities.

205

Despite their celebration of their blackness, it became a source of discomfort they bore (Fanon, 1976/2008). Fanon notes that upon entering a White world, Black men lose their agency. They become reactive; Black men are left to negotiate dynamics with White people at the cost of their sense of authenticity, wholeness, and humanity. Through these negotiations and this binding of racialized constrictions, they are left insecure, inferior, and dehumanized. Despite their attempted resistance against this fragmentation, the participants were conflicted. The fragmentation kept them within a reactive space: they could only provide a response to their dehumanization. Likewise, they only view themselves from the position of a White other; they were often stripped of their own consciousness.

The participants responded to this fragmentation through the offer of proof. As stated in this previous section, this proof was meant to challenge perceptions of Black bodies. The men realized that they were always seen through the myth (Theo: "people are afraid of Black people… I see clearly that they're judging me."; Khalil: "[Being a Black man] always feels like you have something to prove."). So, in their proof, the participants challenged a White-interpreted, hypersexual construction of themselves that was never their own.

For the participants, this proof often came in the form of separation from oneself for the benefit of White people. In this case, it became through de-racing blackness. This de-racing involved a separation and disintegration of any action that could be associated with blackness (Cooper, 2006; Fanon, 1976/2008, hooks, 2004a). It was a capitulation of blackness – that is to say, a submission to the notion of a "good," "docile," "amenable," and ultimately, broken Black man that was only ever adjacent to whiteness. That was a sacrifice for the comfort of White people in return for a sense of acceptance and assimilation that never came (Du Bois, 2005).

The men indicated different motivations for their actions, namely set a different example against reductive stereotypes of Black men. Yet, buried in the attempt was a deep sense of resignation: the participants knew that White people always required them to perform in a way they identified as non-threatening and thus non-Black. Likewise, they understood that they always had to offer proof because what they offered was never sufficient. The men demonstrated ways in which they modulated their behaviors to avoid stereotypic interpretations of their behavior. They used their attire to set themselves against stereotypically black styles fashion that could be interpreted as unprofessional. All participants mentioned that they changed their language and manners to appear "proper," "nice" and "articulate" so White people could understand then. Within their narratives, the participants positioned themselves as outsiders. Yet, as some participants demonstrated, their experiences were never enough. All the participants surprised people when they modulated their behavior, yet they were never fully accepted by White people. Though it was implicit, their many stories referenced or found expression in a narrative of Black men as virile (Collins, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Davis, 1983; Fanon, 2008; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Staples, 1982; West, 1994). In this case, the participants were Black wolves that waited for their chance to strike.

The participants' interactions with a White audience highlighted a dynamic wherein the onus of responsibility was on Black men. They had to prove their worth while the audience failed to be reflexive. Indeed, their racism and racist consciousness were situated outside of them, in the form of a Baldwinian "nigger" (Moore, 1964). The participants had to contend with such an archetype, to do otherwise would be dangerous (Brandon: "[Expectations are] not the same for us and everyone is trying to sugar coat it. If you get pulled over and you're Black, there's a risk that they're going to blow your fucking head off.")

Thus, what is also apparent in the participants' actions is a "whitening" of sorts: an attempt to control the uncontrollable, dangerous Black body (Fanon, 1976/2008). It is a whitening that further disintegrated the participants: they were pushed to fracture themselves under the guise of recognition. While it would be extreme to call this fragmentation a castration, it was a cleansing of a dirtied Black body: a muting and silencing – that was a metaphorical cleansing (Hall, 1997)- of the participants blackness and sexuality that forced the participants to bring themselves to heel. In the participants' disintegration, the oppressive portrayal of blackness as unstable was contrasted by a sense of whiteness as purity and unity. It was apparent in the stories that, as the gatekeepers of the space, many White people expected the men to change and shape themselves to their standards. However, though the participants challenged an assumption and provided their evidence, they understood that the evidence could be easily rejected or ignored.

ANXIETY AND VIGILANCE

The men of this study experienced a level of concern and anxiety regarding their sexuality. They attempted to resist or address their anxiety in some fashion, although to varying success. Within this anxiety, the participants noted an apprehension or fear of White people believing the myth of the hypersexual male.

The participants understood there was always a black dick in the room. How the men appeared in White spaces ignited a question: "How do other people see me?" The participants could always detect the myth looming and they remained on guard for the moments when they were interpreted in such a light. For Theo and Brandon this moment was the suspicion that their larger, muscular statures threatened White people. For Khalil, Tariq, and James, their narratives contained stories

208

wherein White people explicitly referenced the size of their penises, their semen, and their willingness to have sex.

A possible reading of the participants' experiences could apply Du Boisian double consciousness, (Du Bois, 2005), specifically the restrictive power of the gaze. Du Bois notes that the power in "double-consciousness," comes not only in this tension and anxiety two "two warring ideals," but also how these experiences are induced by a gaze. That is, the Black man will always "see himself through the revelation of the other world." (Du Bois, 2005, p. 9). In this case, the other world is White. This gaze filters and orients a Black man towards a White world and offered a mutated, black reflection back to the Black man. The participants' remained vigilant and anxious about a transformative White gaze. Their navigation through racial spaces was punctuated by it. They were always at risk of being transformed into a hypersexual beast, but sometimes they were unaware of exactly how they were seen and when the transformation happened.

For example, Tariq's descriptions of his sexuality positioned him as a Black man who was anxious and concerned about how he experienced himself and how other partners saw him ("When I'm with a White woman, I'm conscious of it and I'm worried about it."). White women evoked uncertainty of racial narratives that were at work. Tariq positioned White women as perpetrators of the narrative, though even Tariq knew this was never confirmed and he believed there was unsubstantial evidence to support it. When he was with White women, Tariq constantly looked in on himself. He was unsure of how his partners saw his body; He was concerned they would evaluate him based on the narrative of hypersexuality. Tariq evaluated himself through his White partner's eyes. His movements, sexual or otherwise, were scrutinized according to the image of the hypersexual Black male. His anxiety disconnected him from his body and it frustrated him. He could no longer be "unapologetically Black," like he wanted.

The anxiety noted in Tariq's experience was reflective in part of Fanon's (1976/2008) descriptions of the anxious state of a Black man indoctrinated into a White world. Fanon demonstrates that a Black man will eternally feel otherized by a White society, which breeds an anxiety and obsession with the racist exclusion they experience. This anxious situation breeds a paranoid question of belonging. The anxious Black man requires proof of his acceptance from others, yet his race makes this proof impossible – he is stuck between two worlds: his race is animalized, and he seeks to erase his blackness for White approval which never comes. On the other hand, he feels as though he cannot truly own his blackness or a Black identity due to his faux-assimilation to and in a White world. It is this anxiety and vigilance that keeps the Black man on guard.

Tariq was not necessarily looking for approval from a White other, but he did wonder about their answer. Though he understood that his White partners did not sexually objectify him, he still worried about it. He wanted to know where he stood. It was in those moments that he, like other participants, were not only concerned about their transformation in a Black beast, but what that transformation meant for them afterwards.

Provided that the constitutive parts of the participants experiences (e.g. animalistic physicality, contamination, the penis, and violence) find their expression in the myth of hypersexuality, the anxiety erupted as more than a fear of being fetishized. The apprehension erupted as a fear of being "brought to justice" by a White authority so to speak. If Black men were the hypersexual Black male, then it meant that they must be punished. The participants noted the ways they contended with their vigilance knowing that there could be severe penalties against them if they crossed a White-regulated line. Theo noted that people were constantly on edge when they walked into a room and so he had to remain vigilant lest they reacted negatively to his behaviors. Brandon noted

210

that he took numerous steps to assure anyone from customers to his stores to police officers, that he was harmless. To do otherwise meant they could be harmed in some way. Like the sense of fragmentation and modulation, the anxiety and vigilance also brought the participants to heel. A Black man's behavior would always be viewed in accordance to the myth: even a twitch, a look, a slightly raised voice or inquiry could be problematic (Ahmed, 2007; Butler, 1993; Fanon, 1976/2008)

The participants' anxiety suggested an evaluation through the White racist narrative. They existed somewhere else, though not quite the middle of their blackness and a White world. Tariq was anxious when he was with White women though his relationship with a Black partner masked it. Likewise, other participants suggested that their relationships with Black women were realms wherein they found a sense of relative comfort (e.g. Brandon's marriage and Theo's long-term relationship). Though they mentioned that Black women comforted them, it also appeared that the racial anxiety attributed to the narrative was still present, albeit dormant.

I believe that the participants' relationships with Black women alleviated the anxiety they experienced. That said, they highlighted a difficult dilemma that may exist within an anxious, uncertain experience of Black sexuality. The myth of a Black hypersexual rapist, brutal and volatile, was inescapable even if the myth's presence was ambiguous. Should this anxiety continue to exist in their relationship with Black women, then it could be argued that this experience merely covered up the anxiety they experienced with White people. It is a false security that leaves the participants unfocused and unattuned to their partner as a partner. Simply put, it reduces Black women to one-dimensional saviors by turning them in a healing space for Black men to find themselves (hooks, 2004a).

In this case, the participants' narratives once again showed the constraint of this racial myths. Regarding their anxiety, they felt it and became used to it in all spaces and in all their relationships. The space and privacy of the participants' relationships was still under a White eye; there is no black space where they can freely explore themselves. Intimacy, though experienced may become constrained as it always exists in contrast to the heightened anxiety and insecurity of being in a racially saturated, White world.

OBJECTIFICATION AND FETISH

In accordance with the literature, the participants' narratives revealed that a myth of hypersexuality can go in the direction of curiosity and desire. All the participants shared stories wherein they felt sexually objectified by other White people. The appropriation of the participant's stories and bodies served the benefit of enticing and satisfying an audience and served as the audiences' proxy for their own desires. Thus, a Black man's body became the site of a racialized fetish which bounded him within a field of sexual objectification (Bhabha, 1996; DuRocher, 2011; Fanon, 2008; Hobgood, 2000; Mercer, 1996). The instances of sexual objectification allowed friends, ex-partners, and co-workers to locate a suppressed, repressed, inaccessible or largely ignored expression of sexuality. They could fix the participants with a fetishistic gaze. These narratives served as another manner to sexually objectify Black bodies and to use them as a tool for their gratification (Foster, 2011; Hobgood, 2000; Hode, 1993).

In this case, stereotypes and narratives that produce, constrict, and predict behaviors of Black bodies keep them in their place. Bhabha (1996) and Mercer (1996) note that it is within the fetishistic dynamic between Black and White people that the racialized difference can be acknowledge and ignored. This site of racial, fetishistic fantasy is strengthened through its erasure

212

of the Black body's personhood (e.g. like one's name) which allows the body to be consumed and in its "ambivalence" (Mercer, 1996, p. 438) which keeps the Black body fixed in ambiguity. This ambiguity oscillates between the sexualization of the racial other and the "anxiety in defense of the identity of the White ego" (Mercer, 1996, p. 438). This oscillation keeps the fetishistic gaze between the stereotypic, fixed fantasies of Black savage sexuality and slavish docility, subservience and thus white-adjacency. This mutes the threat of a Black body, allowing a White voyeur to continually take over. Black men can be connected, disconnected, and fractured. This primitivism contrasts the White individual's civilized propriety and the subservience of the Black body allows the White individual to consume them without guilt (Mercer, 1996).

Applied to the participants' experiences, they became the site where their friends, partners, and co-workers projected their racially-saturated, repressed desires. They used the participants as phalluses and discarded them, where they could indulge, and they could be left behind. This allowed the characters in these stories to 'safely' explore their desires in a way that was still disconnected from them They could enter the restricted space of blackness (Hobgood, 2000) and exit when they were done. Their stories, their questions, and their sexualized proposals were largely masturbatory.

What is salient in the participants experience is the sense of loss two ways. First, over one's body. This reduction to a fetishized phallus affected all participants. Khalil said his friends frequently oversexualized for their enjoyment. Tariq's co-worker posed suggestive questions and comments towards him and evaluated his body because of his presumed sexual prowess. James said that one of his former partners constantly attempted to foreclose his fluid sexual expression or condense their relationship to a purely, physically sexual dynamic. The participants were actively forced to gaze back on their bodies. The comments they received indicated how people

saw them. The men were sculpted into a phallus, held with envy and curiosity, and severed into individual parts. Their movement was lost to their White audiences. This process regulated the racialized space – the participants could never escape this fetishistic gaze – and it also reminded them that their bodies could never be their own.

Second, the participants experienced a loss of inner life. In being fetishized, their right to disagree, to be uncomfortable or unhappy, or even to display a sense of pleasure, was often disregarded in favor of someone else's pleasure. Consent was ignored; fetishism forced the participants to be subservient even in their denials and rejection of the act. The gaze of the other remained. The participants were sexualized, and their bodies would always be handed over to them. This process through which an inner life is removed pushes for it to be replaced through an internalization of the hypersexual myth. For example, Khalil stated that there is pressure to internalize the objectification and act as the hypersexual beast Black men were rumored to be. Otherwise people would think he was a "bitch," thereby insinuating that he had no right to say no and they he would be scrutinized for doing so. In objectifying, reducing, and fetishizing Black bodies, the men were always regulated by and filtered through the predatory interpretations of a White audience.

AGENCY AND SELF-RECOGNITION

A significant finding in this study is the participants' efforts to restore agency where it is lost. Among the rest of their experiences regarding sexuality, the participants tried desperately to reclaim their bodies (e.g. presumed sexual prowess, physicality, success and professionalism, a celebration of black diversity, and a sense of an assertive, authentic black identity).What was most

salient about the participants' responses was that their attempts to display agency amid constricted experiences. This agency came in different forms, but all related to a reclamation of their body.

To establish a sense of agency, most of the participants toed the line of a problematic reification of hypersexuality. They believed, at one point or another, that Black people, particularly men, commanded notable sexual prowess (Collins, 2004; Fanon, 1976/2008; hooks, 2004a; Jackson, 2006; Staples, 1982; West, 1994). For example, Brandon and Khalil noted that sexual prowess was cultivated in Black culture: Black men knew how to seduce women and the hypersexual narratives provided Black men with the space and expertise to explore sex. Their descriptions reflected a black machismo, or Black men using sexuality as an avenue for power and authority (Collins; 2004; hooks, 1992; hooks, 2004a, 2004b; West, 1994). Such descriptions echoed the racist essentialism of a sexualized Black body. In the pursuit of agency via power – in this case an intuition of sex - Brandon and Khalil attempted to regain the big black dicks to reassert themselves in a world that suppressed them.

The participants' reductive reification of sexuality highlights an important obstacle in the Black man's agency (Fanon, 1976/2008). The Black man will attempt to compensate for the internalization of his inferiority via superiority. He will grasp a shallow, imitative form of power and authority to prove oneself to the White other which is all for naught. A White slave master has manufactured a Black man's freedom, manufactured his reach, and, through regulatory practices, controls Black bodies. The Black man craves recognition to feel human, but the bind is that the White man is always required to determine that humanity. Indeed, in a White-dominated space, they regulated who and what appeared.

The participants' reification attempted to make sexual prowess a fact, though it ignored the discourse around Black bodies. To some extent, this was understandable: this power provided a

sense of relief and control in spaces where they were inaccessible. Yet the participants' failure to recognize their fixture and reliance on a White audience risked reinforcing problematic perspectives of Black men and their sexuality. That is, the Black man's attempt to gain recognition, he will latch onto and wield power where he sees fit, regardless of its implications (Collins, 2005; Fanon, 2008; Hooks, 1992, 2004; Jackson, 2006; West, 1994). He is unaware of what exactly he has lost and what exactly is required to regain it. Instead, he simply means directly take something back or relies on the White other to reclaim a sense of humanity.

Even so, the participants were conflicted in their appropriations. Indeed, in the process of reification, the participants highlighted the intense desire to be seen and heard. Their quest for agency was a call to be recognized as a human. But, such statements about the natural sexual potency of Black men were sexualized, objectified, and arguably masculinist and they were often directed at a looming, obstructive White audience. It was a call for them to receive. Yet, the participants attempted to assuage this confliction in their redirection of its focus: they turned their attention to themselves.

In this redirection, the men attempted to disconnect themselves from a space they believed to be outside of White evaluation. Although still restrained by their concern over how they will be received in White spaces, the participants attempted to find recognition in themselves to better experience sexuality on their own terms. For example, Khalil explained that he garnered power in his sexuality via an attunement with his body: he enjoyed that the personal limits of his body (i.e. what his body could do, his strength and his rhythm) was a secret to everyone. Khalil's assessment of his body allowed him to regain a sense of control. Brandon found strength and agency via intimacy which took place within his home and with the support of his wife. Brandon demonstrated intimacy through affection rather than purely sex. Brandon described his sexual experiences as an

216

"all-day" affair, wherein he wanted to demonstrate love for his partner. As a result, intimacy allowed Brandon to reattune himself in his body and in space that was unlike the world outside (hooks, 2004a). Tariq adopted an "Easy Rawlins," persona in his attempt to embrace his complexity and dimensionality. He could be aggressive, outspoken, funny, affectionate and even anxious and still be a person. Though people construed his persona as aggressive or they objectified him, Tariq refused to do anything that "confirmed" any stereotypes that put Black men in a negative light (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In their attempts to discover agency, the men of this study made themselves the audience. They wanted to prove something to themselves after they were forced to exhaustingly prove themselves to a White audience. Hooks (2004a) suggests that by Black men taking a self-reflective step towards exploring their sexuality and the trauma around it, they will be able to disconnect from an idea of sexuality that is confined to domination and submission. Hooks sees this as an empowerment move that reconceptualizes black sexuality as a sexuality of love. Perhaps in the participants' goal of proving themselves to themselves they gained a sense of self-assertion and agency that is not tied to a White other. In doing so, they can begin to rediscover the problematic definitions that they internalized. With this proof, the participants suggested they can experience their sexuality on their own terms. This is to say the participants become "actional" (Fanon, 1976/2008, p. 132) rather than "reactional." They return to the world as active agents of their narratives.

Still, it is difficult to determine if most of the men know what they lost even though they knew they had to prove their value in a racially-saturated world. Likewise, it is difficult to determine exactly how agency would look to the men as their efforts often revolved around only challenging stereotypes rather than a deep understanding of self. In many ways, they were still

trapped within racially confined bounds of the mythical hypersexual Black male. Indeed, as most of the participant acknowledged their effort to focus only on them, they still referenced the pervasive discomfort of racism. At the end of this study, it was still difficult to determine exactly where or how they find themselves. There was a clear attempt to become whole, yet they remain fragmented in the end. We are unsure of where exactly they land and unsure if they can land anywhere at all.

However, James's efforts were different. All participants demonstrated the ways through which storytelling was a reflexive process which allowed to them to find meaning in their histories (Abbott, 2008; Carolyn Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Gemignani, 2014; Murray, 2003; Murray & Sargeant, 2011; Riessman, 2003, 2004). Yet, the participants still seemed conflicted in their stories and in their efforts to regain agency. On the other hand, James, an African American man in his 40s, told his stories in a way that suggested he rediscovered and found meaning in his agency, or at least he came close to it.

James' sense of agency was attached to a notion of totality, a spectrum of black diversity that welcome all interpretations of blackness and Black people's experiences. He accepted that he attempted to endorse stereotypes of hypersexuality when he was younger. In this acceptance, he showed an appreciation of his self. His' narrative highlighted the conflict and struggle that comes with self-acceptance, particularly regarding loving oneself despite a troubled history. His perspective was self-affirming in many ways and reflected the humanistic principles (Rogers, 1957) implemented in his everyday clinical practice. He called for his colleagues to have "unconditional positive regard," for the Black boys they treated. In many ways, James' call expressed his desire to accept an inner self. Thus, James' experiences of his sexuality, and the way in which he positively co-opted and transformed narratives, highlighted a drive towards a self-

actualizing principle (Ford, 1991). He integrated his history into his "authentic repertoire of self."

Even though James acknowledged he would always be read within a racialized perspective, he

tried to expand his reach and step outside of that space.

James' agency and efforts towards a self-recognition turn him into the only participant that

fits, in many ways, Fanon's (1976/2008) actional Black man. Though his stories illustrate many

of the same experiences as the other participants, James displayed a degree of insight different

than the others. All his experiences were meaningful; indeed, his stories provided him with a

reflective sense of his sexuality. James's story highlighted a sexuality that embraced a totality of

experience. He accepted the flaws of a culture and the oppressive discourse that fixed itself to it.

This totality allowed James to move forward. His agency was founded on self-affirmation and

love.

It was James's level of awareness, appreciation, and realization of who he was at the

present, that allowed him to look in on himself with recognition. His agency and his proof were

predicated on embracing the lives he led up to that point. Still, all the participants are restricted

within the saturated field. In a way, after putting in his time in a racist world for 40 years, it is

possible that it is only now that James could have this insight that he desperately tried to pass on

to other Black boys and men. Yet, that insight remained lost and inaccessible to them and remained

cut off for them until the world tells them otherwise. Perhaps James' insight into agency and

recognition – an honest sense of love of one's self - was what the men lost and struggled to regain.

Thus, while the participants efforts toward agency were still conflicted, they attempted to redirect

their focus to themselves as a step toward towards self-recognition. Though his degree of success

was debatable while seen within a racialized field, James self-acceptance provided a potential

template towards self-affirmation.

REFLEXIVITY

When I began this project, I reminded myself that it was important to remain reflexive. I wanted to remain aware of my biases and my cultural identities. I believed that this would allow me to be attuned to the participants and their stories. One of the goals was to avoid a "false empathy" (Duncan, 2002), wherein I dishonestly convinced myself that I empathically responded to the descriptions and cues of the participants. A careful and reflexive approach, one where I monitored my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the research process along the way, was critical to this project's success (Finlay, 2002; Gemignani, 2011; Walsh, 2003). As an African American man, I believed that I would make crucial errors if I did not look inward and shine a light on insecurities, assumptions, biases, and other concerns that could arise due to my role and identities. In many ways, I knew that a simple reflexive approach would be a half-measure for myself and for this project. So, I used my experiences as data to explore my research question (Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Holt, 2003; Marx, Pennington, & Chang, 2017; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Trahar, 2009; Wall, 2008).

I reflected on these experiences and I wanted to determine if an autoethnographic process would illuminate the participant's narratives in some way and help me to approach their stories with a clearer head and eye. I thought that a short reflexive exercise would highlight some of my biases and indicate how my identities influenced the trajectory of my research. Yet, autoethnography allowed me to go a few steps farther. It brought me closer to the participants' stories and my reaction to them. It allowed me to write and reflect on my own stories related to my reactions. Lastly, it allowed me to use my stories to reflect on racial phenomena and to

empathize more with the participant's story. Throughout this process, I existed in distinct roles throughout: a researcher, an audience, and an African American man. As consequence, the process of inquiry into experiences, interpretations, and narratives reaffirmed not only the participants' but also my identities through our conversations (Gemignani, 2014).

During the project, I experienced notable reactions to the participants which called on me to reflect on my experiences and see what they could teach me about the participants. First, I experienced a heightened desire to portray each participant fairly and do justice to the complexity of their stories. While this may be a given for many researchers, I felt an ethical call to push this further. By this, I mean that research on Black masculinity and sexuality can address the critical issues pertaining to the topic, but typically only frame it as problematic (Bowleg et al., 2017; Bowleg et al., 2011; Collins, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Crook et al., 2009; Fanon, 2008; Ferber, 2007; Staples, 1982; Tatum, 2003; Wilkins, 2012; Wright, Weekes, McGlaughlin, & Webb, 1998). Thus, people can walk away from the work and think that Black men are one-dimensional or unaware of the involvedness of their development.

When I reflected on my narratives, I wanted to reveal many of the emotions and thoughts that informed some of my decisions. I wanted to show important, pivotal moments that pertained to my Black masculine and sexual identities and that filled me with anxiety, anger, self-hatred and power. My admiration, for instance, for Michael, who boldly asked a girl for a blowjob both talked about my sexual insecurity and the pressure to embrace a model and construction of Black masculinity that was brazen and hypersexualized (Collins, 2004; Fanon 1976/2008; hooks, 2004a; Jackson, 2006). In another case, my anger at my co-workers and the anxiety I experienced at the "theft" and presumptions made about my body talked about my anger and insecurity as motivators for my internalization of mythic Black masculine constructions (Collins, 2005; Hooks, 1992, 2004;

221

West, 1994; Wilkins, 2012). While these stories endorsed much of the theoretical research on Black masculinity and sexuality, I also wanted to show the complicated and, at times, muddled moments Black men experience that helped them develop their identities.

Thus, I returned the participant's narratives and used some of the insight I gained to reconsider how I interpreted the narratives. I asked myself about my method for interviews, when I decided or avoided to follow-up with questions, when and where did I spend the most time with a specific theme, or a specific participant, and what did these questions mean? I was intrigued and curious about each participant and wanted to ask more questions, but also felt myself experience a plethora of different reactions which led to a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives.

Yet, I would be remiss to ignore the ways this process could have hindered the project. There were risks when I conducted an extensive, reflexive autoethnography. While it allowed me to use my experiences as data to comment on research phenomena, it also brought me closer to the participants. I identified the benefits of it this, but there was a risk of overinvolvement in the process. That at times I almost let my emotions get the better of me and I failed to pick up or follow up with questions regarding vital details that came in the narrative. Likewise, my focus on Black masculine and sexual identities left me blinded to other the participants' other identities. For example, Theo's discussions about his sexuality felt very private. Though he disclosed details of how he experienced it, he often felt reserved. We briefly discussed the moments when other people attempted to objectify him, but even then, I noted that it felt somewhat matter-of-fact. In my search to identify and unpack other stories and experiences, I failed to consider why he told his stories the way he did. I also failed to consider how his religion and relationship with God may have motivated his decisions if they did at all. While these hindrances are important to consider, I do believe this process added to the overall dissertation project.

222

CONSTRAINTS OF THE STUDY

It is important to note the limitations of this dissertation. Doing so will identify a range of factors to consider, should I or others continue to expand the research. Likewise, I must acknowledge my blind spots and areas of improvement. As such, I identified several limitations in my dissertation.

A notable limitation is regarding the diversity of the participants. All the participants were African American men, middle-class, and they identified as heterosexual. Additionally, my autoethnography was anchored within the same constructions of identities, though three were explored: race, gender, and sexuality. While this allowed me to gather narratives and to craft an answer to my research question, it still presented important limitations in terms of heteronormativity and gender normativity. Simply put, this dissertation tells a story of some African American experiences rather than *the story* of African American experiences.

The focus on heterosexuality risks perpetuating a heteronormative position. This position assumes that the stories of Black heterosexual men are default. The literature on Black masculinity and sexuality predominantly explores the dynamics between heterosexual Black and non-Black men. Collins (2004) mentions that the narrative of hypersexuality is complicated by other sexual orientations or gender fluidity. Likewise, some research focuses on the experiences of Black men who have sex with men without considering themselves gay or queer **(**Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Glenn & Spieldenner, 2013). That said, like other studies on Black heterosexual men, the studies that focus on Black men of sexual identities often gloss over what these identities mean, and they express it in the world. Thus, it would be worthwhile to consider how African American men of different sexual orientations experience their sexuality.

The participants and I identify as cis-gender men. A lot of the literature of Black masculinity and sexuality, at least regarding the narrative of hypersexuality, is presented through a cis-gendered lens and foregoes considering other gender identities.(Bowleg et al., 2017; Bowleg et al., 2011; Crook et al., 2009). Gender identification may change how Black-American men may experience their masculinity. Thus, it is worth considering how Black non-binary and transgender men experience their sexuality.

Third, the participants and I are middle-class Black-American men. Class diversity can change how we experience our masculinity and sexuality, though my research neglected to explore class-based issues as it pertained to the research question. I was unable to fully consider how class-based issues could change the way African American men experience themselves and the reverberating impact it could have on one's sense of self. Exploring class-based issues can provide an opportunity to see how Black-American think about class in relation to their Black masculinity and sexuality.

For this research to expand and continue, cultural identities must be considered in the future. Specifically, it is worth considering the identities of other Black men, such as Afro-Latino American men (González-López and Vidal-Ortiz (2008) or Caribbean-American men (Crowell, Delgado-Romero, Mosley, & Huynh, 2016). Considering these diverse cultural and ethnic identities can allow different historical narratives to come to the forefront. Likewise, it can also provide different perspectives as to what blackness, masculinity, and sexuality mean for them.

Finally, it is worth considering whether a group interview could achieve comparable results to those provided. While a group interview with participants could expand the scope of the dissertation, it could possibly require a different narrative and ethnographic approach. The individual approach of my methods allowed me to explore the narratives in-depth. Individual

interviews provided the participants and I with an opportunity to deeply and critically reflect on their narratives in a way that would be difficult. However, narratives are co-constructed, and a different interviewing style could open narrative possibilities that were overlooked. Exploring narratives about Black masculinity and sexuality during a group interview could provide equally rich conversations about how Black men are interpreted and how the group participants understood and constructed their identities (Riessman, 2004)

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation focused on how African American men experienced their sexuality. This project's value was situated on the inner lives of African American and Black men are often glossed over in research. Although their stories differed, the men in this study experienced much of the same struggle. While parts of the study reiterated the pervasiveness of racial discourse, the participants show that experience of an oppressive mythical narrative and the internalization of such was not straightforward. Indeed, the binary between those specific binaries undermined the conflict the participants experienced. This research illuminated their exhaustion, the struggle, anxiety and vigilance the participants felt in their sexual experiences.

The participants experience of their sexuality was informed by the interpretations of their race. Thus, they illustrated that their constriction within racial spaces was lifelong. They fiercely navigated an inescapable and overdetermined terrain while they were made to feel uncomfortable in their skin. A Black sexuality was experienced as a stain and a threat. Yet, the men wanted to regain the loss of their bodies, to prove something to themselves and to others: they were more than sexualized beasts and their sense of sexuality was more than sex. It was multifaceted, conflicted, diverse, and rich.

225

In consideration of the study's findings and the participant experiences, there are some practical implications can be identified from this research. First, this dissertation shows that research on Black masculine and sexual identities should highlight and explore the participants' constructions of their identities. While a theoretical understanding of race, gender, and sexuality development can be sufficient (Armstrong, 2013; Collins, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Davis, 1983; Hooks, 1992; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006; Slatton & Spates, 2016; Tatum, 1992, 2003; West, 1994), it would be beneficial for researchers to explore personal identity development. Explorations of the processes and dynamics through which Black men construct their identities can provide a deeper understanding to how they experience their sexuality. A recommendation for future research would be to consider how these identities form across an individual's history and observe pivotal moments that informed how one constructed a sense of blackness, masculinity, and sexuality (Bowleg et al., 2017). In doing so, a multifaceted view of Black masculine and sexual identities would contribute to work that offsets or combats the problematic images that tend to be associated with Black men and masculinity.

Furthermore, this dissertation shows that it is important to look at how Black men experience sexual narratives. While much of the research on Black masculinity and sexuality discuss how Black men internalize racist narratives, it is important to take this a few steps farther. This dissertation shows that research must look at Black sexuality as multifaceted rather than oppressive and hypersexual (Bowleg et al., 2011; Hooks, 1992, 2004). I showed that Black male sexuality is more than objectification and an endorsement or enactment of the hypersexual narrative. This focus will allow researchers to address the anxiety, frustration, and pain that Black men can experience because of racist interpretations of their sexuality. A consideration for future research would be to focus specifically on the anxiety, frustration and other experiences that could

arise within Black men and to observe how these feelings may inform how they experience their sexuality.

Additionally, this dissertation shows that participant's endorsements and internalization of the mythic, promiscuous narrative are intricate. The participants' internalization of these narratives suggested an attempt to co-opt the narratives rather than a sexist and essentialist motivation. Additionally, the internalization of the narrative could motivate one to de-race or de-sexualize themselves for approval from White people (reference the stereotype threat). This suggests that how Black men endorse the hypersexual narrative can differ from individual to individual and cannot be oversimplified. The conclusion of these narratives can be heteronormative and sexist. However, this dissertation shows that exploring the process behind the internalization of the narratives can lead to greater understanding of how some Black men experience it.

Lastly, this dissertation shows that qualitative methodology can lead to substantial and important findings and observations on Black masculine and sexuality. Qualitative research sufficiently accesses the depth of quality in a participants' stories and can explore the complexity of an individual's experiences.

Because of this dissertation, I believe that this project and others can go in several different directions. Following this dissertation, future research may be needed to continue gathering narratives of Black-American men and integrating additional identities to learn about ways of experiencing sexuality. For instance, some recent research suggests that class identity can alter how people experiences themselves. Elucidating this dimension can lead to new perspectives of Black-American experiences (Bowleg et al., 2017).

Future research may consider other marginalized groups within the African American community. While this project focused on privileged groups within the Black community,

specifically those benefiting from heteronormative and gender privilege, I see this project as being part of a larger tapestry. Expanding the research to consider other groups, especially marginalized groups, within Black communities will enable researchers to explore the fluidity of Black-American masculinity and the stories of potential participants. Collins (2005) stated that African American men who perpetuate the idea of Black male hypersexuality and sexual prowess also endorse a heteronormative position that exiles and demonizes gay men. This can also extend to men of different sexual orientations as well as different genders. These identities pose different possibilities and therefore different stories that show the complex interplay and co-construction of Black masculinity and sexuality as they are contextualized by society and culture. One way of doing this is posing the research question generally to Black men and allowing them to interpret the question and share stories however they see fit. This would avoid the assumption that Black men of different identities have a definitive way of interpreting their masculine identities in regard to their sexuality.

Furthermore, the narrative approach to Black masculinity and Black experiences in general can provide opportunities for connecting people, strengthening communities and mobilizing people with similar or contrasting stories. This mobilization can enable people to use their stories as counter-narratives against dominant discourses and racial narratives that act as reductive and restrictive of Black bodies (Harper, 2009).

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APPENDIX A
DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:	**Myth of Promiscuity: Examining Black Male Sexual Narratives and Sexual Identity**
INVESTIGATOR:	Seth Young, M.A. Graduate Student Duquesne University young1767@duq.edu
SUPERVISING INVESTIGATOR:	Marco Gemignani, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology Duquesne University Gemignanim@duq.edu
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to participate in a dissertation research project that focuses on the question: how do Black-American men experience their Black masculinity and sexuality as it relates to their sexual identity? You will be asked to provide stories related to sexuality and manhood, and what it means to be a Black man. You will be asked to engage in a critical discussion and exploration of these stories with the researcher. The aim is to better understand the experiences of Black men in relation to the racial narrative of the hypersexual Black male. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.
RISKS AND BENEFITS:	There is minimal risk in participating in this study beyond those encountered in daily life. The research acknowledges that the research question and subject matter of this project can be a sensitive topic to those involved. While your engagement is voluntary and will pose little to no danger to you, the aim of the dissertation projection and your involvement is to address an experience related to the Black-American community and to promote empowerment. Your contribution could help to understand the impact of a racial narrative and how it is lived by Black men. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, the researcher will provide references to mental health providers at your request should the need arise (i.e., in the case of narratives evoking feelings of anxiety or depression).

COMPENSATION:	You will not be paid for your participation in this study. However, participation in the project will require no monetary cost from you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	Your name will never appear in the interview transcripts, dissertation, or in any public discussion of the research project. Additionally, any information that may identify you will be omitted from the records. All audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms containing your name and information linking you to the data will be securely stored at Duquesne University in locked files and password-protected computers in the psychology department . The data will be destroyed within two years of the completed research project.
RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:	You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time or at any phase of the research project. Should you withdraw, all audio recordings and transcriptions pertaining to your participation will be destroyed.
SUMMARY OF RESULTS:	A summary of the results of this research will be provided through the researcher's dissertation proper. You may request a copy, at no cost, at any time after completion of the research.
VOLUNTARY CONSENT:	I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.
	I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Seth Young at _____ for questions pertinent to the research or Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for questions related to human subject rights, at 412-396-6326.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature   Date

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

KHALIL

Interviewer – I'm not sure what you remember from my dissertation at all.

Khalil – Big black dicks.

I – [laughs] Yeah. Yes, that was the former title. Which is still, technically… [K: RIP] [laughs] Name of my introduction. Essentially yes. that's kind of what it is. But, for the most part, the main general focus of my entire project as whole is exploring Black masculinity and sexuality, and sexual identity. And, in that, gathering stories related to that stuff. And getting a sense of how Black men experience themselves and their own sexuality and sexual identity. Really, that's all it is. In the consent form, that's what it is going to say. That's it. [K – I consent [laughs]] So the first question… Well, first of all, you won't be identified in this at all. So, your name and stuff, it's just not there. So, if people were to read the transcripts, people won't know exactly who you are. So, the first question is – tell me a little bit about yourself. General details, okay? So, for the record… give a little bit of info about yourself, who you are what you do, how you identify.

K – I am a writer, specifically a poet. I just finished a master's in fine arts program. I'll be teaching middle school English in the Fall. I have a girlfriend – she's White. I would identify as straight, not necessary because of that. [laughs] That ordering was very peculiar.

I – [laughs] Yeah like the two don't necessarily follow.

Khalil – I am straight, a priori her. What else?

I – Culturally, how do you identity?

K – Culturally? That's the kicker! That's the one I always go back and forth on. That's what my entire manuscript is about. So, I identify as Black pretty much all of the time. But it shifts depending on who I am around.

I – Give an example.

K – Family. So, my family sphere is the blackest sphere of my life. Whereas my social sphere is way Whiter. Although, as I've grown up it's gotten blacker. It's also… you know, times changing. But, one of the things I wrote about in my manuscript, or tried write about, at least as a driving concern, is understanding what being Black and having a Black experience is. And, maybe this anecdote would help. But, my first year of my writing program, I was at a Writers of Color meeting. And, the poet Yona Harvey was there. And everyone was going around talking about their

experiences writing about their race and I was really quiet. So, she was like, "what are you quiet about?" And I was like, "Well, I've grown up going to schools with White kids my entire life. I don't speak the way you would assume, stereotypically, a Black person speaks, even though I knew that was bullshit anyway. I don't do a lot of the other things the Black people I know do or have certain experiences. So, sometimes, I don't feel like I have license to write about blackness because I don't know if I've had a Black experience." And she just stared at me, and she's like, "But Khalil, you are Black. So, all of your experiences are Black experiences." And, for some reason, that was the most earthshattering thing I've ever heard. I was like, 'thanks for setting me straight.' [laughs] So, why I always go back to that to kind of define my mental landscape of race is that I feel like… I know what I am, but I don't always feel like I am that, and I feel like I'm sort of a chameleon depending on my surroundings. Yeah.

I – So you have shades of blackness.

K – Like, I don't naturally speak with any sort of Black-English vernacular until I am around a lot more Black people. Then it, like, kind of creeps up. When I do it, it doesn't feel natural, like it's very much a conscious thing. But, the idea to do it is not as conscious.

I – So, the key question from that… so my sense of that is that you have Black at the top in terms of identifiers, then you have shades of blackness, when I heard you say that you… I'm not sure if it's a question, if how you identify is a question that you've had for a while you were writing your manuscript. But, I got the sense that you identified solidly as Black around other Black people and then in more White dominant areas or White friends and social groups, how you identify is much different. Would you say that's true, or, if it is how, how would you identify when you're around White people?

K – True and it's not true. So, let me break this down. Especially around family… I feel most me when I'm around family. Though, what that is, I almost hesitate to even put a color or racial label on it, because to me it's just family. Like, my brother is extremely White-passing, and I'm the darkest skin-toned person in my family, so like… I don't know it's all over the place. When I'm around extended family who act slightly "Blacker" [K used air quotes] than my immediate family, I feel Black in the sense… almost like an acceptance. Not necessarily like I've entered into something. When I'm around mostly White people, I can also forget that I'm Black sometimes until there are certain experiences like going different places in public, or talking about certain things in the media, or those one-off, really quick, low-key "didn't you realize that was racist?" comment that comes out. And then I realize, "Oh, I'm not down with that." And then I have to negotiate the rest of the conversation. Or when my physical blackness becomes really apparent in the moment to the group of people I'm with vis-à-vis a joke or some other thing. So, I don't go places thinking I'm Black. That's not a very conscious thing in my mind. So, on the one sense, I do feel Black, but in the other sense, I only feel Black when it's kind of thrust on me circumstantially if that makes sense.

I – it does, at least to me. It seems as though context heightens your awareness of it and plays a role in how you approach blackness, how you see yourself against the outline of the structure of how you define blackness. So… can you give an example, of how you feel like you're pulled back into blackness when you're in a White circle or White situation?

K – Yeah. I think so. When I'm asked to do it, it's hard to draw it up, but it happens all of the time. Probably one of the easiest ones is when there's a wedding, or it's a bar, or anywhere there's music being played… Unspokenly, this is super uncanny, but people I've never even met before or people who have only known me briefly… As soon as music comes on there's always this look at me like, "Oh, you're going to start dancing, right?" Or like "You're going to dance really well," or like that's a thing that people will know about me before even knowing that dancing is a thing that I like to do and that I do well. And that's always really weird because I'm like "what in the world could drive you to think that aside from my skin color? Like, there's nothing else… like I'm not standing around bragging like "I'm going to tear it up on the dancefloor. So, I don't know what people… that's always something that comes up.

I – Yeah, nothing really informed that judgment call.

K – Yeah, I mean, it's a misread of me, so I don't know where they're getting it.

I – What do you imagine they would say if you asked them that question? Or have you ever asked someone that question before?

K – I probably have. They usually get really defensive and there's some sort of weird placation. Or, they deviate from it by saying "Oh, you just look like you… I don't know!" Like yeah, you don't know what you're talking about. But, I have a weird trigger about ever calling people out on those things.

I – What do you mean?

K – Like, when people make a weird racial assumption. Or an assumption that I could view as race-based. Kind of knowing how easily I could grill on it to death is like, how could I let them off of the hook? Because I don't feel like dealing with the consequences of this, so I usually just go with the flow, or just ignore it or create some sort of joke just to get by.

I – Almost like you want to mitigate it [K – Exactly}

K - Like completely nullify the potential energy in what's happening. Like, zap, – Gone. Yeah, I'm trying to think of other instances. There's a time when I got elected president of my fraternity, immediately in the meeting: like the gavel goes down and the first thing that happens and we're sitting in a semi-circle for some reason and I remember seeing someone from my left this one fraternity brother leans over and goes "Obama." Because I was the first Black president of the fraternity. So, it's funny that little things like that are like "Oh wait, don't forget you're Black." Thanks.

I – It was a White person that said that to you.

K – Absolutely. Ironically enough, not a fan of Obama, but said it to me somewhat encouragingly.

I – What was that like for you? What do you think that means?

K – Super weird. I don't know. We were never really close, and later on he had reason to hate me but that had nothing to do with race. But, it was always really weird, because it was like I hear the tone in his voice and I can never parse out if it's completely sarcasm, or some sort of excitement.

I – Do you think that joke would've been different if it came from a Black person?

K – I would've taken it differently for sure. I would've taken it as a wink and a nod kind of thing versus a "Hey Guy, you're Black," kind of thing. Which is probably, I don't know. I don't know if that's how it would be, or if it's a filter that I have in me… I don't know.

I – What do you mean?

K – Like, if I were to read intentionally a Black person saying that differently, or if it actually just would be.

I – So are you saying that you – and I don't want to put words in your mouth – but it's like sense that was your first response, is that what your gut is telling you?

K - Yeah. And maybe that has to do with feeling a different shade in different circumstances? So, I am going to take things differently from different people. And that's why I think it's kind of built into me. Like, which shade of gray am I? Who am I touching?

I – Who am I closer to? Who are you closer to? So, in that case, what does Black or blackness mean to you? What does being Black mean to you?

K – I don't know. I think being Black means… I don't know if it means this, but it's like something inherently built into this a sense of adversity and a sense of overcoming. I think that has very obvious roots in everything… hahaha *Roots*!

I – [laughs] Isn't that a song? Like on a rapgenius, if you had an annotation right there.

K – [laughs] I was going to say, the song "Sucka Nigga" by *A Tribe Called Quest* which I love because it's like jokey, but the last third of it is oddly very serious and says something like, exactly like that. Like Black means adversity or overcoming. I forget what the exact word is, but it always stuck in my mind that that's always a thing that's been said since the early 90s. So that's one thing it means to me. Beyond that, I don't know if I can say anything too concretely. Like I want to say Pride, but since I don't always feel Black in certain circumstances, I don't know where that pride would be located. Except for me, Pride has a lot to do with family, my grandfather being a civil rights activist, a church leader and all of those things. And the stories of different sides of the family going all over the country and Canada and escaping slavery and stuff like that… so there's a pride in like heritage and lineage. Family is black to me. And even though I don't always view my family's traditions as inherently Black to me because they're just family to me, when I look at other White families interacting it is always very obvious to me how not Black they are. So, I don't know, I'd say faith, but I wasn't raised under any particular religion. I was raised more middle-class upper middle class than most Black people I know at least more than most Black people I

keep in touch with. So, I don't know what to do with that… how economics factor into blackness for me.

I – I mean the thing that I'm kind of noting, it's almost as though – at least in terms of your identity, and like the speaker told you before – those things are Black because you're Black. It automatically makes it Black, and they can be Black by extension. You can't get out of that.

K – It's like the Midas touch of blackness.

I – Whether or not they're Black based on how they pertain to certain definition or construct of blackness as an idea… it seems as though as is a bit more tenuous for you. So, concurrently, one of the things we touched on briefly, lightly, is your sexual orientation. You made two references to that, but not in depth. But, if we take a few steps back then, what does a being a man mean to you?

K – I have, and I learn this every day it seems like, but, I have very gray, traditional notions of masculinity in me. I am noticing that even with me and G---, Thursday was our 8-month anniversary and I was just thinking about how I went to the ATM and pulled out a whole bunch of money and paid for everything and left a ridiculous tip. And, even though one of the first things we talked about when we started dating, one of the things she insisted on is "I hate when people pay for me. I will always make you split the bill with me." … I'm in a little better financial situation than she is through the summer, so I've offered to take care of her and doing that is very rewarding to me. Everywhere we go if we drive, I never let her drive my car. She doesn't ask. I also don't ask her too, I just do it. So, I always feel like I'm shepherding her. And I view our relationship as a much more heteronormative and… a patriarchal sense. I have a much bigger drive to be a provider and in every facet of the relationship I'm looking out for that. But, I also manipulate the idea of being a provider in more presumably feminine ways whereas like I always like to be the emotional provider to ask how you're doing more and to listen more than I talk because I generally hate talking about myself sometimes. But that's a tangent.

I – Tangents are allowed [laughs].

K – Yeah. I talk about myself when I feel like it's asked for, when it's relevant and relevance has a lot to do with it. I guess somewhere along the lines I got very paranoid about talking about myself too much to the point where people are like, "I really don't care and now I don't like you." Whenever we hang out, she'll ask me things. I think I talk about myself in different ways. Like, if I write a poem I'll get very excited to share that with anyone around me, especially her. So, sharing her is like doing that. But I'm very reluctant to be like "here's how my day was, this is what I did" because most of my day is moderately interesting so I don't know why you'd think it was interesting. But G--- is very reluctant to those sort of traditional gender roles, even though we fall into them all of the time. Like she loves to cook, so she always ends up cooking at her place or my place. But, the way she circumvents that is, though it's not like not I'm allowed, she'll call me into the kitchen to talk so I don't leave the kitchen and sit on the couch and drink a beer or something. She hates that. Not that it is necessarily harming anyone, it's just that it's one of her ways of managing that. And I didn't realize that I was doing it which probably has a lot to do with my

traditional role of being a dad… "being a dad?" that was weird… that's going to be fun for you. Being a male partner in a male-female relationship. Also, dads. [laughs].

I – [laughs] Thank you for the segue.

K – I heard a man named Freud calls these slips.

I – Here, have these Freudian slips. Okay, so one of the things that stood out to me was, and this is a really academic way of putting it, you made a mention of being a man and what it means to you being related to the male-centered roles you take up. Being a man of provision is pretty much an important thing for you, something that you like to be. But, where in your own life do you think that comes from?

K – My mom.

I – Oh! Twist.

K – Yeah. Because, for so long and in some ways still, hasn't come from my dad. When I was a little kid and he was still working as a doctor, he was bringing in money. And he wasn't around because he worked ridiculous hours, but my mom raised me all of the time. She would take me to my sporting events and areas where you would think a dad's there. Not that he wasn't, but when I think back to those things, I think of my mom taking me to get my hockey pads when I was younger or whatever. And then when we moved from California to Pittsburgh, he didn't… he was like "I'm not going to get a job." And that was a whole other story. But, he sat around the house pretty much. But, he didn't work for 14 years. And, my mom paid for everything. Everything. And, my dad's cerebral, and therefore closed off, nature, all of my emotional experiences and major milestones in adolescence and growing up usually have my mom's finger prints over them. So, she's always my model for how to be an adult and a parent. Which is to be involved in everything, to be providing, to be always accessible, to be generous to make things happen or to make people happy. And I don't think the way she did necessarily had a masculine tinge to it. But, I take what I learned from her and I think these are the ways that I need to be a man in my relationship to Anna, even in my relationship with my sister and my brother. Like the way I try to take care of them because I feel, for a lot of reasons… like my brother doesn't have beyond a high school education, he's been a musician, a struggling musician, feel like he's not the older brother, but I'm the older brother. I am like the caretaker of the siblings.

I – That's a really interesting parallel you drew between you and your mother where you become the surrogate older sibling even though that's the role you necessarily have. And your mother becomes the surrogate father even though that's not the role she necessarily has. So, it's almost as though your model for being a dad, a father, a brother comes from your mom. Would you say your model for being a man also comes from her, too?

K – I wouldn't say that's how I see it.

I – How do you see it?

K – This is going to sound really annoying to me, but media. You see how men should be in movies and tv and books. Not in very macho sense, but just in a sense like, here's a man that has his shit together. I want to be that man. I actually reject macho masculinity a lot. And I'm really into it now in an academic sense of it, but when I think back even when I was younger, when other kids around me were being annoying in a boyish way, I was always wondering "Why are you doing that? Why are you acting this way? Why are you being gross?" Why are you being annoying, why are you doing these things I don't think you should do?" "Why do you feel like you have to be that way?" Because I always thought you could opt out of acting like an asshole or acting like this, but I see some many people not doing that. And I'm thinking "What's keeping you in that?" And I think they're in their construct of masculinity whereas mine for whatever reason, maybe because it's tether to my mother, but I've always been questioning of why men act the way they do. Because it seems so easy to not do a lot of those things because I don't do a lot of those things.

I – You said that your examples of what it means to be a man comes from the media, pop culture, pop media… can you give an example or share a story of something in pop culture that exemplifies manliness to you?

K – I'm always really drawn to the moments in film or tv shows where the father emotionally opens up to someone in the family, usually a kid, and those moments of… I'm really interested in men who act in a strict masculine sense and then realizing the error of those ways. My dad acts that way. So, I'm always really happy when I see that in media. I can't think of an example right now. I'm also really attracted to noble or virtuous men because they aren't the same as manly man. I don't know why this sticks out in my head, but Solomon Northrop in *12 years of Slave*.

I – Was thinking Ned Stark.

K – Also Ned Stark. Love Ned Stark. Also, not Black. Or real.

I – That is true. Why Solomon?

K – I think it has a lot to do with… I'm very moved by the end of the movie where he comes back, and he tearfully apologizes to his family for something that wasn't in his control. But, he still has the sense of an obligation or duty that he was not there to fulfil but he wants to be held accountable for it. And I love the shit out of that. I like a masculinity that is accountability-centric because my dad isn't that way. Well, he isn't that way about himself, but he's that way about everyone else around him.

I – So on two levels, we're talking about race and gender almost separately: manhood and masculinity on one level and blackness on another level and where you see them in different aspects of your life. Do you see race and the idea of the Black man operating somewhere in your relationship?

K – The concept of a Black man in my relationship?

I – Well, let's take a step back. What does it mean to be a Black man, if it means anything?

K – It definitely does. It always feels like you always have something to prove. Wherever you go, you have to do a little bit more. I think that's why I carry myself in certain ways, why I talk in certain ways, why I dress in certain ways, because if I don't I feel like people will reduce to me other things I don't want to be. And in my relationship, I try to be loose and whatever in private and a little bit in public when it's appropriate. But, I always want to be on time, I always want to dress the right way, or act the right way to wait staff or to be quiet in a movie theater, or not taking up space. I realize more and more how visible how being a Black man is, and I try to take advantage of that when it's beneficial and fun and every other instance reduce it.

I – When would be a moment when you take advantage of it?

K – When the notions of Black oppression and therefore society at large is almost pedestalization of Black people because they've been oppressed works in my favor. Whenever someone makes a joke or slips real quick, I can jab because that's a freebie. Or, when I have the opportunity to say that "your perspective is a little messed up because you aren't considering what my people are going through." Even if I don't feel offended by what's happening or what's being referenced, because I can claim I just claim it.

I – It's a way to celebrate it in those comments and those remarks.

K – Yeah, which maybe goes back to the chameleon thing because I've been given a thing where I can go two shades darker.

I – There's a bit more room to talk about that, or the idolization of Black men allows you to talk that way.

K – My girlfriend is very "woke" very conscientious White woman. She doesn't… she is more up on issues of colonialism and Jim Crow and redlining and all the ways people are colonized or afflicted marginalized groups in general. But especially with Black people. So even when she slips up and says something innocuous and I give her a look, she takes it very hard. And I derive a sort of a weird pleasure of that in some instances and sometimes I just want her to stop because she's too into it and too obsessed with it and more into than I am. Like, I don't really care about this, but you do. So, like, blackness in my relationship is sort of like a sweater that I get to take off up or button different ways sometimes or spin around my head. It's not a toy. It's an accessory that has certain functions that are vital but is also very much in flux.

I – That also seems to be very dependent on the context that you're in. It seems as though whenever race comes up context plays the biggest role. All of the stories and example you've given, it's prevalent across the board and that doesn't mean it'll change. But, your blackness and the shades you can be is dependent on context. When you say that you raise your eyebrow a little bit at your girlfriend being into more than you are, can you say a little bit more about that or give an example?

K – Yeah, I can give a shit ton of examples. It happens every day. I'm trying to think of one that's happened recently… Black Lives Matter movement is a thing she's way more down with than I am because she's way more down with than I am, because I just have philosophical qualms with one, the name, and two, the methodologies. But, anyway, so the BET awards on Sunday, Jesse

Williams did a speech that I really like, but I have this switch to hyper-activism where I'm just not interested. And I try to mitigate that a bit more now to be more interested now, but when people are like "We need to make other people respect us, we have to take that by force" that always sounds more Malcolm X than Martin Luther King. And MLK to me is more like, in a social-justicey sense, a better example of blackness – which is a shitty word to use in that sense – but that's how I think about it. My girlfriend is way more…. She's more on the Malcolm X side. [I – I love this needle] Yeah, the needle is great. She saw the Jesse Williams thing and loved it, and when the Justin Timberlake thing came up, especially because Justin Timberlake tweeted to a Black follower of his, her immediate, critical lens was like "How interesting is it in that in trying to support what Jesse Williams was saying, Justin Timberlake took it from a Black Lives Matter to an All Lives Matter thing and then said that to another Black person. And she's telling me about how messed up that is. And I'm like, I didn't even do my research that much, I didn't look at the icon, or who the guy he tweeted at was, or notice that he did an All Lives Matter sort of argument. I also wasn't generally bothered by what he said, though I can see why it's messed up. In that sense, she is more hair-triggered to have those things. Like, the tripwire of her sensitivity. Whereas I shrug off and I think it's because I'm not sure how and when to locate my blackness that I haven't always been consistent in looking for the same triggers because I don't view the triggers in a racial context or racial sense.

I – Do you think that she sees your blackness in a certain way?

K – Oh, that's a great question. I have no idea to answer that. Really great question. [laughs] I want to ask her that. To me, I would never think to extract my blackness from my masculinity like, looking in on myself. But, I am sure she thinks of it in a certain way. But she probably has a very delicate sensitively crafted way of looking at it where she can see me as Black person and as a man, but not reduce me to those and not separate them. She can compartmentalize those things probably very well because she will want to do due diligence to not just the fact that I'm a man, and a poet, and a brother and son, but that I'm Black and that blackness has implications and ramifications. For her, it's never just the surface. The very histories of a culture are very much at play in every contemporary thing that happens. Me walking into a jewelry store and getting looked at to her… Like, I know what I'm going into with that, I know that feeling, but for her… Like for me, if I walked into a jewelry store and I knew I was going to get looked at like "Hey, can you even pay for any of this or are you going to try to rob the place" that's like, a thing I know I'll have to negotiate., it's less oppression than just shit I have to deal with because I'm Black. For her, it's systemic racism and bullshit and you don't have to deal with that. And I'm like, calm down, I'm just trying to get through the store. I don't think she's dating me because I'm Black. I don't think she's not, not dating me because I'm Black. I don't think really comes into play on a personality romantic relationship level. But, I think it's really interesting for her to be the partner of a Black man especially in our contemporary age.

I – Side note: are you the first Black guy that she dated?

K – Yup. Well, that's a huge assumption that I have. I haven't seen pictures of her exes… I haven't seen pictures at all. I know about them.

I – It seems like she's never dropped any clear identifying cultural markers.

K – She's not one to… if she were talking to a friend who didn't have Facebook or something and had no way of seeing me, especially because my name is super White, her way or describing me, the first thing she wouldn't say is: "Oh, he's a Black man." She wouldn't feel like she has to say that I'm Black. She'd slip it in at some point and be like oh, he's Black and it's inconsequential to her. It would be like saying he has blue hair. And she's never said that to me about any of her exes. They've just been described, and it just sounds like they're White because White is the norm.

I – So, we're talking about blackness and masculinity and all that sorts of stuff. What does sexuality mean to you? What does your sexuality mean to you?

K – I feel like I have always taken it for granted. Like, I'm just a straight man. I never once questioned that. It's never been in doubt for me. Although sometimes, I like to play like mind experiments like, "What if I were gay?" Or What if I were bi or this or that. And I'm really bad it. I can't imagine it. Like I can't feel it when I imagine it. I can picture it, but I couldn't be moved.

I – By comparison, it's a lot more abstract.

K – Yeah like… me going up to a man and kissing him or sleeping with him, is just "Oh what if?" Like me going up to a woman, and kissing her and I can sleep with her, there's more visceral emoting or reaction that I feel.

I – You can feel that and see that.

K – Being a straight man… There's a way in which there's what it is, and I do feel it, I do notice the way… I'm really bad at this. I'll look at any pretty girl on the street, I will mack on any girl on the street, and I'll lean awkwardly through the window and like, pretend to do all this to manage to get another look. Which, funny story side note, at the BET awards, the very beginning where Beyoncé did her number, she had her dancers come down the aisle. They were wearing some crazy outfits and Sam L. Jackson is sitting in the front row and the very last thing before the camera switches he's leaning over looking at her booty, and I'm like "Is no one going to talk about how Sam Jackson is a freak? He probably has his wife next to him…"

I – I saw that! [laughs] he probably doesn't care that he's on camera either. He's flagrant. Your sexuality as a straight guy, it is what it is. Or at least that's the sense that I get from…

K – Even though obviously the people I'm around and the communities that I'm in and the things that I do, being a guy and being straight are completely untethered from one another. Like, being a guy is being what I am. Though if another guy is being a guy in another way, then I'm just like, that's your way of being a guy. It's also a highly individualized thing for me. Like, it just feels right, and it feels natural. I would not even begin to know where to start to begin acting or performing or behaving as a guy who is not straight or straight but not a guy, I can't separate those things. It's just… it is what it is. I take it for granted while at the same time, it's just a choice.

I – it's locked in. You've already told me in some ways how your gender is locked into that. But do you feel like your race plays a role in how you identify sexually?

K – I think so. Because I think… when I think of 'Black,' I don't usually have a space in that thinking for other sexualities knowing that they exist, knowing they exist just as often in other races. But like, unless it's super obvious when I see another Black person, another Black man, when I see another Black man, I assume he's straight. Generally, I think I do that for most men anyway, but for White men, I feel like there's a bit more room… maybe I'm wrong about this, but I feel like when I see a Black man, I'm always like oh you're a Black man, so you're straight because you're like me. Unless there's some exterior indication that that's not true.

I – Like what?

K – Dress, body language, tone of voice, all very stereotypical, but those things.

I – Really visible markers.

K – Like a thing where you notice it and you can't miss. Or, you could, but once you notice it and process it you're like "Oh"

I – But it also sounds like, unless it's otherwise stated, other Black men are straight. Whereas White men have, they're given that realm of variation. They can be anything.

K – When I see couples, Black couples that aren't straight versus when I see Black couples that aren't straight, I like, I notice them longer. I have to look at it more to think "yeah, it's happening." Because I don't see it as often. I also don't think you see it with exception to like *Orange is the New Black*, you don't see Black sexuality represented in media. So, in a sense, I'm not conditioned to know what to look for, which is problematic in and of itself. But, I think that's very much a play on my side. I know how to identify two non-straight White people. But, I don't know how to do that as quickly with any other race.

I – Do you have a story or example that demonstrate that?

K – There's been couples walking up and down the street, two lesbian couples walking up the street in Squirrel Hill and it's like… I don't know why, but it's very telling that my body language is to move back before I even say anything. It just bothers me that I do that. Moving on… it's to look up and see two women holding hands, walking towards me and they're dark. I'm like "what are they doing?" versus "Here comes a couple." Why are they holding hands? I always wonder – and this is possibly pseudo-racist – I notice a lot more because I'm in Oakland, because of CMU students, I notice Asians walking arm in arm a lot more often in ways that don't seem sexual to me, but I never see them walking in ways that are. But, I don't know if and when those things come together. So, then I'm like, how do they or how would they, not-straight-Asian-people carry themselves… I guess it's because I'm a huge reader of body language and so body language is my way of figuring out how to put things into categories or figuring out which labels to assign, if I should assign them.

I – From what I'm gather, it sounds like you're saying you wonder a bit more what couples could be when they're non-Black. When they are Black it's like they're straight unless there is a really

visible sign that they aren't straight, you don't really think about that. But then whenever Black people appear and they're non-straight, you take note of that. It's notable, but you're not sure what to think about it or how to negotiate it.

K – Yeah. I think I have tons of queer White people in my life and only one or two queer Black people that I can think of. So, I know them. But it's not a big enough number for it be not anomaly to me.

I – When they're Black and non-straight, you know exactly what they are. Whereas if they are non-Black and if it's two men or two women, they can be anything.

K – Yeah. I feel like gender roles are way more, or maybe just in my mental construction, rigid. Not rigid in the sense that people can't move through them, but rigid in how I view them and how they are in blackness as a community. Again, I don't know what to point to hang that outside of the fact that other sexualities and other genders are much more… I don't want to say accessible, but permissible in non-Black spaces. Like, I feel like a White person has way more leverage and privilege to say, "I can identify myself anyway I want." Like a designer person. Whereas a Black person is going to be viewed a certain way. So, I don't even take the step of applying that to them, it's more of a surprise to me when they're like, "Oh, a-gender et cetera et cetera." Like, where did you learn to do that? To me that does not enter my realm… probably because my realm of blackness has way more things that have to do with me that don't include other genders and sexualities. So, I'm like what are the avenues for that, and how did you even become exposed to that? Whereas for White people it makes more sense.

I – Bringing it back to you, though, because of, lack of a better word, how Black sexuality is generally policed and what's permissible in society at large, until otherwise stated, Black men are always straight unless otherwise stated… if that logic follows to you.

K – I would say so.

I – So for your personal relations with women, do you feel like your race plays a role?

K – Yeah.

I – How? In what way? Do you have any stories?

K – I have tons of stories. Are we talking about romantic relationships or relationships in general?

I – Let's do both. Let's say one that is romantic and one that is not romantic.

K – Yeah. Well, my first two girlfriends my race played a huge role. It was something that was I was never allowed to leave behind in the sense that it was constantly brought up. And that has a lot also with their families. It was brought up in the context of where I met them at: university, in their sororities and… just wherever else. But it wasn't until I interacted with their families that me-as-the-Black-boyfriend was a big topic of discussion. It was the reason my second relationship failed, and it was almost the reason my first failed. Probably still was to some level, but it was a

major issue that had to be negotiated and put to rest over time. Which is the complete opposite of my relationship now where I was the one going into like "Oh my god, I hope this doesn't come up again." And it just never came up. It's never come up. Until I asked. I was like "Is it cool that you're dating a Black man," and she's like "yeah." Like, not even phased by that question. As far as non-romantic relationships… I mean going back to when I was a kid, it's always been a thing. There's a poem I'm trying to write, it's just like random collections or memories or observations. This one time in high school, this kid I'd known forever, and this isn't the first time he's asked me this, but I remember this one time in high school and he turned to me and was like "Is your semen black?" And I'm like… "What?"

I – Wait…

K – Seriously, he asked me that: "Do you come black?" And I'm like "What are you talking about?"

I – What does that even mean?

 K – Like, if he had been joking, I wouldn't remember that. But, he really was curious, needed an answer, needed me to tell him. And I'm like… in the poem I'm writing, I fabricated after the fact, but I don't know what I said at the time. It was just like… what the fuck.

I – What did you say in the poem?

K – In the poem the line goes… [laughs] it's super snarky. It goes: "In 11th grade, a friend asks me if my semen was black/ I told him how often he reminded me of the Whitest Black guy he knows." Is sort of response. Like, check yourself. So that's like one… I had a friend in middle school, elementary or middle school, we went to the same high school. We were super close then. Um, but there was this refrain, this joke refrain, whenever anything happened, even if it had nothing to do with race, he would just go "You know that is, Khalil." And the answer was: "because you're Black." And it happened so often, we didn't have to finish it. He would just go "You know why that is," and he would just apply that to any situation he wanted. And it got to the point where I was just like "could you stop?" Like that was one of those things where it's like, I could be cool with that joke for a while. But, if you keep mentioning it to me, then I'm just constantly irritated that you're constantly reminding me that I'm Black. So…

I – To go back to your romantic relationships, your race became something where you really had to negotiate with your girlfriends. Could you give an example of a moment where that stood out to you? Where, on the basis of your race, you had to negotiate your interactions with your girlfriend.

K – M---, first girlfriend. I have a memory of being invited to a family get-together. And, M--- and I have gone into the living room, we were sitting on a love seat. And her grandmother shuffled into the room and M--- said: "Hi Grandma" and her grandmother didn't say a word. She just stared at us ice cold. And then kept shuffling. Turned away and kept shuffling. There was also… I don't remember exactly what happened, but I have a memory of being in South Carolina with M--- and her family and her whole family and it was like the Black biker gang… or bikers, I don't know if

it was a gang. But, Black bikers' convention at this beach and they were driving all over the place, bikes are noisy. Whatever. And, I have some memory of her younger brother mentioning, kind of being frustrated like, "Why are all these people" doing this. Behaving the way, they were. And, M---'s dad just immediately coming in and saying "You can't say that, what are you talking about? Don't say that." Totally controlling the situation. And I was like… uuuuh.

I – It kind of signals specifically what they were talking about.

K – Yeah. With B---, second girlfriend. She, I had a sense, especially coming off the heels of dating M---, I had a sense that her family probably had a similar reaction. I told her upfront "If my race is going to be a wedge in this relationship then let me know. Let's not even worry about, I don't want to cause your family problems." She reassured me. We pressed on. It became a problem. And I always thought it was a problem I had to be insulated from. It's funny. I went over to her house like three or four times. And her mother always put on this front of being polite but didn't like to look at me. Her younger sister really didn't like to look at me. I have a memory of her… when the new iOS came out, she asked the room "How do I do this?" And I was like "Oh, I know exactly how to do that." And I went over to take her phone, and the look she gave me when she handed me her phone was like "Why the hell would you ever touch my phone."

I – What did she think you'd do to it?

K – I don't know. I don't think she wanted me to be anywhere near her. And I remember very deliberately doing that, thinking that maybe it would be a way to break the ice. Whatever. And I ended up not being able to do whatever it was, which was funny. There was something about her phone that I wouldn't fix. But I was like, this is what you could do, you could read it here. And she just said "thanks." Super reluctant to acknowledge that I was a person. And every time I would leave, that's when the drama would start, and her mother would start sobbing. And she'd tell the younger sister why she was sobbing, but she wouldn't tell B---. But, B--- went and confronted her and her mom would just keep saying "People are going to judge you. People are going to judge you." And I don't think B--- wanted to believe that but being told that enough drove her to reconsider what was going on. So, I had to negotiate the back end of that. Like you know interracial relationships are fine. Nothing wrong with them.

I – They're perfectly okay.

K – Yeah, but that was a losing battle.

I – So, what way do you think race played a factor in your private relationship between them. Like your more one-to-one interaction between them. Do you feel as though it did play a major part?

K – M---, one day, just out of nowhere, was like…. Because she was convinced we were going to get married and have kids. One day she was thinking about it so hard, she freaked out and said: "I'm afraid our kids are going to come out splotchy." Because she had seen…

I – I remember that story.

K – Yeah. She had seen albino people, albino Black people and was convinced that was absolutely what was going to happen. And I was just like "No. What? Why would that happen?" Like it could, but it's not guaranteed. By any means. Like, albinism and race are not necessarily a one-to-one thing.

I – Are albinos splotchy?

K – No, that's the other thing. She… the whole thing was cluster fuck. But, so there was that. There was the fact that, after high school, I didn't dress in super baggy clothes. But, definitely baggier, looser clothes. And M--- always wanted to change me to wear tighter jeans, tighter shirts and eventually won me over only after I wanted to start dressing more that way. But, I think that possibly had a race thing. Or maybe I'm just reading into it after the fact. What else? There was no really overlie racialized… I'm thinking in the moment… of sex, or sexual activity. There were no super racial things. There were always jokes outside of it. But there was a lot more mutuality to those jokes. I'd make them, she'd make them.

I – What kind of jokes?

K – Dick jokes.

I – Okay.

K – What else would there be?

I – I guess that's all that needs to be said.

K – Jokes about being chocolate and vanilla. Jokes… all of the food euphemisms you can think of.

I – What's that like for you in hindsight.

K – I didn't care. I'm not terribly caught up about it now. But, when I look back on it, it is very childish. And there are ways where I still do that with G--- now. I don't know. Intimately, they were always very reluctant to make… light of race between us. To everyone else, there some memory… I think I remember being there for it. But I have no memory of it at all. J--- told me there was a time I was at Milano's and there was a bunch of us. And, M---… something happened about Black people came up and M--- became very insistent about asking this question that was inherently very racist and asking it very directly at me. And I was like "Can you not ask that question," and everyone is super uncomfortable and were like "That's a dumb question." But she kept asking it. I don't remember this happening, but I get told about it every time she comes up. But, it's only in moments like that when there was another coalition of White people round that any sort of cross examination however joking or serious, of my race came from M--- or B--- and very rarely from B---. Maybe she would laugh at someone making the joke about me being Black. M--- would definitely make the joke and laugh at other people making the joke. Or be defensive. She was always very protective over me. The intimate details, unless I'm just thinking about it too

much and not considering other nuances, there were never any serious racial problems between us. Like the fact we decided to date put to rest any problems about that.

I – But for the most part it seems as though racial comments were more parenthetical. But even when they're parenthetical, they seem to be rather overt. Like the splotchy comment in which case, to this day, that blows my mind.

K – Yeah. So bad.

I – This is my connection, especially in regard to the poem you wrote. The two images line up so well in mind.

K – So weird how there are misconceptions about Black sexuality. Which sounds like the entire point of your dissertation. But why would a person ever think that semen is Black?

I – What do you think about it?

K - I don't know, because I know that guy was probably watching a shit ton of porn, so he had to… unless he completely avoided Black porn, he just had to know how it was. But, if he asked me that sincerely, then, he like must have believed one way or being Black meant that I was absolutely different. That was the other thing that kid said at one point. My mom has a memory of my mom driving all of us home one day from school and I guess were joking around in the car… and this was in fourth or fifth grade. But he said, "it's because you have a big black dick." And my mom was like, "What?" and then my mom subsequently going to a PTA meeting where the mother of that kid was talking about how that school was so great and race isn't a thing and my mom being like "your son said this to my son." And that woman being floored, couldn't believe it or refused to believe it until my mom proved it. So, I always wonder what that guy experience was… to think… that he could ask me that question and get the answer that he was somewhat anticipating.

I – My last question to wrap it up: in terms of sexuality, do you think there's any way for it to be empowering?

K – Yeah. Maybe that's it. Maybe Black sexuality to me is a more powerful sexuality than other race sexualities. To me, and I'm already drawing the problematic lines in my head when I say this, but to me when I think of a Black man make love to a woman versus a White man making love to a woman, I am thinking of the Black man being better at it. I think of Black people being better at that in general, but I don't know if that has to do with capital B blackness as a thing, or if it has to do with my own thoughts about how people of color in general, their cultures are more accepting of bodily movement and it's more fluid and loose and less rigid than White culture. Which is like, you only move your body in a certain way at a certain way that are prescribed. It's like Black people dancing and moving your body are a part of everything you do in ways that don't appear in Whiteness. And therefore, I feel like people of color have more physical body intuition and that those things are more practiced… and this sounds so messed up Darwinian, but we know how to fuck better. [laughs] we just do. We can jump higher, run faster, and that. Which has no basis in anything real. And even knowing that bullshit, it's just a thing in my head where if I see a White guy at a club making out with a girl or whatever, I'm always very skeptical of what he's doing or

264

whatever. Versus like a Black guy where I think he's going to pull out some magic and do it. And I don't know why that is other than generally thinking broadly, Black people are more intuition about their bodies.

I – Does it influence how you think about your body?

K – Absolutely.

I – In What way?

K – Knowing my body is something I take a lot of pride in. Knowing how it moves, knowing when it moves, expecting it to be in certain places, whether that's running, whether that's dancing, whether that's karate, knowing how to do salsa dancing, even just strength. Like I don't lift a lot and I don't try to, I'm not a bodybuilder, but kind of like knowing secretly how strong I am and knowing that other people don't know that I am… it's like super appealing. It's like being a super hero, but people don't know you're a superhero and you don't talk about the fact you're a super hero. But I don't know where that comes from. I don't think I made that up 100%. I think I just take pride in having a very capable strong body and I've probably attached that to other things. Creating that mythology about myself and other Black men around me.

I – One of the things that stood out to me was your sense of Black sexuality as this inherently powerful thing. And the descriptions you gave… I could see what you meant when you were talking about it and the way it connects to your body. How you interpret it providing a very intimate sense of self at least in terms of how you experience your physique. So, one of the things I was wondering about there was, one, I was intrigued by how you interpreted the question of empowerment as being powerful.

K – That's funny, I didn't think of it as enabling.

I – So, for your Black sexuality, as a concept, is and can be, at its core, defined by a certain element of strength. And that can be interpreted however you want to interpret. But you're saying personally, you can interpret that both in a private sense and a public sense and that dictated how you may experience yourself or perform for other people. And that remained the other thing I wanted to ask about, if you have any examples in your mind where you've had to perform one way or another.

K – Pretty much anytime I'm out. Which I mean capital O or lowercase O. Capital O would be the Southside, or at a bar, or where there's music or dancing going on. But not necessarily. It's like the Winston Bishop syndrome. You have the Black guy in the group that everyone is looking at and it's like, you got to be that. And I think that's when I step up to the stereotype a little bit more.

I – Just for the sake of clarify, capital O would be…?

K – Partying. Out with a lowercase O is literally outside of the house. A bus, this coffee shop. There are other ways… sometimes it's just a sense that I get from how people look at me that I need to hold myself a certain way. But, as far as specific examples, generally I'm around dancing,

especially because of the way dance happens these days… which sounds like I'm dating myself, so weird. But, being at a club, club dancing, grinding, stuff like that, is more explicitly sexual or sexualized, like the pressure to be good at that, one because you're a Black man and that's expected and two, you're a Black man and you have sexualized stereotypes about you. You have to confirm those because if you don't the other stereotype is, you're a bitch. And so, there's that pressure to avoid that.

I – I wonder if you have any stories of that. I recall a few times when we've gone to clubs together, but we've never really interacted. And on some levels, or a lot of levels, I can really sympathize with that sort of feeling. But I'm wondering for you if there are any stories that stick out in your mind.

K – I don't know how this will fit exactly in…

I – I mean, if it came up, it came up.

K – Yeah. So, there's the time, my going away party, when we ended up at Levels and we're upstairs… because I don't remember this the same way… and it's funny how often I don't remember things the same way other people remember them… But I remember we were upstairs and C---- was with us, and you were dancing with T----, and I was dancing with C----, and I know that, in the moment, we were really into dancing and pushing me background, like that's how into the dancing she was. I remember you and I exchanged glances and we laughed about that. Ever since then, that story evolved from "C--- was like dancing crazy with you," to "C---- had you backed up against basically walk fucking you. I don't ever remember reaching the wall, because in my memory it was covered with other people." But, in my head, what I experienced was one level of sexualized dancing, but the story has jumped up seven pegs to like basically sex on a wall. And that's the way it's always told me. And I don't have any say in amending the story anymore, so I go along with it.

I – Someone's story to tell about you. Do you feel that was an experience that was infused with that racial dynamic?

K – probably. I don't know if I'm projecting or not. But, the only other Black person was you. And then M--- had left and then C--- was there, and I just think that the co-opting of another White woman was the thing that people were like most paying attention like oooh look at Khalil.

I – Khalil is stealing all of the White women. Good job Khalil.

K – Exactly. But, that's the only thing I could think of to explain it. Because like, I think S--- was dancing, I don't know who he was dancing with. But, you and I were the only people dancing with people that I know of, which was notable in that sense. Very notable because of who was engaged in the optics.

I – Optics, very academic term.

K – Say a little bit more about the optics of it? Probably because Levels was full of other Black people being seen in that way and full of people that, because of people I was with, was full of people of people that wouldn't normally go to Levels or be around those people or on the second floor where the dancing occurred. But, since I was there and blended into the environment in a lot of ways that took me out of the group where they could see me differently, like I wasn't a part of them. So optically, I was no longer part of them and I was performing this act, this moment, this sexuality, this thing.

I – Yeah.

K – *Layers*.

I – Levels was one of the more predominantly Black bars on the Southside, out of the many bars that were down there, it was one of the more premiere bars. S bar, Jimmy D's, at least was up there in terms of its Black dominance. Rumpshakers…

K – It's interesting that we ended up there. It started off as a joke and then everyone was like, let's do it. Like that group of friends wouldn't have gone to Levels.

I – That group was predominantly White, especially at the end.

K – There were no other Black people there except for you. But, normally that group would go to like Tiki Lounge, where you could dance but the type of music was different. And most of the time people would go Levels only because they let anybody in so it's a good underage bar. But, not because they were like "I want to go upstairs and dance to rap music". But because that was a thing for me and the novelty of taking me there, I think created that whole moment. So, the implicit sexuality of rap music, a Black club, Black people dancing to that music in that club, and taking me there, and having me dance with a White woman, that was a peak of that moment.

I – So, to use an academic phrase, you transformed in their gaze for the most part. It became a Black spectacle where they could look at you and critique your Black performance, or our Black performance, or other people are doing the same thing and White men stare in. What is that like for you, to acknowledge how your experience of your body is in some ways taken away from you.

K – Weird is the first word that comes to mind. Especially because, as I was saying before, one of the things I take pride in is having a sense and strength of my body and being in control. And, my sense of control of my body is generally very physically minded. Not observationally minded. Even as I consider how other people see my body in space is always weird. My construction of my Black shifts from place to place, contextually. So, I'm not always actively thinking of being a Black person everywhere I am. So, the moment where doubts come up, it's like "Why am I even making this distinction?" then the second thought is "I can't get into my friends' heads, so I can't understand how they would be viewing me differently." Like, I know that if I were on the couch looking at me doing what I'm doing now, there's a way that I would look at myself, but there's no way I can guarantee that they are, are always are, looking at me. Couch, bar stool, restaurant booth, buses… I'm all about buses these days. Buses fascinate me for how race plays out. It's like a place

you can't escape, it's moving, and it's a small microcosm of America, especially 61 A, B, C, and D [laughs]. Everyone is there.

I – As an aside, I think public transportation really plays a part in terms of how race is allocated in cities.

K – Oh god yeah. If I were going to a city and I want to see the demographics of the city, the first thing I would tell that person is get on a bus. Because if you get on a P1 or P3, it's mostly Black. If you get on any bus headed downtown, you're going to have a certain segment of Black people. If you get on the 40, it goes from downtown to Mt. Washington, you have an older crowd that's more White. If you get on the 71s or 61s, you're going to have a much higher Asian percentage on the bus, just because of where the neighborhoods are spread out. It's interesting. Okay, here's another story, it doesn't have anything to do with anything.

I – Doesn't matter.

K - One time I got on the bus coming from Oakland after work and the only space was in the vert back. And I remember being aware that a girl was following me to get to a certain seat, so I didn't sit at the five seats in the back. And there was this guy on the left, so I didn't sit in the middle, because I wanted that girl to get to the other side for all of us. I think because we had bags, I was just thinking about space. So, I sat very close to that guy and got lost in thought. That girl ended up getting off the bus well before me and I had my headphones in and just didn't care, and I slowly became aware of the fact that the guy on my left, a guy sitting perpendicular to me, and a guy farther down were all friends. Black men. And, I just didn't move and I guess the guy on my left was uncomfortable that I didn't get the social cue to move over and give him some space and, by the time I realized I hadn't, they were talking so loudly on the bus mocking me that I became aware of that over my music and I just acted like I couldn't hear them and acted like there was nothing wrong and kept sitting there. And finally, instead of staying on the bus when it went all the way down Murray, I got off at the corner on Forbs is when I decided to get off and one of the guys who was being the most vocal about it was like saying something like "Oh he lives in Squirrel Hill," and it was such a weird feeling of "this black man lives in SH, he's that Black guy." And then, as I was trying to go past, he tries to trip me because I didn't take his cue and they thought I was an asshole or whatever. It has always bugged that I missed this cue that I should've moved over, but then, he judged me for living in SH and tried to trip me. Because I'm a Black man and presumably, he doesn't know I was getting off in SH and he guessed – correctly – that I lived that and whatever SH means to him is not something good he associated with me, so he tried to hurt me.

I – Because SH is not a predominantly Black area. It's not known for that. That's so fascinating.

K – Yeah, that was a little over a year ago.

I – So, do you think Black sexuality, as a concept and as an experience, can be something that is very empowering or enlightening?

268

K – Yeah, although now that you pointed out that I interpreted empowerment as power and then, when you pointed that out, my immediate thought was "Oh, different way of interpreting empowerment is enablement."

I – What do you mean?

K – So for me, power is more physically, enabling or ability isn't strictly physical, it's license and privilege and attitude and all of those things. More intrinsic stuff, I guess. But, if I think about it that way, or both ways simultaneously, I'm not sure that it's anymore empowering or less empowering that it would be for any other race. I know my own sexuality and I know, as a Black man, it's forever linked that way. And, I have my own ideas about White sexuality for instance. But, I don't know. If there is a way to put numbers to everything if Black empowerment or Black sexuality were to come up on top. But, the prevailing sense in Black culture and American culture at large is that it is. You have these historical ideas of "can't let Black men touch White women because everything bad will happen. Or it will, because that's the only thing their minds are geared towards." Which is fucked up, but also informs the idea that Black sexuality is something you wear on your skin or on your sleeve.

I – With that in mind, what other ways do you think that sexuality can be something that's empowering?

K - I always tell people about that thing you told me once probably off hand, but I've taken it to heart – that, it's not healthy to repress interest or sexual thoughts necessarily. Like, if you're in a committed relationship, it's okay to acknowledge those feelings or experience those feelings and that the only transgression in a moral sense to your partner is when you decide to initiate a relationship, physical or otherwise with that person based on your feelings. Which, to me, frees up a lot of other things for people to do, like flirt harmlessly, to – and, what the politics of this are, should be, I don't know – but even to gaze at that person in a sense, to allow yourself to have the gaze or enter into a mutual gazing, who knows… So, I think…. Restate the question again?

I – If you think, in a general sense, that sexuality can be empowering.

K – So in that way, I think that it's empowering to have a more liberated sexuality. I think there should always be boundaries because I think, with most things, having a boundary helps to define what that thing even is. So, I draw the line at obviously don't sexually assault anyone… You'd think it's obvious. I've taken that advice, and maybe manipulated it a bit from what you've said, but I've taken it to be… so a lot of my friends are partnered up with other friends and the women, I generally talk with more and, not that I have a better relationship, but we maintain it more regularly through communication with the men because we don't have to. And part of that is that they're attractive people and I enjoy looking at them and how attractive they are. And I enjoy flirting with even though it's not, especially because we're with someone who is a friend, so for me and I don't know if anyone else shares this morality, but it's the way I work. To me it's safe to flirt because everyone involved knows there is no threat. But, what it does is it alleviates the slightest bit of sexual tension. It's not like I'm looking at this, like I've got a huge boner, got to do something about this. It's just like, they're attractive to look at. So, I talk with them and there's a bit of flirting and usually it's mutual, but I can't be 100%, though I'm sure from where I'm coming

from. So, that is empowering to me to have that component to friendships, to say that this is the sexualized component of our friendship and this is how we do it and perform it and this is its boundary and we understand that, and we don't go beyond it. We enjoy what it is.

I – So, what I got from that… first of all, I think that experiences are always interpreted no matter what and fixed interpretation is when you just apply the literature. So however, you decide to interpret that, as soon as that is experienced by you, it's given to you. But what I've heard is that it allows you to experience your relationships as whole in a new dynamic sense where emotions or feelings or thoughts that were foreclosed to you based on some norm or standard now opens up for you. You can acknowledge that and how you feel about that, and it allows you to view people differently. Given, of course, the clear boundaries that are still there, it can give you some sense of sexual liberation.

K –there are boundaries on multiple fronts. I wouldn't kiss one of them, but in the past, E--- would be the one to say grab my butt or grab my boobs, do it. Julie would sometimes do it. But, now that E--- is married, I don't ever initiate physical contact with her that way, if it came up, maybe. But, there's something very sacred about marriage and you don't touch someone's wife. Now, what's interesting is that J---- is Z----'s fiancée right now. She knows what it is, and she plays along. I don't linger or make it any more than it is. I just pat her butt. She does it to me sometimes, too. Elise did it too, but since marriage it has petered out. I guess it's because I have emotional relationships with the both of them so, I think a lot of that is just tied together and as time goes on and how our separate relationships evolve, how we incorporate sexuality into our friendships shifts naturally.

I – Since you mentioned marriage – you're someone who intends on greeting married and having kids. So, when that happens, assuming there's a certain element when they're seen interracially. All of that as a given, how do you think you'll approach the idea of sexuality with them? Like not, sex, but sexuality.

K – I was thinking about that the other day, just things about what if I turn out to have a son that turns out to be gay. Which, if I marry G---, we talk about that and she has feelings about that so who knows if it's possibility. But let's say we get married and we have a kid, I know G--- would be very good about handling that and handling that experience for our family and for our son, or our daughter, should she come out. And I would, too, but I think it would be… in my head, it wouldn't be like "What is happening?" It would like, this is what my son is, this is what my daughter is, and I need to be compassionate about this. Which isn't to say is something I want to do, but it would be something I would actively have to deal with, whether than if they are straight, there'd be a lot less thinking in that than "When do I have the sex talk?" you know and managing sexuality in a much more traditional sense as a parent. So, I guess that's the only bend to the…. The only asterisk to raising a kid and discussing sexuality is the only way I know I would deviate from a norm is if they identify differently than how I do or have experienced.

I –So the way you're approaching it would be different, but you'd have the fundamentals about it. Compassion would be a part of the conversation and no matter how you approached the conversation, compassion would still be essential elements to how you approach it. But how the

narrative would go would deviate depending on whether or not they shared the same sexual orientation as you. That makes sense.

TARIQ

I – What does blackness mean to you on an individual level?

T – Uh, that's a deep ass question. I can answer but go ahead.

I – I guess, to back up, I'll ask first foremost how you identify. In any sort of way, if you had to share any bit of information about yourself, how do you identify?

T – Identify straight up as a Black man? Like, there's a little bit beyond that if you want to go hobbies and interests. But, if you say, "Hey, what are you?" Black man. Period. It's kind of hard that it is an identity, because it's just what I am. I can't envision being something. Because this…. There are things you have choices in. This isn't one of those things [laughs] I can't Rachel Dolezal my shit.

I – I like that. "It's what I am, I have no choice."

T – I have no choice in the matter. I am a Black man. I grew up as a Black boy who turned into a Black teenager, who became a Black man. I don't understand the ability to shift in certain circumstances.

I – Okay, so if you were… so if I were some person you randomly met on the street or decided to have this awkward conversation in a coffeeshop. "Hey bro, tell me all about your blackness." With your own self-identification in mind, how would you introduce yourself to me? Like, who are you, what do you do?

T – I'm a Black guy, obviously. I like to write. I like to write about things that normal to everyone, but from a Black perspective. I like to play video games and if there's some minority shit in there, kudos. If not, I can take the L. I like to read about Black ass shit. I like to read books about Black ass shit. I like to be represented in some way.

I – But what if you weren't represented in some way?

T – I take the L. if there's one thing I learned over the years, it's that I got really… subconsciously, not even on the end, but on any intention level, just good at taking the L and saying "Hey, this would add points to my diversity." So, whereas, if I am in the space and I realize I am one of three Black dudes in a sea of fifty people, then I go "This is my chance to understand what the fuck White people are like, and better to navigate the quagmire that is a spot where I am the only Black, or one of the few. You know what I mean? So, I have learned to take Ls and I guess you really couldn't call them Ls as much as you can turn that L into a learning experience.

I – [laughs] instead of a loss it's a learning experience. I feel like that was a quote I could hear from one of the preachers. "Sometimes you take the L and turn it into a learning experience."

T – Yeah. Like one of my boys, he's always like "You know, White people, what the fuck is going on?" Sometimes I really don't know what White people are thinking. I can't know that shit. But,

in a certain way, because I have just learned to be, not comfortable, just learn to navigate White spaces as a Black person. Because, for a long time, I would just codify language, tame my reaction to things, tame my description to things. But, little did I know I was still coming off Black as hell, but I was just coming off as Black-lite.

I – Lighter shades of blackness.

T – Like my blackness was just toned down by six or seven shades. And then, eventually, I just decided that it was no longer necessary, and it just came out like Beyoncé's "Formation" song where everyone realized she was Black. Surprise, I'm a nigga. Um, so yeah, I just learned to operate in those spaces and learn what makes certain White people tick. I mean, there's going to be obvious outliers like B---, where you're like "You just don't know what the fuck is going on around you," But, most of the time, I come across people who are like "Uh, I don't get it, but I'm listening." As much as Black people are victims in this country, there are a lot of White people who understand that, or are willing to understand that, or don't really know but aren't opposed to the general position.

I – So, you say things and there's so much there. So, how you see yourself, and how you introduce yourself… this Black guy who has in interests in reading and writing and gaming and all of those things, and socializing, but your experiences and how you experience blackness and your experiences as a Black man are defined and framed by the sort of blackness you see, but also the absence of blackness in your social circles. Or, also, in the type of media interests you generally have.

T – I definitely behave a certain way based on the saturation level of blackness. If there aren't a lot of Black people around, I definitely have to Black it up for everyone. If there's enough, I tone it down. But at the same time, that group mentality just ramps itself up because now we feel embolden. There's more of us. We can be Blacker.

I – there's no set limit. It reminds me of… I can't remember what his name was… Dwayne McDuffie, comic book writer. He mentioned that was… in comic book writing, it's a general rule in a lot of popular media or anything that requires writing. But, the amount of Black characters you have on screen determines whether or not that particular piece, or movie, of tv shows is considered a Black film or non-Black film. And he's like "yeah, as soon as you hit three or more Black people, it's automatically Black by default. But, that's not necessarily how we may experience it. So, to hear you say that there is a limit to how Black we can be in non-Black circles, that's what I think of.

T – It's interesting, because even if you don't know them, there's a silent acknowledgment that occurs. There have been some events I've been in where I see other Black people and it's like "I see you. You're not alone." But we never get a chance to interact. But you know that if shit goes down, there's another nigga there. And if even if they can't get you back, it's like "I feel you, bro."

I – there's a shared acknowledgment of something.

T – So, it's wild. White people everywhere they go, they don't have to think about. And I think when people talk about race relations is because they don't really know what the fuck we're talking about, because the shit that they do every day and the shit they take for granted is the shit we have to work to get, if we can get it at all.

I – We have to negotiate the boundaries of the situation in a different way. We have to go in prepared and apprehensive of what's to come.

T – Exactly. Preparedness is key. As Black men, when we go somewhere, or just as Black people, we have to be like, okay, let me adjust the blackness to Whiteness ratio, people aren't really uncomfortable. And that, even if you think about that, that's really fucking weird, because you no longer feel normal being normal and that's weird as fuck to me.

I – Do you have any examples?

T – Real life examples?

I – I want all of the real-life examples, name redacted.

T – So, when I first started hanging out with S---, and B----, and K---- and them and they were introducing me to their friends, and N--- was the only one that was not White. Didn't know, because upon talking to her you just think she's some British chick. And I had to sit and be like, because I was like, "This seems like a crew I'm going to be rolling with for a long period of time." So, I gave them small doses of chocolate, you know what I mean? Like, did you ever have this particular type of chocolate, that's that Godiva Fresh. And in those spaces, I found myself saying shit, and because it clashes with my preconstructed-White-people-safe mode, it felt awkward coming out of my mouth. Those two parts of my behavior don't talk to each other. So, it's like you have two programs who, whether this is right or not, don't operate the same way. They operate in contradictory ways. And then when they try to work together, they clash, and it seems really awkward. And maybe they don't pick up on it, maybe you're the only one that feels that way, but it still happens. And that way, you feel really weird being normal. And there's a lot of buildup. So, by the time you've successfully navigated both of those water, it's a bit more event. But as soon as you go all in too fast, or you just don't give a fuck, because what's happening is, you realize there's a cultural gap that, you know, because you watch *Fresh Prince* and they watched *Degrassi* or whatever the fuck. Or *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Ally McBeal* and you're over there watching *Cosby and Martin* and *Hanging with Mr. Cooper* … like those two worlds are so different that your cultural references don't make sense.

I – You're saying they make no sense to them.

T – So there's a backlash to me. So that's one way you just start feeling weird. Whenever I dropped a term, like I'd say, "Oh that shit is ratchet." And they were like "What is that?" Like… what isn't "ratchet?" Or If you start dropping terms that only Black people would know… like even K, who is kind of up on shit, when I sit with her and I say some shit, she's like "You know I don't know what that means." Imagine that in a group of people. And the perfect example is when I was at that bachelor party and I was the only Black guy. I would say shit and they would be like "What?" So,

it stopped being "ha ha" or "that's a good point," to "What the fuck are you talking about?" You know, and that kind of reaction to things, especially if you get it on the regular, it makes you feel weird. Like you're not… like there's no one there that could understand, and you have to consciously taper everything you say. You have to edit everything you say because you're like, I got to make sure these White people know what I'm talking about." Got to know your audience. And that's something that honestly, digging deep, going into a weird ass arc that I don't understand right now… but, I'm okay with that.

I – You're okay with having to read and adapt to your audience.

T – I'm okay with that for a couple of reasons. #1 being that blackness hasn't been commodified thoroughly.

I – It hasn't been…

T – It's not mainstream, it's not like anyone can be Black now because we've turned it into a commodity that anyone can buy.

I – It's not accessible to the general public.

T – I feel that way about any culture, I feel like Asian culture should be the same. And like Native American, Latino, Hispanics, all of that. I feel like all of that should never be completely accessible because, what then? You just become this normal ass, everyone is everything kind of thing/ It's boring. And it becomes harder to have an identity. Ironically, that's why B-- thinks I'm racist. [laughs]

I – Because you believe that culture isn't something that should inherently be shared.

T – I think it's something that can be shared, and will be shared, but I don't think it's something that shouldn't be demanded to be shared. I don't think it's something people should take for granted. Like I don't take Chinese food for granted, I don't take sushi for granted, I don't take anime for granted. I don't feel like it's mine. I feel like I'm someone who has an interest in it, and I can have a small stake in it, but not an entire stake. And I don't know enough about Asian culture to say what they should or shouldn't do, what is or isn't mine, or what is or isn't okay for me to claim, and I operate under that umbrella of ignorance. Self-aware ignorance. Not saying I'm going to do ignorant shit, but like it's not in my knowledge and I operate based on that.

I – You're saying that those are things, where you have personal history with that but that's… those are the sorts of things bring to your culture based on that stuff. So, you saying 'I am this Black guy that likes video games and comic books' and so on and so forth, there's w ay in which a lot of the things we consume come from different countries and come from different cultures. Video gaming is 50% Japanese and Korean and maybe that's a flimsy number, but it's still… it's not our culture.

T – We recognize that. And I think there's some White people that are like, that's not okay. And recently, you can tell me if this is one of the more boss analogies I've ever come up with. I liken

275

culture to people's houses. You should behave culturally the same way you would behave as a new guest in someone's house. You don't go into someone's house, put your feet on their furniture, go into their fridge, sleep in their bed, try on their clothes or all of this other bullshit. You go in there and act like you have some damn sense. You say, 'thank you for having me,' blah, blah, blah. If they ask you for something to drink, you go "You have some water" or something like that, and they will you take the kitchen, open the fridge, and tell you "We got this, this, this and this." Versus you coming in being like, "I want your lemonade, I want your peach tea, I want your Cîroc. I want it." It just increasingly got Blacker. But you wouldn't do that in someone's house, I feel like culture is the same way. You are coming to a group of people you have no real connection to, and you're learning about them. And they're learning about, but you're in their house, you wouldn't do certain things. Just like culture. Also, you wouldn't take some shit from someone's house without them knowing, which is basically what appropriation is. You wouldn't say "I like this pot, or I want this vase. I'm going to take that shit to my house and say it's mine." That's basically what it is, and people don't agree with that. I'm like "No." first of all, getting some people to admit that cultural appropriation is a thing – and I've told people it's a thing, it's documented, son – is one thing. Like someone like B----, or initially K----, did not believe it. But I'm like cultural appropriation is a thing and I give you plenty of examples as to why it happens.

I – Do you have any moments that pop into mind when you've had to make that argument?

T – All of B---.

I – What's one?

T – The first time I brought it up I was tired of something he said, I don't remember what he was talking about. So, I hit him with the cultural appropriation thing and he was like "What's that?" And I told him "It's basically when you take aspect of someone's culture, like style based on their race or ethnicity, and claim it on your own." And he immediately goes "That's just cultural sharing." I'm like "No, cultural sharing is like if I take you to a Black barbeque. That's cultural sharing. But, if you show up at a barbeque and you don't know anybody, that's cultural appropriation." It's not the same thing. We went back and forth on it, and I said, "You know, if a White guy with dreads tries to apply for a job, and we apply for the same job, you're going to look at the White guy with dreads and the Black guy with the dreads, but you being who you are, you may not see any problem with that. But (And he can't seem to separate himself from White America} I'm going to be looked at as a thug, possible drug dealer, and all of these bad stereotypes, while this White kid? The worst stereotype he's going to get is a whether or not he's seen as a pot head. And even then, he'll be in much more fair shape than I would. The stereotypes attributed to even someone seen as a pothead or a hippy is still considered harmless. So, he's like "They have stereotypes attributed to them." Yeah, but those stereotypes don't describe them as a threat to other people. But for me, and this is coming from Black culture. Black people have been doing this shit long before White people, but I'm vilified for it. I'm demonized for it. But this kid, even his most harmful stereotypes are harmless by comparison. And that's an example of how appropriation operates for the taking. It's a perception, too.

I – You mentioned… So, two things, I want to make sure I'm getting this right. You pretty much, for this entire thing, this is how I experience… this is me putting words in your mouth, so I

apologize, but, 'This is how I experience things from the position of a Black man, this is how I identify, this is how I experience the world, and how I introduce myself to you is based on my position as a Black man." So, two questions: For one, how would you define, or how do you express yourself as a Black man. What does being a Black man mean to you, for one? Subpoint: Do you feel – speaking to the way people stereotype you and see you based on your appearance and race – do you feel as though you have been stereotyped or vilified based on your appearance? Go for whichever one you want first.

T – Okay, so the first is what does it mean to be a Black man? [I – To you]. To me? Okay so, you've read Walter Mosley's *Easy Rawlins* series? You've read some of it though?

I – A long time ago.

T – So, a part of me really idolized Easy Rawlins because the way he communicates with White people and keep in mind this is 1950s, 1940s, it's way more hostile… the way he talks to them, the way he operates with them, he's just fucking on it. It's so… I recognize what you could do it, and I'm going to put some respect on it, but let me find a way to fuck you, and I will. Because you've been fucking me this whole time. He doesn't play dumb, but he never shows his entire hand. Something about that I respect the fuck out of. And it's not like he's this mastermind, he's just this Black dude trying to find a way to survive in one of the most racist times since slavery. He's emotional, he's not afraid to get angry and scare the shit out of White folks. He's a straight up man, but most importantly Black man.

To me, the Black men that I want to be is the one that I've been most recently, which is like the one like "I'm no longer going to coddle this White folk." If there's shit that needs to be said, I'm going to say it. If there's something that needs to be done, I'm going to do it. I don't want White people to be comfortable with me because I'm doing something comforting. I want them to be comfortable with me because I'm being myself. They might not understand what all of that means, and they don't have to. But they need to understand that Tariq is Black and Tariq's going to do Black ass shit. Not from time to time, but all of the time. And to me, being a Black man is not being afraid to be Black. And not even not being afraid, but not being afraid to be Black. Recently I've been doing more of that where I'm like hey, Black shit. To the point people are like "We get it, you're Black." And I'm like "No, you don't get it. I'm Black." It doesn't click the same way because to you everything I do is a constant reminder that I'm Black. But to me, I'm just doing Me shit. To the same way that you and everything around is White and everything you do is White.

I think Childish Gambino said some shit like "I want to be a White rapper" and not to say he wanted to be White, but to be considered on the same level as White people where he gets a blank check to do whatever the ruck he wants, and his color is not considered. I don't want my color to not be considered, but I want to be able to do shit and for people to recognize the difference and I think that to me, at least where I am right now, is what it means to be a Black man. If I got emotional, which I haven't had a reason to, then I can, and I can do that in whatever way and not be worried about stereotypes of Black men crying. I get be frustrated about shit that happens and is not okay. I can angry about shit that happens and it's okay. I can respond to things in the way that I want and if it's Black, it's Black, and if Whit people can understand that's fine too. But I'm operating under a "Fuck the Man," but more specifically, "Fuck all perception of what I should be."

And I feel like Easy Rawlins… I don't know how much you know how much I was emulating my behavior and how I thought about things to the way he did it. Because even though not all his characteristics were good, he wasn't worried about the shit we may be worried about operating in predominantly White spaces. He was who he was, he was a Black man who had shit going on and I admire the shit out that and I admire the shit out that and I wanted it so bad. Because at that time, everywhere I was, I was code-switching like a mother fucker to the point that I didn't even notice. And then when I get around my family and most of my friends who were Black at the time, it would be a weird awakening and I would shrug this shit off after realizing I had been playing the game the whole time. So, that's how I would say it…

I – So, you made a mention of all the things you're going to be is going to be Black all of the time, everything you do, your blackness and your male is going to be a core to what you're doing. Regardless of if it's front and center, it's going to be there. So, what would you say makes an experience Black for you.

T – Black people. As soon as you add Black people to the mix, shit gets Black. But I think it's the culture we developed. I know a lot of people don't know about Black culture or say it's constructed, but to me, most important or integral part of black culture is family and camaraderie. And we have that shit in spades. Not sure if that's a racist term anymore… one day I remember I said that shit and it clicked, and I like was "is that racist…?" So now, I'm hesitant to say it… But it's one of those things we are known for amongst each other. The silent acknowledgement is one of those things where, you walk down the street and if a Black dude don't give you any sort of a head nod, you feel some kind of way. Like "Wow, that's fucked up." Or if you don't give one because of whatever reason then you feel some kind of way… it's that level of camaraderie where it's like… I don't know you, but we understand what the fuck just happened and that makes it even more significant. The family is another thing, getting together with your Black-ass Auntie, cousins, all of these other people, and like my aunts on my dad's side… we get together and shit is Black and normal. But, other things we think is dumb, like I think fleek is stupid, but I respect the fuck out of it. It's a new generation of Black people being Black.

I – Like an idea of blackness that's constantly developing.

T – Yeah, it's constantly developing because we create shit and we're unbound by grammar and proper English where we can operate on both sides of the coins. We can be proper as fuck, but we choose not to be sometimes, and we recognize that the English language isn't sufficient to talk about how you feel, it's going to have that je na sais quoi. So, you come out with other shit, so now we got fleek, or you repurpose a word and now you got trill. That thing… I think it's inherent in every culture, but the way it happens… that's what defines it. So, when you get a whole bunch of Black people together, it's different than if you get together with a bunch of your friends that are multinational. Then, that's more of the melting pot that everyone likes to say is a thing… I'm not sure I believe in that, but it's another conversation. It becomes this thing where every Black person, even if you're not related, is family in some way or another… and that doesn't really extend to the greater community, it's always in the smaller groups of Black people where we can be the strongest. We haven't really made it to the point where we can be like "I'm going to support this mother fucker over in Memphis." It hasn't gotten there yet.

278

I – Assuming you're talking about on a communal level… maybe a neighborhood.

T – Neighborhood, city level of event that would bring everyone together. Because we don't support blackness in commercial senses. We don't support Black business the way we should, we don't support Black actors all of the time, or Black things in White spaces. Not all of the time, sometimes we do. But I think it's really hard to get that. Like how do you think the Indian store got there? It's not because some Black person was willing to open the store in the neighborhood. It's because the Indian had the money to put it there and now because the Indian people are the only ones that are close enough, they get all your money. That's not Black people being negligent, that's Black people not having the means to support your community. I think that we got so used to not professionally dealing with each other that we don't trust it. Which is weird, but I get it. Because when you deal with cousin Ray Ray and he never gives you your money, you don't want to deal with Black businesses.

I – So, you've been spending a lot of time, and you've shared a couple of stories regarding how you experience life as a Black man and how you feel like from that position you need to be as strong as possible. And if you can't in situations and to continually reaffirm your blackness just based on the fact that you are that. You mentioned before that certain appearances that are associated with blackness may garner very negative stereotypes or associations with them that White people who adopt them won't experience. From your perspectives, those stereotypes are petty, or weak, or they're generally not harmful, they aren't institutionally powerful. Do you feel like you've been stereotyped or profiled in any sort of way? Like in a negative sense. Or any sense really.

T –. When I was coming up at school, I remember teachers saying you aren't going to do this, you aren't going to do that, you're not going to be anything. I'm not going to pretend like I know all of the reasons why they say that, and I don't know how personally I can take it. But, it came from a place of "You act like all of the other little Black boys that end up in jail." Even though that probably wasn't true, it definitely wasn't true, but it was one of things where I get profiled based on what they think they know about Black people, what they think they know about Black kids. I heard this talked about many times before but, White kids don't know to do deal with Black kids. Never had that been more true to me than looking back at school, and just the reactions they would have to the things that I did that weren't different to what the White kids were doing. In those aspects, I remember being explicitly being treated differently because I was a black kid.

I – Are there any stories that come to mind?

T – The most popular and prevalent one I have in mind is also the pettiest. It's when I had the Black fist pick. I would just have it in my hair.

I – How along was this?

T – High school, so freshman, sophomore, early junior year. And Ms. Andre would have a problem with it. And maybe in hindsight it was because she was threatened by the black power first at the top of the handle. Maybe, I don't really care. [I – what happened?] She was like, "Take it out of your hair" "Why, I'm not picking my hair. I'm not getting my hair leavings on anyone's chair. It's

279

just there." "Well, it's against the rules." Where? Show me in the rule book where that is. And if it's in the rule book, I'll take it out. So, she was like "Just take it out for now and we'll check it later." And I'm like "No, I'll keep it in now until because I don't know if you're telling the truth." This went on for months. I think after two weeks, she went to the principle, and he was someone I was cool with at the time. And he was like "Can you just take the pick out of your hair?" and I'm like "No. I'm being a nigga, no." Especially at that moment, I felt like that was the first time there was an explicit attack on my blackness and that made me double down. I don't know if I could articulate that at the time, but that's what it felt like in hindsight. Looking at things and how I reacted, I was just like, no. But also, the fact… and I still do this, I find out where the lines are, where the rules say I can go and I bend it and tow it.

I – Do you feel like you've been profiled or stereotyped recently?

T – I know it has happened, but it has happened so predictably… You can go some places and know it's going to happen [I – Like when? What example, what story do you have?] Um… You know when you first meet people. And this has happened as early as two weeks ago, and you know you're at a function with a bunch of people that don't know you, a bunch of older White people, and you start talking about stuff and someone drops that age-old-famous-this-is-how-you-know-I'm-racist-line, "You speak well." And you just go "hmm, saw that coming at some point tonight. On a slightly larger scale, instances with B are probably good instances of being profiled or discovering prejudices in someone…

I – Like him stereotyping you.

T – Yeah. He's the most armchair-iest psychology, armchair everything else, that he has become a basis for which I understand certain perspectives that White people may hold.

I – What do you think is a prime example of him stereotyping you or profiling you.

T – For a while, he thought I straight up hated White people. But now, he thinks that as a soon as a White person does something in a vaguely Black space that I'll think it's racist. So, he thinks now that I'm that angry Black dude with a chip on his shoulder and that anything White do towards Black people is racist. He thinks that I unjustly hate the cops. I don't hate the cops, but I don't trust them. I don't think that it's a requirement for me to trust the police.

I – is there anything that stands out in your mind where he was actively portraying you that way?

T – He's never explicitly said that but…

I – I mean when you guys had an interaction or conversation in the office and it felt like that's how he was saying you.

T – He explicitly said it. All of those things I said, he has explicitly said at one point or another. The police thing, he was like... and this is even further undercutting of Black people period, but he was like "You have so little trust for the police, you view them as such a threat and opposite to you, that now you think they're all bad."

I – When did this happen?

T – Probably around the Michael Brown case. [I – Was anyone around to hear this] Yeah and this isn't verbatim, obviously I wouldn't remember, but he was like now you can't even tell when a cop is innocent. He said that, and he harps on it, and I don't think there's anything wrong with this, is because he has a soft spot for cops. He just doesn't understand why Black people have a problem with this. I can give you a better example. But now, he views me as the type of person where anything White happens to Black people or absent of Black people that's automatically racist. I'm like no, I don't do that. And he says things like "If you keep calling things racist it's going to keep losing its power as a word. "And I'm like, no it's not, it's not. Maybe it's just that it is racist, and we keep encountering racists things because like… if 2013, 2014, you have the Arab Spring, what happened here was a Racist Spring. What happened last year no wonder everyone heard that shit everywhere they went. It's not too late in 2016, but he said that I'm like, no, the shit is racist and just because you aren't sure what the definition of racism is doesn't mean that I don't know what racism is. I know when something is racist. But, the cop thing, we were talking about random shit. We were talking about how people who play video game are violent. And I dropped this line, and I knew it was a honey trap, I knew it was a honey tray when I said it, and I said it any way… I said: "I find it weird that people can judge an entire group of people based on some shit, their worst elements, and then you find out that they don't know anyone in that group." And B--- goes: "That's exactly what I say about the police you guys always say that they're blah blah blah and it's the same thing with the cops." And then there was a pause, and I'm like, "We're about to drag this mother fucker." And in my mind, I'm like… "Differences…" and in my mind, I was thinking about how we were talking about Muslims, and I'm like "The difference is that Muslims repeatedly don't condone violence, they don't condone terrorism, versus cops where they have one of their own that has deliberately killed someone, deliberately raped, blah blah blah, no other police station in Tulsa when the Orlando shit is happening, they aren't going to call that out. Cops don't call each other out, they close ranks. So, when you have one that does wrong shit, you're not going to have someone that calls that out. That's why we shit on cops, because they don't do what they're supposed to. Then people said some other shit and people "He just sat there and said "hmm" because he had nothing. He's constructed, based on his psychological-skills, a persona of someone who hates police, hates his job, doesn't want to do his job, and is like… and this is what I'm gleaning from things that he has said, but over-protective of Black culture. But, actively guarding Black culture, like a gatekeeper. He's had enough exposure to me that he would have an understanding of what I'm like, but what he thinks is the opposite of what I am, but the spaces I operate in now are so routine that I don't come across too many people that would be dumb enough to not know, you now? So right now, I'm in this weird spot when I don't have to worry about being profiled.

You know what, though, the first time I went to a Penguins game, I had my black hoodie on and they both had sizeable purses. There was a group of three girls that had big purses. As soon as one of the security guards saw me, the next five people went right past with no issue. He had a wand, didn't even wand them. All I had on was a hoodie and maybe a drag. And he specifically pointed me out, our group got up, let K--- and her friend go by. He's like "what's in your pocket?" and I'm "keys and some gum. And my phone." And he was like "empty your pockets." And I do it and he's like "what's in your back pockets?" and I'm like "nothing" and he goes, "Show me." He made me empty out of pocket I had. Had to unzip my hoodie, open it up, and I'm like "He

didn't wand those girls," because everyone up to that point got wanded. And as soon as he saw me, none of that shit mattered. I was being cool about it, but he's like "Empty your pockets." And then I get in there, I'm like, I guess I see why, because I was the only nigga there. There may have been one other dude there. But all of the other Black people there were working.

I – So he was prepped for you.

T – That was probably the most egregious. Barring from when you go to public places where that is liable to happen or not happen. Normally now… it's hard for me to come across shit. But if it does it's so routine I don't pay attention. So, it's just at work with B, because he's stupid.

I – Where he's constantly trying to push against you in some way.

T – I recognize that, as Black people, we've been incredibly vocal against the crimes of White people against the Black community and I get that may be a very hard pill to swallow. On the other side, I'm willing to debate certain things. The problem with B is that he likes to play devil's advocate, but the more he talks, the more I'm convinced he's just the devil. I'm convinced that he's trying to find a way to push off or express what he thinks about certain issues without being labeled as a racist or a sexist and he says things like "I don't think this, but…" and then he has arguments that are nonsensical or not part of the conversation, he has such an expansive position on it that it ceases to be one of those "but I'm just playing devil's advocate" kind of things. And you ask, "Why do you even talk to him" because he seldom does shit that is so wrong that I would be uncomfortable letting it slide because he'll be implicitly told that it's an okay position to have. I can't change his mind, but I'm making him think twice. So, I'm just playing equalizer while I'm there. Because he's not going to change his mind. But, I just feel the need to combat that whenever I come across that.

I – How are you feeling now?

T – Good. This feels good because it's rare that you get to talk straight up about blackness.

I – So, for you, how do you look at sexuality. What does sexuality mean to you?

T – I look at it as one of those, especially this recent year, I look at it as one of those things where it's… like not necessary.

I – What do you mean?

T – Not sexuality, you can identify sexually as whatever you want. But to me, sexuality, for me it's one of those things where it's like… I'm Black and I'm a straight guy. That's it there's not a bunch of identify wrapped up in being a straight man. In terms of sexual preference, you're at the top of the chain in terms of socially acceptable, socially powerful. No one has fetishes about straight people, nobody has weird as ideas that are prevalent and harmful to straight people. It's one of those things where I'm like, straight male, done. There's no depth there, it's like being at the shallow end of the pool. When I apply it, it becomes different. I start realizing that it goes beyond physical intimacy, it goes beyond sex. And that's… I'll be the first to say, that I'm not the

most well-versed in the emotional aspect of sexuality, so it's all new to me. But, for me, it's I try to make it extension of myself. I try to be true to what I think I am, to what I know I am, but I try to make it an area of development because I know it's an area I'm weak in because I am with and not-with E----….. I find myself behaving the way I normally I do, and then trying to reserve the intimacy for the bedroom. I'm not sure how to navigate that.

I – Are you saying that sexuality for you…. It sounds like you're saying it's all encompassing if it goes beyond sex, or sexual practices.

T – For me… put it this way. For me, it should be all-encompassing. I think it should be 100% of your relationship with someone you're sexually involved with. It should be more than the sex, or the hugging, kissing, it's more than that. That said, it never is. At least with me. You know me, I'm not that emotional. So, that might be a bad example, but like, what I do when…. It's a mode, or a stance. Perfect example, we were at Kings. I hugged her and kissed her whenever she came, and I didn't sit close enough for her to wrap herself around my arm or some shit, because I kind of hate it. I didn't make any reference to the fact that we're kind of together. She was there, and I treated her like she was there. We get back to my place and things are a little bit more tender. We're talking Tv and she's like got her arm wrapped around and I'm like… This would be easier if it were on the couch, but I still don't know if I'll be any more comfortable. For me, sexuality is one of those things that needs to evolve if I'm going to be a in certain space. But, because it's something that I don't regularly practice, it's one of my weaker attributes. I find myself considering it a weakness of mine, because it is. But also considered a social weakness in the ways that I can be considered emotionally weak. And since it's one of those barely used aspects of my personality, I can get away with it until someone shows up. And then I have to be in overdrive to be accommodating, but so accommodating that I start giving off more permanent things. So, sexuality is one of those things that I do that I'm not entirely sure about.

I – So there's a conceptual idea of it, that's a theoretical idea of it, like an ivory tower…

T – In a perfect world this is what it is, type of deal.

I – But for you, it's not like that.

T – I don't know… I don't have a problem with that right now. we can spend volumes just talking about my hesitation and apprehensions about being with her. But, just the day to day, I don't fucking know what to do here. When they bring shit up that you don't care about and then you have to pretend to be interested. Like I don't pretend to be interested in shit anymore. So, it's like, that's cool. I just find things to ask about, but I really don't care, or I'm like, "oh that's interesting," I've learned to take a perspective of, if I don't care, that doesn't mean that there isn't something interesting about it. But, yeah, it's one of those very underdeveloped things is, what is "this thing" is actually this other thing, but I don't know how to move towards that without committing to something that I don't want to commit to.

I – But it sounds like, for you, even though sexuality has this really far reach and has different appearances depending on what arena you're in, you're saying for you personally, while you still hold that general idea, you don't know how to explore the ideas. And how you're used to exploring

those ideas are purely through sex. Do you feel like your sense of yourself as a Black man influences how you influence sexuality, if it does at all?

T – I think it does and I can say that it does in the Black love sense. In the sense that I notice a difference between how Black girls have sex and how White girls have sex. There's a distinction even between the way they kiss. And, while Black girls are, at least to me, there seems to be more of a fierceness there. And I feed on that and I feel like they feed on my feeding on that. So, I feel like there's this homunculus of sex versus when I'm with a White girl, the way I… it's not better or worse, but it's different. I find myself checking myself, there are a couple… it feels like I have to be more sexually aware of what I'm doing instead of going on auto-pilot.

I – With a White woman you have to be more aware of what you're doing. What do you mean, if you don't mind sharing?

T – No, I don't. Because I don't understand it. Maybe this is room for me to figure it out a bit more. Like, #1, White women are more content to be in one position. Whereas with Black women, they're more likely to move. And maybe it's just the people I'm with, and the White girls I'm with are cool with that. But, at the same time, White girls will move, but I feel like they don't take the initiative all the time until they get comfortable and then it's like "Okay, let's do this." But they'll roll with a certain position and then get tired and be like "Okay let's do something else." Versus when a Black girl, it's more of like, both parties are doing shit and changing positions and doing different things. But the difference is so narrow that it's hard for me to realize why I feel a certain way. Sex with White girls for me has been different than sex with Black girls. I don't know if it's because, to a certain extent, I'm more comfortable with Black girls. That's something been fucking with me since…

I – You're more comfortable?

T – When I'm with a White woman, I'm conscious of it and I'm worried about it. But, at the same time, I'm mad, because I know I shouldn't be and it's not fair for me to feel that when it doesn't seem like they do.

I – Do you feel like they receive you differently based on the fact that you're a Black man?

T – No. So far, it's been two girls and neither one of them seem to have the racial hang ups that other White girls will have and still have sex with a Black guy. Of course, they mention shit like, "Oh yeah, that big ass dick." But they never mention it as if it was expected, and then they're talking about it like "Ooh, about to get that good Black dick kind of deal."

I – Like it's preemptive.

T – Yeah, at least they never voiced those things. They're like "Oh it's pretty big." And I'm like, "Really?" Because to me, I mean obviously I wouldn't know what other dicks look like, so I can't get a good… it's not like breasts or a booty when you can see, "Oh, those are some big ass titties or that's a fat ass." I have no idea what the average is. But, across the board, it's been "yes, you know, big dick." It's fascinating to me. I wouldn't attribute big dickness to me, but I wouldn't

attribute small dickness to me. I just thought I have an average sized dick. But apparently, I don't. And it's always weird to hear them say it, because I never asked. They just say "oh, it's a lot to take it" or "you go a little far." And I'm like, "Oh." That affects me because I'm like big dog with a little dog complex when you don't realize how big you are and you're running around like you're little. Like that plays a part, because even the way… I mean only the most recent one is where it's been an immediate issue…

I – You're saying that, it seems like you're talking about on two levels, it sounds like you're saying that your identity as a Black man plays a role in a large sense in the way that you have this large conceptual idea of sexuality and your sense of yourself as a Black man carries on that sort of weight. You have this ubiquitous idea. But it seems like it's a lot more specific when you're intimate or interacting with a Black woman that you're interested in.

T – It feels… not even normal, but it feels safe. And I never... with T----, even though I knew it wasn't a thing, the level of comfort there was way different than the way it is now. And that's not better or worse, but it's just different. And there's a certain level security where I don't know if I have something to do with, but, it doesn't have the burden or whether or not it would be okay.

I – Whereas when you're with a White woman, there are new realms to negotiate.

T – And that's really weird to me. Because it's not like, "I don't know if I don't want this," but "I don't know what comes with it." And I'm kind of using it like a legitimate turning off point because, like, I like E---- and if she wants to be like "Let's be serious about this," I'm going to be like "Give me fifteen minutes, let me think about this for a little bit." And apparently, I wouldn't have a problem with it but, at the same time I also always imagine myself with a Black woman at some point. If I imagine myself settling down, it would be with a Black woman. And not saying this is throwing that in the air, but I recognize that I'm almost 30 and at some point, if that happens, who knows. So that kind of questions some things.

I – There are a couple of things you said, but with the one thing it's kind of a note more so than a question. But, you made a mention of when you're with White women, they describe your body in a way that seems racially invested. They make remarks about you that fall into the "Well-Endowed Big Black Guy" stereotype. But, it's not preemptive and it seems like you could read it that way, but you don't take it that way.

T – No, because it's always after the fact.

I – Like after they know you in the Bible-sense [laughs].

T – Yeah, in a biblical sense. Especially when they make weird noises. Like [imitates the noises], and I'm like "what's that." And they're like "Ooh, you went a little too far." And It's like I'll back off. But it's never been in the sense when I'm like, "Oh, they're expecting this Big Black dick" or like "I know there's something there." It's always after they have something to go on, after they have physical evidence. Then they make that comment. It's never preemptive, like "I bet you got that."

I – It's never assumed.

T – When I started working at the university, I did get the "You're always a big guy, so I imagine you're pretty big." From the married woman. So, there's an interesting story there/

I – By all means, do tell.

T – So, you know me, I wouldn't encroach areas I wouldn't encroach in. So, when I first started working there, randomly I would discussion with me, her, and S. And we'd be talking about shit, like sex, drugs, alcohol, and whatever the fuck. And, every now and then, penis-size would pop up in the conversation. And, sometimes, I got the vibes that she was down. So, one week, she said "Oh, you're a big guy, I'm sure you got a big dick." I was just like… I never knew what to do with it, I just thought, "You're married…" Like what are you doing, am I reading this right? Should I be reading this at all, and we'd have conversations that go that way, and she'd always ask me things that would go down that hole. And I would just stand there, like "I don't know…" But then she'd tell me things like "Oh I have a clit piercing." And I'm like…

I – So she's just introducing these things to you and making all of these remarks that could be sexual.

T – Yeah, but more than a few times she'd remarked …. She thinks I have a big dick, and I never had a problem with that. But, at the same time, I'm like "You don't know… and you're basing this off of physical things." And… she's not racist so I never… I had a hard time taking it that way, but at the same time, I knew it was a based on it, or part of it at least. But that was also like a weird few years where I'm like, "I bet if we had a half hour, we could make some significant headway." And then like she'd make comments about how I never compliment her ass, or because she didn't have one, I wasn't interested in her ass. And I'm like [sigh] "You're married though." And I think if I didn't have that hang up like maybe I would've started pushing for shit to see what happened, but yeah, that was one of the few times where it was like, "Oh explicit statements of blackness and big dicks." But that was only like for a year or so, then I was in the safe zone once she had a kid. Then I was like "Okay, now the sexy phase is over, maybe she'll settle down and find something else to talk about." But then were some comments she made where she'd say stuff like "Oh, before I had a kid, I'd have an orgy." And I'm like "I knew it!"

I – So you took that as a sign if you had gone beyond her being married…

T- Shit would go down. Part of me was very intrigued, but there are some things that I'm not comfortable doing because I'm not sure what it would awake.

I – In them?

T – In me. You know what I mean. I feel like the only thing that's keeping me from having sex with more than one girl at a time is the fact that I don't want to hurt anyone. So as long as I don't want to hurt anyone I can stay on this side of the line.

I – When you say, "hurt someone" you mean in a manipulative sense or emotionally?

T – Yeah, I don't want play games with people and I like being straightforward and there's nothing keeping me personally from exploring that. Perfect example is J---. But the reality of that sets in and the reality is that "There's no way I can get through that and not play someone, not manipulate someone, not hurt someone's feeling," and I'm not in it for that, so I don't want to go down that road. I find myself like… kind like "I want to fuck that girl" and I recognize if I start one time it'll be like "I did it and I figured it out, so I can just keep going." Which is part of the reason I'm so apprehensive playing that up at certain times with M---, because I knew that if somehow, I had sex with this married chick, then all married chicks were on the table and I feel like I already have one monster. I don't need two.

I – But it sounds like you're identifying this part of yourself. You're identifying what you see to be a slippery slope. And then, on top of that, identifying that slippery slope is something that could be manipulative or hurtful.

T – I also think as a Black dude, too, that could be hurtful. Because we're seen as being unfaithful. You know what I mean. So, I'm not interested in perpetuating that stereotype because then you have the "Multiple Father with multiple kids and multiple jobs". And as much as I like to be predictably Black, I don't like being a stereotype.

I – Is there a difference for you?

T – Between being predictable and being a stereotype?

I – Yeah like being a predictable Black man that could be considered stereotypical.

T – Yeah, I do think there's a difference. Stereotypes exist in a vacuum, they're not bolstered by a nuance understanding of Black people or Black culture. It's just a way to plug in anyone, plug in anything to get this value. And as soon as you add actual blackness to those equations, it's destroyed. Do I like fried chicken? Yes. So, do White people. It's one of those things like, do I like watermelon. Sometimes. Do I like Kool-Aid? Abso-fucking-lutely. Do I put sugar in that bitch? It's the only way to drink Kool-Aid. I mean, but White people got Concentrate and that shit is sugary as fuck. I don't want to hear it. It's one of those things where the stereotypes exist to be damaging, but they can't hold their weight when compared to nuance and information. So, you can that like Black men can't hold jobs, and then fifty dudes with jobs that pay more money than you walk into a room. It's just something that is there to destabilize, there to disenfranchise, to take power and agency from.

I – Going off that, then, what would be your concern with appearing as a stereotypical Black man in a negative sense. It sounds like you can navigate that pretty well, but what would it be? What are your concerns.

T – My concerns are more with being the type of Black man that sex as a gratifying act for yourself. The woman as a means to that gratification. Not really being open publicly or privately because you know what you're there for. And I don't even know if that's specific to Black men. As much as It's just men… for me, most of the stereotypes for Black men come from the Black dick. Having

like a Horse cock as it were. One of the things I do worry about that is, like, now that I'm like, 4 for 4 solid like… [I – People know] now I'm sitting there like, "Can I thrust this far? Can I do this? Can I hit this position? Because it has come to my awareness that certain angles get you farther away from the cervix and sometimes I'm like banging away on that door like it's cops at a fucking trap house. And I don't… in that very direct sense, it tapers a lot of what I do. But, also, like, you could probably attest to it, but there's an intensity with a Black dude having sex that is an intensity of other people have sex. I don't know how to explain it anymore deeply. But it seems to a thing. And I've only gleaned this from the two White women that I've had and the couple of Black girls with White guys and the things they say imply a difference.

I – You're saying that level… your curiosity about your own body and what you're able to do aren't determined by things that can be read racially. That can be read racially by anyone else but aren't being read racially by you. You're saying that, you read certain things about your abilities as a Black man based off of someone's reactions, not necessarily what you think about yourself.

T – Yes. To put it in pop culture terms. Remember Winston's speech [from the show *New* Girl] when he says that we're all the same color when the lights go off, that's literally what it's like for me.

I – Like race is pretty much a non-factor at that point and everything you do and what you experience is based off of your experience with someone else.

T – Yes, because even if race isn't off of the table, it suddenly doesn't matter because you're on top of me and I'm inside of you. And, in a certain way, if there was a race factor, I'm literally going to fuck you for that. So, it just… it's the only place I feel like, race doesn't seem to play an explicit role.

I – On the other end of that, you said that… it seemed like you were suggesting that your concerns surrounding your sexuality and however you may engage sexually with other women, being read as stereotypically-this, rather than selfish, narcissistic expression of sex and sexuality, that Black men… that may be attributed to Black men. Okay, based on that thing that we read, and I'm not sure how this follows… for one, do you think there's such a thing as Black sexuality?

T – I do, I haven't had enough experience to tell you what it is. I have some ideas about what it is, and I think honestly, there's such a thing as every-other-ethnicity-sexuality. And I think it's one of those things where we're compatible with everyone, but it's something that might be more special – and I say that hesitantly – more special and connected when it's two Black people or White people, or two Asians, because there's less to bridge. There's less between that you have to navigate in terms of shared life experiences. And so, you don't have to communicate certain things. And to me there's such a thing as Black love, since now that you both know this thing about each other, there are less restrictions, it's more fluid. It flows in a different way. And I'm not saying you can't obtain that with different people, but there's less of a hurdle when you're both Black. And Black love is the appreciation of the that other person's blackness in your life. Like Jesse William's speech where he's like "Black women we're going to do better." It's like, I support you as a Black woman because I know you need and because I want that for you. And the same thing from a Black woman for a Black man. And when it comes from that love, that makes it even more

powerful and it's more about the fact that we know what this shit is and we're going to do what we can to love each other and support each other. We know the hardships. We know the bullshit you had to go through. When you come together, it's like I love you more for it. It's like when people go through similar experiences, even though they didn't know each before… when you know someone, and you have shared life experiences like that, there's something that makes that love different.

I – I always get that sense that personalized answers are better than academic ones. So, do you think sexuality can be empowering.

T – Yeah. I think more for women. [I – Why?] I think women have a certain set of… like, as a guy, you're typically the one doing the fucking in a societal understanding of sex. You're the one in charge and…

I – You're the person that has the power. No one is going to judge a straight guy.

T – as a woman, I feel like in terms of public perception, you're the fucked. The fucked. So, I have a hard time feeling any kind of vulnerability or victimhood when it comes to how I'm expected to perform in the bedroom. I recognize that as the guy, I'm the one that has to be in charge even though it never goes down that way. I prefer that. It's just that the power and strength is always on the man's side. So, I have a hard time feeling that way for that reason. But there are also… I don't feel too lazy. So, it's like "if you want me to tap you, I can tap you out." It's weird… I don't know when, but I gained a certain level of awareness like me as a man versus someone else as a woman and what it means for them. All of a sudden it fucked up the ways I can feel about things because I recognize that I have male privilege and that means I can do certain things that you cannot. I can be seen in certain ways you cannot. If a guy fucks a lot of women he's a pimp, if a girl fucks a lot of guys she's a ho. I no longer feel bad… not bad but slighted about certain perceptions of sexually about me as a man.

I – it sounds like you're saying that sexuality is always… or carries power and can be empowering in a really diverse and acceptable way for men. And based on that, it's already limited because it's already there but for women, where sexual oppression and gender oppression really restrict their movements and how they can feel about themselves, there's a lot more to sexual liberation in that realm. That it can be more empowering in a much more profound way for them.

T – I guess I've been talking about sexuality in regard to me personally, but in terms of the greater social context… like, phew, what.

I – I meant you personally.

T – I personally feel like the hurdle for men, specifically Black men, to not have negative ideas about their sex put upon them is not nearly as high as it is for women, especially since… you can look anywhere and find out how men feel about women. And none of it will make you feel okay. The Brock Turner case is a perfect example. Or like the onus is put on the woman to not be sexually promiscuous when she's drunk and not on the man to not rape her. It's like… how I can feel any kind of way when that's the reality that women have to deal with. Like, you know, if you don't

want to get raped, you shouldn't dress like that or flirt. But, like, I flirt. And if a woman rapes me I'd be like… "I guess I had it coming," because I wouldn't feel like I was wrong the same way a woman feels like she's wrong, someone would view me like "Oh, I want to fuck him." You know, maybe that's weird, but, I just don't… I don't feel like, as a man, I'm in a sexually lower position. As a Black man, I feel like I have problematic situations to navigate socially.

I – What do you mean?

T – As a Black man, I have the big dick idea and you must fuck like this, or you must fuck like that on the basis of me being Black. But like, as a guy, just as me as a male? I don't really have any problems.

I – How would you navigate sexual empowerment as a Black guy? Or is there a way to navigate.

T – If someone says some shit, I just try to clarify. That's all I can do. I'm not even the most sexually active Black guy, like so I don't have a wide array of experiences to say this is how it is. I just say shit like, you know, Bill Bellamy has this stand up from years ago where he's like "You know Ladies, it's not a titty or an ass where we can get that… it's odd in some ways, we got the dick we got." And to me, as someone who did not know where he stood, and still does not know where he stands in terms of do Black guys have big dicks, just like, you got the dick you got, and you got to fucking roll with that shit. When things are like, "Oh you must eat pussy real good," and I'm like "yeah?" I don't know, what makes you think that. Because I'm a Black guy and Black guys get more women and thus they get more experience? I don't fucking know. I have no problems like, taking an L and insinuating that I don't have a big dick. Because, you know, the ways in which this whole big dick thing has affected Black men is really fucking weird. It had its moment in the sun and now it's like a rubber band starting to snap back in bizarre ways.

I – What do you mean?

T – Now I've heard instances where Black men don't feel as Black if they're perceived as not having a big dick. Or other people don't. it's somehow become a part of blackness where I'm not necessarily sure it has a place.

I – Black men you know, or Black men you heard about.

T – I've heard it floated and as soon as you hear something floated, you know someone feels that way. I don't know how many people, but I've heard it enough and I can understand how it gets there.

I – Do you know anyone who holds that thought? Like Black men aren't Black enough because of their size?

T – Not at all. But you also to consider that girls lie to make you feel better. So, it could be that girls are lying to you the whole time because maybe you're not like other Black guys. That's a harmful idea to have. Now you're saying that every other Black dude has a big dick, but you. Suddenly now that's a threat to your blackness because now that's been solidified in your mind as

290

a staple of blackness that you don't share. I think that invalidating someone's identity as a Black man is a harmful stereotype.

I – But it sounds like to you, sexual empowerment, specifically for Black men in a racialized gender experience of sexuality, can be empowering, maybe. It sounds like you're saying that the terrain is so murky that it isn't clear how it can be empowering.

T – Yeah since you're a guy. I think empowerment isn't the best word, maybe enlightenment. Like, what is or what it is actually that Black men are sexually. Because, honestly, I feel like everyone is pretty much the same. It's one of the great equalizers, kind of like the bus.

I – So if empowerment is the wrong term to use and enlightenment is the better thing… How would you answer that question if you switched empowerment with enlightenment? Do you think there's a sexual enlightenment as it pertains to Black men? If so, how?

T – I think there could be, but I think you mean more in terms of how we behave versus how much is put upon us from women. I think that if you take sexuality and go beyond the bedroom into intimacy there could be more enlightenment. Real talk, Black men can be some of the sappiest mother fuckers to the point where it's like, my God I hope I never turn out like you. Even though, yeah, you got overly sloppy examples like D. But even my dad, when it comes to love and the way he explains to me the way we should treat women, I'm like I respect that. I think that society has put upon men to be tough, especially Black men to be extra tough that directly influences sexuality. Like you can't even be emotionally available when you're being emotionally intimate with someone, so I think that regard, removing some of the stigma that is associated with Black men and removing stigmas of them emotionally and intimately and sexually, I think they're products of that instead of the focal point. So, yeah. I think there could be a Black male sexual awakening. I think it could be more about a bunch of Black men owning up to the fact that, they aint as hard as people want them to be or as they are all of the time. I think that being honest about what you're actually like goes a long way in terms of getting people to understand what's actually happening. And even that's going to hard to do because Black dudes in LA will be harder than Black dudes in Buffalo.

I – You're talking about making it more dynamic, but making it more open ended

T – Yeah. Because here's the thing. Like in terms of race and race talks and racism in general, minorities are put into very tiny boxes with no nuance. And because we're going to coming from different parts of the country, we're going to have different experiences when you're talking about specifics. There's no way a nigga in Pittsburgh is going to be as sexually aware, active, or open as a nigga in fucking Tucson. They might be in different ways, but that doesn't mean that the way they are open is going to be the same and I think we need to make room for that and allow for that. It will be Black, but Black Tucson and Black Pittsburgh aren't the same thing either. There's subcultures in that shit.

I – Shades of blackness.

T – Yeah and even colorism, which confuses me sometimes, it still can't operate in simultaneously different ways. Like the whole Dark skin vs. Light skin thing, I've met some emotional mother fuckers. Like that whole entire… I have met some brutal savage Light skin mother fuckers…

I – Know a few myself.

T – Like, D, debunks the debate on any level. I think there needs to be room to allow for that to happen.

JAMES

Interviewer – The first question that I typically ask is to give a brief description of who you are. You can say your name if you want to, it'll be redacted in the transcription. But, just say who you are, how you identify, and you can take that in any direction that you.

James – I'm an African-American male of native American heritage as well. I'm a mid-west transplant on the east coast if that makes any sense.

I – It makes more sense to me now.

J – I am a middle class. For some people's purposes, I'm upper class. In other… I don't know how people define my finances, but I feel not-so-affluent in a way. I'm educated, one of six siblings, my oldest brother being adopted. Blended family, so I am… my genealogy is quite interesting. My oldest brother is adopted. My oldest biological brother – and we share only my mother… I'm the only child of my parents… my father is deceased. And my younger three siblings are from the same father. So quite a blend. I would consider myself an outlier in all of this only as I have family members from Israel, Haiti, Dominican Republic… so we have a wide range. I have four sets of grandparents. So, I have a Bachelor's and a Master's degree which is important as a social reference. I've been living here for forty and I'm in my mid-40s.

I – What do you have your degrees in?

J – I have a master's in social work and a bachelor's in African-American Literature, Women's Studies and Spanish.

I – So you were a triple major.

J – Well, it was a major and then others were minor.

I – So, some of what you said resonates with me. Not just in terms of… my immediate family isn't as blended, but extended family has similar constructions of different families being very different and having different parentage with different group of children and having different trees. So, it resonated with me in a way. So, you when you say mid-west transplant, what does that mean?

J – It means I was brought here when my father past and my mom remarried. So, I've been here most of my life, but I've always gone back to Kansas. Wichita, Kansas is where I'm from. I mean, it's odd that all of the family circles are. All of the grandparents and all of the cousins. So that's the central rooting. But we were here in Boston on the eastside, so there's always that separation of biological family. But we always went back and got infused. So, all were grandparents, and all were grandchildren, it didn't matter where we came from. We were all taught to treat each other equally and love each other equally and our families had made no division among us. Loves, finances, I mean… we were family and we were going to make it work.

I – So which city feels more like home to you? I meant the description of a transplant really sticks out to me.

J – So, I still say I'm country, I could never live in New York. It's too dense. In Boston, I never lived in an apartment. I've always lived in a house. So, in Kansas, people have apartment and houses. But all of my family, we had a house. We had a backyard. So, while there was very urban living in Boston, we had all of this country like space around us. The triple deckers were at a great distance, they were on the same street, but… it was different. So, I've never had that apartment, or "inner-city" experience. We had three floors. We had a basement. We had pets. [laughs]

I – I can sympathize with that.

J – it reminds me June Cleaver. We had that household.

I – It seems as though you can, at least in terms of being middle class, it seems as though, depending on who you're interacting with, people may identify you as being middle class, or upper middle class. Is that something that's prevalent in your family? Do your family members look at you in the same way?

J – I guess within the immediate, it's really interesting. I don't think we talk about our social status in that way. I think my mid-west family… they're more like "You're from the city" and I guess the city has this flavor no matter where you go. Things must be really fast. Things must be really popping off in Boston. You have all of these teams in Boston. So, from our family out west, so who are in upstate New York, there's an expectation that we're more affluent in that way. But, within our immediate structure, I think we've always aspired to more no matter what perspective we've had. So, me and my brothers, we've gone to the METCO public school system. I went to METCO and then go out of that and came to Boston and got into one of the test schools. So, we're all intelligent. Flourished wherever we went. Two of my siblings have graduated with degrees. Three of us have advanced degrees.

I – So class isn't something that's just framed by finances, it's framed by aspirations and success. And, it even seems in some ways, resources, too. Regardless of those resources being created by you and your family, or if they're available through other means that you may have.

J – It's interesting. One of my siblings that didn't complete his last semester in school, he decided to go off and pursue his career. Which is something that he's doing right now. It's music. He went to school for music, but he's like, at the last semester he's like "I don't need this degree to follow my dream." I have another sibling who went into the military to finance his career. He didn't need to go, but he chose that. So paralleled training and paralleled desires, you know?

I – Yeah, that's not just confined to academics. So, the next question I have… I feel like we could go off on that alone. So, for you, what does it mean to be a man? And you can attach race to that or stick with masculinity.

J – it's funny, I tell people, I wake up every day and realize I'm me. And me meaning man. And I get dressed, shave, and whatever those rituals for men can be in the morning. And then I walk out into the world and people remind me that I'm Black. It's like Oh, you're Black today. It's almost an afterthought in my engagement with myself. I do have African centered art, I do have Native-

American centered art. I have Americana in my house because I think that's all a part of who I am as an individual. But what's thrusted upon me… the expectation of you have to act, and you have to speak… it's like no, not really. And I fight against that. Sometimes I feel like education, unconsciously or consciously, helps you fight against the boxes that people try to put you in as an individual. Even the idea of what "man" means… I speak several different languages because I like languages. So, why can I speak Hebrew? Or Chinese if I want? I had a very interesting conversation about that at Brandeis University. "Why do you want to take Hebrew?" "Well, why not? It's offered, this is a Jewish school, why not learn it?" "But what's its usefulness to you?" "it's a language. I like to learn. Schools are about learning." It's interesting, like what there a secret I wasn't getting? Did they think I was trying to steal keys? What is it? Education is education for me. So, your question was…. "What does it mean to be a man?" [I – Yeah] Hmm… I'm a father as well, I have a 23-yer-old daughter. What it meant to me prior to having a child is different than what it means to me now.

I – Oh… [laughs] so choice point. Which direction do you go?

J – Prior to my daughter, I was trying to figure out what it meant to be a man as society saw me. I came up in one of the 90s thrusted into young adulthood. The tv is telling me that I can only be a rap star or a singer. Or these social aspirations are limited. The president could never be a Black man. So, it has changed post-Barack Obama, and I'm appreciative because I think about my nieces and nephews and they will never have existed in a place where they could never have a Black President. So, to me, that's a Black man. I think for me, I can't detach my reality from being a Black man because people have expectations or me, or people try to limit my education or scope of ability. Being a man… to me it's interesting. I think I've always tried to understand other people's perspectives. When you gave me the frame of questions, I thought of one of the defining moments when one of my brothers teased me when I was younger. And my mother was arranging a party for me and I looked at the birthday list. I was very smart and in the 3rd grade, I had an 8th grade vocabulary. I looked at the list, I said "Mom, where are the girls? You can't have a party without girls." And it's like, for me it was all about the balance. So, when my brothers would bring girlfriends home and they'd talk about I'd always try to stick up for the girls. "You can't do that to her, she has rights to" So for me, being a man has never been a part of 'You need to be a part of a certain group.' I never cared if the guys hung out with the guys. I just wanted friends. Whether they were female or male. I don't care if you agree with me as long as I have a group of friends that do. And I have friends that are transgender, gay, Muslim, I've studied Christianity and Judaism…

So, I guess for me, the idea of who I am as a man… I define it for myself on a daily basis. From, interesting choices in colorful outfits… [laughs] I don't care, I'll wear pink with brown and my favorite color is purple. [I – Ah! Great so it is mine] [laughs] and so is Prince's and he's the man. So, it's… I think I've gotten a language in education, with the places I've gone like… gender is fluid. And, my sense of self… I don't think it shifts. I need to clear as that. I define myself as James, son of so and so and so and so. Trying to be the best I can be at any given moment. And sometime that takes a very stern presentation. Sometimes I can be… I code switch when I need to. [I – Yeah…] [laughs] Like "what the hell is going on." And you have to, through some more colorful language in there. To saying, "That's not very appropriate right now." Like who am I talking to? I've had people very astonished from when they see me after a phone conversation. I don't know what people assume about my voice. And that's a very unique experience to have

people make assumptions about your voice and then they see you, it's like "Why are you so shocked?" Have you never encountered someone like me that speaks like me/ And what does that say about them in relationship to themselves?

I – So… a lot of things.

J – I apologize if I went on a tangent.

I – No! That was great. A few things stuck out to me. So, it seems like your point of identity doesn't shift, but it also seems like it's fluid in a way. So, not necessarily to the degree you become this fragmented, confused, contradictory person. But it seems like a foundation of you are is accessing fluidity. You are who you are and who you want to be at any given moment. And that doesn't change who you are, that is you. And it also seems as though for you, being a man is a fact of you who are. And you try to push back against prescribed social narratives. So, sorry if that simplifies it…

J – It's true. I always think of it like water. Water can be ice, it can be precipitation, it can be steam, it can be hot, it can be heavy… I think that's who we all ultimately are. We shift between marks… how can you be a son and grandfather at the same time and know that role. I can easily have been stern in one moment and then go to my mom and be like "yes ma'am, yes ma'am." Right? Because we are… it's fluid within a range. I have a wide range fluidity because I've been able to accept myself for a lot of what society would say would be not-so-masculine behaviors. I'll give you example. I'm an emotional person, and I'm a social worker. "Well, that's not a man's job." What's a man's job? Is a man's job to work? Well… 90% of the men on the planet would say yes. So, whether or not you like my work… we need to have a voice at the table for a lot of things people say we shouldn't have. I thought about taking a job as an OBGYN, which as a field it's like "Why as a man are you going in there?" Well, why not? So… Yeah. I think my education has allowed me to use language and allow me to embrace my ability to be really sad and cry in moments of pure sadness and be okay with that. But it took some time for me to realize that my tears can be my strength. I can experience my emotions and I don't care what anyone says because to be a man and to cry at a funeral may be okay. But, to be a man and cry at wedding? "What the hell is wrong with you?" According to who's looking. I cried at someone's wedding because it was a beautiful wedding. It was on the beach, it was at a Cape! I was overwhelmed. And people were like, "You don't even know the couple." And I'm like "It's a beautiful occasion!" You can't be happy about that? Maybe you can't capture the moments and you can't be truly happy with yourself. My life experiences have allowed me to do certain things, and their experiences have put them in a box. And they don't even know they're in a box and that's terrible.

I – When you were speaking, the image that pops into my mind is like somehow, you've gained access to all of these gender descriptions and things that are associated with some genders, some with men, some with women, and anything fluid in between: bigender, transgender and whatever resonates with you is the thing that you pick. And so, manhood to you becomes remarkably your own. And it doesn't seem as though, if someone challenges you about what it means to be a man, you're comfortable challenging back or accepting doing that some may define as being feminine or doing something that some people may define as masculinity. As long as you're you, you're okay with that.

J – Well, if someone was like, that's not how you do it, I'm like *scoff* "Okay" My life has brought me to a place where I can say "that's your interpretation." I'm not going to do it and that's fine because it's not working for me. What I believe in trying to be is your authentic self, and sometimes as much as your confusions can be confusing, they're telling you something about yourself.

I had a moment about ten years ago. I don't have any grandparents in this state. But my grandmother, she passed. And post-that, it was really traumatic to me. So, I remember running around telling my family members, "I love you." More than normal. Even ex-girlfriends. And they were like "why are you saying this so much," you know, "I'm fine. I just need to express this now, because I don't know if I can express it in the future. And this is who I am. This is how I'm coping. And if that's too overwhelming or challenging, then that says something about you and I need to get this out of me."

I want the best for my friends and even my enemies. So, it was a very unique point when I realized that not everyone see love, or to say they want something, or free to express themselves. Men can just not be as open with their love of self or others like I am because they have injuries and I accept that. I told my mother that not everyone thinks the way that she thinks so you can't hold them accountable. But you have to be who you are. So, if comes at me like 'you're still doing that?' It's like yeah "I'm still saying I love you. I'm still being me." I'm pretty damn happy about it otherwise you're miserable trying to find out who you are. Your authentic self today may not be the same. It definitely wasn't the same growing up with my daughter. It's like who the hell is this guy?   Then suddenly shifting into fatherhood and suddenly there's the idea of "Now, as a masculine father you must go and…" That was me railing against the machine. Like, all of the statistics like, you're going to be absentee father, you didn't marry the mother, you're not going to be responsible. I didn't take chances with careers, I stayed in the state, just to make sure that narrative wasn't a part of my narrative. So, there was definitely some railing against that. That story that they say about men of color. And every man of color that I've ever known has always been present in their children's lives. So that narrative is insane. "They can't provide" well let's talk about how men of color cannot provide for their children the way other fathers do… because we get paid less. You don't take vacations, but we get paid less. You pay us and women of color less, so we have the less income, so we can't afford the houses, or the vacations. So why are you demonizing someone that has less. But no one wants to have that conversation. I'm always trying to get people to have honest conversations about what they're expecting. Because if you expect me to perform as someone else… same degree, same job, less pay, you're already lying to yourself.

I – It reminds me of… one of my younger cousins he has two children out of wedlock and the ferocity at which he tries to provide for them by any means necessary is astounding. And, for him that was something that motivated him so much. Not only for his sense of identity, but also back against what he knew was a prevailing stereotype of Black fathers. That was really impressive to see.

J – A gift to me by someone that I didn't expect any gifts from, talking about a scenario like that. Someone said, it's not the quantity of the time, it's the quality. People who are working two or three jobs trying to get all of these extra goodies… your presence is more valuable than the goodies. But society isn't telling you that. It's telling you that you have to do this and this and kill yourself trying to do it. And that's not fair to any mother or father put in that position.

I – So, this leads into the next question. You've managed to weave race and how race may play a role in masculine identity throughout this entire conversation. So, what does blackness mean to you? What does being Black mean to you?

J – It's interesting. It's a point of pride. I wouldn't trade being Black for being anything in the world. Not that not-being Black would be… I don't know how other people exist in that. But I like being Black. I like being, not necessarily the underdog, but the flavor of the universe. The lies that are told about people of color are just amazing to me. There's an ongoing narrative... I had a friend in elementary school who asked me "Do Black people grow tails at 12 o'clock?" "No, we don't grow tails at 12 o'clock" and in my advanced mind I thought "yeah and I fuck your mom with it." [laughs] And this was elementary school, so you can imagine how much I knew then that it was going to get me in trouble of I said it. But this is my mind at this age processing: tails? At 12 o'clock? Who says that? I said who told you that? And she goes "My Dad" and I'm like "No he's lying." And when he came to pick her up, she slapped him and said "You lied to me? Why would you tell me that Black people grow tails at 12 o'clock?" Why would you pass on this legacy of foolishness? And there are all of these lies that we pass on in our community about being Black, let alone outside of the community about being Black.

And I think the reason I like being Black is because I see beyond the narrative. You remember the booty call? [I – Yes!] It also came out with at the same time as the movie *Love Jones*. [laughs] In our local radio station had this call in about "is this the narrative? Is this the narrative?" And I traveled to Virginia and I had come from the Maryland, Virginia area the year before. My brother had been getting a degree down there in law. I called in and said "You know what I love about that? I love both of them." "Why?" Because we got people like that and people like that in our community. That's the beauty of it. Why can we only be the pimps and the hoes? Why can't we be the preachers and the prostitutes. Let's be honest. We have all of this. We are a community, not a monolith. So, it's a beautiful thing to see the crazy cousins I could have, or the family members and then see the affluent family members trying to have an affectionate relationship without all of the other stuff that society deems ill, because not all of us live in the same bubble. So, for me, that range was beautiful. I appreciated Jamie Foxx's character that was a terrible misogynistic individual, but we know there are people like that. We still have to navigate that in our families. Those same terrible, misogynistic individuals are very protective of their kids, and they'll go alpha male on anyone trying to do harm to their kids. So, they play a role in our family dynamics, they play a role in our communities. So, I embrace the totality of being black. The shame. I love when these individuals are so afro-centric that they just can't see the truth. So, when they say, "We were kings and queens in Africa" and I'm like "Yes, some were also slaves." Because someone had to serve the kings and queens. Let's even the playing field, let's be real about that. I don't deny that truth. But I don't hold it as the only truth. Architects, contractors, we had this reign over the continent, and that spilled over into other communities.

The thing about being Black in America is that there's a legacy they don't want to talk about but want to hold us accountable for anyway. The New Jim Crow. This seedy behavior where if Black people aren't aware of it, they can't engage their non-Black neighbors about it. And persons of other colors that get privilege off of that, but they buy into materialism and capitalism and the dream… but I have the ability to see through some of that. I can't look at old black and White films anymore without telling my aunts and ruining it for them and going "there seems to be no Black crooks in this… were we not around? Were we not stealing? Until the 1950s? Oh,

they just didn't have us on film?" I always laugh at the audacity of the narrative because I think I've been able to… in the northeast being able to surround myself, by having community… the LGBT friends I have and the religious friends I have and the educated friends I have, the self-taught friends I have and being able to go into those circles and have conversations and be myself and say "hey, this is what I'm bringing to the table, still" and laughing at the stupidity of the world around us where people get caught up in these little mind games. I don't want to play these mind games. If you want to have an authentic conversation with me about race, gender, anything, then let's talk about where the baseline of all this is by now. I've constantly been able to break barriers with my friends about that stuff, but I'm still protected in the bubble because I haven't gone down into the lower-48 where some people won't want to have a conversation about the history. They'll want to tell me certain things about the history of the flag. The confederate flags and their rights. But whose rights? And I know not to have conversations with some people…

I – Yeah, some battles you can't win. What I really like about what you said about blackness was that you said it was a totality and it's a range. And, you didn't… to have *Love Jones* and *Booty Call*… not necessarily in contrast to one another, but to hold them side by side and to glorify their casts and both plot lines and both stories as opposed to simply saying "This is Booty Call. This is really problematic." You're instead saying "It's not the best, but it's also a range. It's the gamut. And Black people aren't just this and that, they're this and that and everything in between." I really like that. And it really seems to exemplify what you said about manhood where it's also a range and it's a totality, and it's very fluid. So, I'm wondering if you have any stories that demonstrate that Black totality.

J – it's interesting. As a light-skinned Black man. I enter circles where light-skinned brothers are it's like "light-skinned brothers are out James." But it's like "well, I'm going to be me." I didn't like you anyway. [laughs] There are plenty of people who like me for who I am. There was one time I was walking on Brandeis' campus and they are these two African brothers – I knew they were African as they identified themselves as such. And one was like "Where are you from?" and I'm like "Wichita" and they were like "No, where are you from in Africa?" and I'm like, you see African in me? Versus all of this other stuff, versus just seeing Black, you see African. That's not just slave-in-America-Black, but you have a continent. You have a context that you come from and there are people that look like you somewhere that I recognize. I guess I'm trying to capture your question, like where have I had to use this Black totality of mine?

I – Sure, or anything. I feel like any story you give will demonstrate it.

J – Like, I enter a room as an advocate or a social worker and I'm the only male and I'm the only Black person in the room and we're sitting around, and people are identifying themselves. Someone asks me "Oh, where'd you go to school." And I said "Boston" and I do this particularly because I've heard "James, you're not like other Black people." Like, how many other Black people do you know. I mean, you're right, I'm poorer than some and better than others. Who do you know? I'm like… do I have to walk with my diploma out like Jim Crow laws? What's going on here? And, I say "Boston." "What school?" "One of the better schools in Boston." I'm being vague intentionally. "You don't understand the question." "No, I understand the question, I really just want to know why you're asking me about my pedigree." I'm always looking at what people are trying to read into me. Whenever I leave, I go into meetings with a shirt and tie. Proper and

clean. Other people go in a t-shirt. Like who is doing this? But, I know I need to go as the advocate, so I go with whatever other people are comfortable with, and people call me Mister because I want them to know that my parents gave me a name and I come from a lineage of something… and I'm not that familiar. Like, if you're a doctor, I need to call you doctor. So, I'm always entering into these spaces… I'm part of an association of Black social workers because I think there are conversations that are happening around family members that you can't have… you share your dirty laundry with who is in your family, and not everyone in your family needs to know your laundry. And not everyone who knows your laundry is family. So… I think I'm not answering your question.

I – You are.

J – I think I bring in my… I think it's become so second-nature. My entering spaces as a Black man and making sure people remember that, but not because they just see it, or because I speak a certain way, but it's more like not only am I a Black man, but I'm a Black man advocating for my family. That becomes the whole purpose of me getting a degree. There's an instance where I was mulling over in my head where I had… I encountered a co-worker who… this is me not seeing what they were seeing. And so, we were talking about a former client and I was like "I want to see him in ten years." This dynamic, smart, had some developmental issues, but gregarious, young, Brown brother, and I was very happy for him. I saw a picture of him in a suit and he looked like he should be president of something. And I saw the folder and I said, 'I want to see him in ten years." And this co-worker of mine, said "I hope he's not in jail." And I'm like… social work lens… Black man in the community lens… father lends… it's like I had to go back to all of my scopes and see where this person is getting… I had to peel in my mind. They laughed nervously, and I was really struck by this. So, I had to talk to someone about this because it was stirring something up in me and I wanted my message to be heard enough. And I didn't care if it offended because sometimes we have to offend. I wanted the message to get across, and I didn't want to be the angry Black man. Because, if you're a social worker saying this, where is your unconditional positive regard? If this is a child and you're talking about their future, why does it have to be a dark future for a dark child? He's a member of my community, that's another offense. He's a male, that's another offense, you're a woman talking about a little boy going to jail. Why does that have to be the only story. All of my stuff came out. So, when I approached her, I told her "I had to tell you, I was offended by what you said." And they said, "it wasn't because of skin color" and I'm like, "You can't separate his skin color from who he is. That's a part of his reality. You may not see it, but everyone else may see it. So, why not say he's doing well, or I hope he's not in jail or incarcerate. Or I hope he's getting treated, I hope he's successful." In 10 years he'll be in college, so "I hope he'll be in college."

I – She could've gone any other route.

J – And it would've been like "You think good for him." He's got to be in jail. Well, she didn't say dead, which was also a positive, too. But her offense was, "with kids with his profile I've seen kids and they were White." Well, shame on you for saying that about White kids. Because where's the unconditional positive regard? Because we have a bright future and if you say that now about him, how did that inform your treatment? Your hellos to him? Your goodbyes to him? I love the daycare we have downstairs and their smiling faces. And you say hello and they say hello. Why

can't we be like little kids and hope positively even though life gets crappy? I know that it gets hard as a man because we're expected to do a certain type of task and we don't do that, people put us in certain boxes. And then you're like, I'm not in that box anyway, I'll crawl out of it. Did you put this barrier up because you're stupid? Then there's self-imposed things, I try not to self-impose myself with things. But, I've had to undo the negative self-talk and I find it seeping in at times because I know, are they going to think of me as another Black man, or as another man that's doing it? In that particular regard, I don't think she got the message. What I learned in that moment, I was able to be clear and supportive to her and the child and later on she came around. She made some nice comments to me. I think that was her way of playing nice. But she had to process it, I gave her something really heavy that she… she didn't start doing all of the other nicer things until a day later. Maybe she went and spoke to her significant other or got feedback from another individual and thought, 'he did that, and he challenged you and you should be thankful. That's when you create allies, create friendships. Another point about masculinity if I may. I also think those of us who have the knowledge have the obligation to help others with knowledge navigate where they're going I say that with an example.

As an advocate in my work, I work with kids as well as foster parents as well as their families. I think that sometimes there are generational pieces that aren't taken into account. Foster parents are older, they have a generational lens and their language may not be as clean. Like, "what's transgender? I don't understand this? It's too much for me." And it's overwhelming. We now have young people engaging in conversations with people who aren't getting, and they aren't realizing that people are getting stuck on the language and getting frustrated and overwhelmed, getting frustrated because the language isn't part of their canon yet and may never get there. At what point do you take into account someone's generational challenges. I worked in a geriatric psych unit where an older man, older by twice my age, called me the n-bomb. And then he apologized, but he's also on a geriatric psych unit slipping in and out of space. And I'm like… he's like, that's not okay. And no one is disagreeing that it's not okay, but you need to understand where he's coming from and if that's the thing that he can come to boy or James, then, in the moment, I'll take it. And if he can apologize in the moment, or stay with me in the moment, if the next moment is bad then the next moment is bad. But this is not okay. So, we have the job, as we push forward, to meet people where they are and force -when the lawyers aren't listening, when society isn't listening – 'look, do you see where this person is from? If they don't have the words, or you don't have the words, then meet in the middle. Find a way to not use those words anymore and to not kill them for using these harsh words. We have to be generational and social translators. I think that's what it means for me to be a man. And then as a light-skinned Black man, that's another layer for whoever is seeing me… I'm the safer one. "You're not so intimidating, you're not so scary, you're not so tall, you're not so ready to hurt me." Maybe I am.

Maya Angelou said she was free when she realized that… anything that is human is not foreign to me. That's another eye-opening moment for me. So, in my masculinity I incorporate everything that is human. I have a friend who goes, "It took a woman and man to make, so you have a woman and man in you. You're any of that." Anything human is not foreign to me. Murderer. Not foreign to me. Religious, Not foreign to me. Drug abuser, anything that is human… Trump! [laughs] So when you embrace that, but go "Where do I want to go in the spectrum in my humanity, where do I want to put my time and energy, and what do I want to be known for?"

I - What I like about that is that, for one, it highlights some of the difficulty with trying to separate identities or questions into singular categories. Like talking about manhood and talking about race,

they both collide immediately. Generations and time and history, they collide with that and in addition to all of the other identities that we take up. So, as you're talking, I'm like "Man, there's a big theme of totality that seems to inform how you express yourself in a Black masculine way, or a Black way, or a masculine way. Even how you account for family and the generations and who you're speaking to, but also in terms of who you're talking to and who you work… other colleagues and clients. It seems like that's a major theme and major philosophical foundation, or tenet, for you.

You touched on a couple of things, but I want to come back to those later if we have time. But they pertain to how race and gender may influence or may play a role in your relationships, but it seems like you touched on that in some ways.

J – Race and gender… Some I'm a heterosexual male, I know… [laughs] I have an ex-girlfriend who I took to a gay bar. "What, you don't want to go to a club?" "well, you want to go dance? That's where the best parties are when I go with my gay friends. They're getting it in. She's like "You took me to a gay bar." "Well, why not? They're dancing, there's music, you can dance with me, and they make killer drinks." Oooh you see, 'they make,'… The club in particular made killer drinks. Not gay people. It's a whole point of 'I want to have a good time, you want to have a good time, my gay friends have great times.' Not only, but whatever. In the community, you have to have these sorts of conversations. Some people are just ready to pounce when you say something that may or may not, in the right context written out of color, but sometimes it is.

I – Even though that's the vernacular that we use. If someone makes a killer drink that means it's good.

J – Again, and the tip was half the price of the drink because it was like three drinks. And she was like "are you gay?" "why would you come here?" "Why not? It's the same music you hear everywhere else. I feel very safe. I feel very welcome. I like to have a good drink. I like to have some good music. A party is a party." I don't control who goes to the party. "do you go here all of the time?" "Sometimes." "do you go here without me?" "Absolutely. It's a bar." I am who I am, if you like me, I'm showing you how I am as an individual. Your small time in my life does not completely define the roads I have trotted to come and be with you. Why do you think I'm this narrow sliver… it's like a whole plot and there are four dimensions. It's all there. She continued to want to date me, but she always had this thing in the back of mind "Is he gay?" No, I'm not, I'm a man of my word. So, if you don't trust me then the bond of the relationship is over. I had another girlfriend and I took her and her friends out one time, I treated them all of them to food and beverages. I was driving. I noticed they were very close. "Do you like girls? No harm no foul." And she's like "Why would you ask me that?" "You told me some intimate things about what you've done in your past. This particular question resonates with me and I wanted to be honest with you." "Would you like it if I asked guys?" "You can ask, I can answer the question."

I – It seems like the question can contain a change in sexual orientation. You asked if she liked women, not necessarily if she were a lesbian or if she were bisexual.

J – I mean, it is what it is. And sometimes people don't know because they haven't tried something or experienced something or bridged in a way that they can mull it over. Sometimes it's curiosity in the back of their mind that some people don't know in the forefront. People are ashamed of their

stuff, the things that she told me prior to that, I'm like "Do you kiss girls? I do, I do it all of the time." For me, I'm asking a question for my understanding. If we're trying to have an honest relationship, why not have honest conversation when they come up? I didn't have conversations like that earlier in my life because I didn't have the words, I didn't have the self-confidence. Your capacity to read people or engage people only increases when you have time with yourself. That lady and I never talked to me again. Like she was offended I asked that question, but she would also tell me all of these things. And I'm like… I think thou detest too much. You all were real close when I bought you food. I just wanted to know. In my mind, I guess I just needed to know if you were going out for a night with the girls, or a 'night with the girls.' I've always told me friends in my community that there are things that I can't compete with. If you like vagina, I can't compete. I'm off the table. You can't compete with a penis. That's the reality of a situation with that. But the intimacy of a relationship, the carrying and nurturing, we can all provide that with each other. To some degrees, in a different way. If you have more time and more freedom, you can do more in those ways. More of a religious connection? You can do a whole different level of connection. I'm always trying to help people who engage with me have the conversations. Like, what do we bring to the table and what do we handle with good intentions in this rollercoaster of life.

I – So, what I also seemed to notice, and it's a running theme, that your fluidity of identities often times seem to produce interesting interactions with other people who seem to be rather fixed or resistant to how they can be socially. So, what does sexuality mean to you?

J – I think sexuality is funny. There's such a range. I always tell people that "Prince is the most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life." I've seen very masculine women with very feminine men and they're heterosexual relationships. Then I've seen masculine men with feminine women and she's more dominant. So, it's like, scratching the surface of what people look like and what is sex itself is fascinating to me.

I – What is fascinating to you?

J – The stories you tell yourself and then you find out the stories are completely different. I was at one of my gay friend's parties and… I don't care about dancing with men, a good time is a good time. And so, I'm dancing and having a good time and suddenly I get my butt smacked by a guy. And he's like "you know where you're at." And I'm like "Okay, but you don't have a right to touch my body without my permission." And some woman got in his face and was defending him and I'm like "hold on, if someone grabbed your breast out of nowhere you would be offended, and you have the right to be offended about someone coming up to you and touching you. Unless you're adult and you give permission, in which case that's fine. If you say no, no means no. Let's set the rules of society that's what it is. I don't want anyone to Donald Trump me. So, I find it so interesting when my gay friends are talking about tops and bottoms and I'm like, I guess I'm versatile because… I like women and so anything that we're doing together…. For me, if you're in a relationship with someone and you're exploring them, they're exploring you, and it's an ongoing conversation about what's comfortable… For me, as long as you're having a conversation, it's ongoing and negotiable. Things change. For me, sexuality has a range. I always find it fascinating when people have an attractive to inanimate objects. Where'd that start. Then my curious intellectual mind takes over and it's like, where did that come from. What's that meaning.

Wow. Then I hate to be the perv like, can I see? Because I have a range of friends that have a range of manifestations of their partnerships, I try to keep up with the changing language.

I – Sexuality falls under the same sort of fluidity that all of your other identities flow under, too. And the way people engage with you and approach you, it seems for one, you can enjoy the honest conversations and there's no limit to those. The only limit is what people decide to bring to that relationship or conversation. But also, how people should respect and honor and your body is not necessarily by what might be gender appropriate or racially appropriate. It's a matter of what's appropriate for that human.

J – What's appropriate for the coupling. Snugglers. Sometimes I want to be the snuggler. Sometimes I'm not. Sometimes it's like, it's funny… being that I'm more appreciate of people having a range of expression, I had female partners and girlfriends, significant others… I think because they're comfortable in the space around me, they've done things they wouldn't have normally done. Like they come over to me and they're like, "good job, guy." And I'm like what, because I'm doing the dishes? I'll roll with that. But, I think they are also times when it's like, let's not. We didn't have that conversation. That's not in play yet. I think it stops here. I think that's the idea. You are getting to know someone that you've never known, or you've known in a different way. So, if you went from friends to this relationship, or you just met someone and then got into a relationship, I mean, you're getting into this other baggage. You're going into the private drawers of their mind and their thoughts and their desires if you're able to have that conversation. Some people are like, this is the role.

   I have been fortunate enough to have opportunities to push boundaries. And to have people push them back. But then to have conversations about why those boundaries have been pushed. I will say that being a social worker has its benefits. You're able to look at the whole picture, you're able to look at the whole environment, whether it's conscious or not. Why is it this way? Why is this person rejecting this opportunity? And then, like, it's not personal. They're just not into whatever that is. I've had partners go, "I'll do whatever this thing is for you, but you don't ask. But, like, I would normally never do it." Don't do it if you're not comfortable. I do it because I want to do it, not because just being I'm being asked. If we're in this moment together or moments together, let's enjoy the moment for what it is, treat it as the best moment we can and if it doesn't turn out the way you planned, then let's talk about that. If it does, let's talk about that and create a good memory. The sexualized, or particular sexual encounters, or the whole leading up to it is… sexuality is part of the relationship dynamic. There are all sorts of ways of being intimate with a partner that are not sexually intimate and they're emotionally intimate and probably more satisfying. If you look for those emotional supportive opportunities, those rewards out way the sexual gratification.

I – Or it could provide its own. Is there any particular conversation or moment or memory or story that demonstrates that emotional vulnerability?

J – On my part? Probably quite a few of them. So, I had a friend, only a friend. I known for a couple of decades. Our initial encounter – if I gave her name she'd probably kill me – but our initial encounter was in a classroom. She was doubling over in pain and I had no idea why. So, I offered my hand and said, "If you are in pain, take my hand." I don't know where I saw it, but we're now both doubling over in pain. She's squeezing the hell out of my hand and digging her

nail in it because she was having cramps. That was the initiation of our friendship. We've been these friends for this long period of time. Period. Of Time. [laughs] Play on words! I'll have to tell her about that. We talked about the sexual exploits. She's dated friends of mine. We talked about the stalker I had, the stalker she had. Literally stalker, people who wouldn't go away. But, we'd go through this thing where people were like, "you're not dating? You're not married? You never had sex? No, but we've had intimate moments. A lot of them. And we've had borderline sexual tension moments. It's insane. But our relationship is so rich and so full. It'd devalue it. You've gone back to the base intimacy that gets overridden with these other high-impact, emotional, supportive, moments.

I – I hear that, that also seems like it goes back what you've saying about all of these other stories. That, to accept the baseline or this fixed standard of what it means to be this, that, or the other, or to perform this, that, or the other, really does devalue who you are, but it also devalues the dynamic, and affects how you engage other people. So, to simply transform something like a relationship into a sexual relationship because you had sex, devalues exactly how profound the emotional relationship was. It detracts away from its openness and vastness.

J – so, that relationship has never gone sexual and we've never dated, never married. I think we swam around the pool one time. She was like "We should move out together and go to another state. But, if we do that we would end up having sex." And later my adult mind was like, "Man, I could've done this." But the relationship to me was more expansive than that. To that same point you were making, though, very unique as I had gotten older.

      Hate to admit it, though, there are relationships that I have had that only want to be defined by the sex. I had one girlfriend who re-interjected herself into my life. I told her "I value you as a friend." We had great sex and a great relationship and there were a lot of highs and lows for that various reasons. But, I told her "I don't know if I can be in that type of relationship." Because it had caused a lot of problems. The sex… it was what was gluing it together, but it had a lot of challenges. And she was like "If we were going to have a relationship, we have to have sex." "Like even if it's just a friendship?" "We still got to have sex." What? That doesn't make any sense, I never had a friendship where I had to have sex. So, but my social work curiosity is now like, "let's talk about that. Let's figure out why this has to be a component." For whatever reason, she kept going back to the sexual thing. And I'm like "We can't have sex." "Well, let me give you a goodbye blow job." What? [laughs]

I – Yeah, it's like what part of the conversation did you miss?

J – At what point did this… like, who did you get your counsel from? This is the same person by the way who wouldn't want to watch rated-R movie because it was too gory. So, like, where did the hypersexuality come from? There's this being defined by one's perception. This is the same ex who thought I was gay. Like, you thought I was gay, but why would you want to continue to have sex with me if you if you thought I was gay, and now you want to give me a goodbye blow job? You can redact that if you want. Oral sex.

I – The things I've had in these transcriptions… you're fine.

J – But it floors me. But this is the range of humanity. When... in my mind, I go "different strokes for different folks" She's not an outlier in that she has this desire. Maybe the sex is a good memory and she's trying to recreate that. I can rationalize that. But at some point, you have to stop rationalizing. Like, I'm not giving you therapy or anything, you know what I mean?

I – So, what I'm wondering now…

J – May I finish this for a second? I think maybe my fluidity has created opportunities and has also created for me some of the struggle. Like people think you're just open to having these conversations. People will just engage you and continue to push.

I – Because there's no perceived sense of a boundary at that point. And if there is, the spectrum is so far and wide that it's not visible.

J – You just accept me. Which I do, but at a distance.

I – Do you feel a though race has played a role in how you experience your sexuality, or sexuality in general?

J – Yes. I think I've been approached by people who have this exoticizing…. I used to have dreads like yourself. And in college, undergrad, I think there are a lot of people who like to experiment. And I'm like oh no, I have a daughter already. I've had gay male friends approach me. I've had a lesbian couple, partnered, and they said, "If we were straight again, you'd be the kind of guy…" and I took that as a very high compliment. Like you value me, okay that's great. What does that mean? We were older, so I didn't think it was a type of fly-by-night conversation, I thought they really took some deep thought into it. I think there have been people… I think we're all curious about what other cultures are like. I think we're curious about what other people are like. And I think there's natural curiosity, like children, that's innocent where you're like "I want to know." "I want to touch your hair." Like okay, you can't pet me, but I can understand and appreciate your curiosity. I think I dated a young Irish… Irish-Italian. My first experience of blatant racism is that I went to her house and her brother came out of his room and said, "get this nigger out." And I looked around like, "You see a nigger here?" And he didn't come close to me either. And he went about his way. So, I think people's perceptions about the role a man has to play… I think my encounters with women of color has not always been that… there's been a difference in what those anticipate pieces were. By that I mean, I do think that I've had experience where White girls thought I'd be some overly aggressive kind of… and I'm "What does that mean? I don't understand" and I've had some women who wanted to call me all sorts of bitches and sluts and I'm like, "that's not my character. I can play the role, but it's not…"

I – It's not you. No active motion.

J – [laughs] "You dirty girl, give me some safe words on the wall." But, scripted. So, I think there's some pieces where I've been exoticized based on what people perceive men of color of doing or should do. You know what, I think I've played into that role at times. Like of course this is what is expected of me. Like I'm supposed to be a rap star. I'm supposed to be a gangster. I'm supposed to droop my pants. You do consume some of the stuff and you play it out in your mind and you

play it out. And sometimes it can become a part of your authentic repertoire of self. And I think…
I do think in my own mind, I've consciously chosen to date women of color… maybe because I've
found them to be the most beautiful women on the planet. It's gone back to this concept of Black
people being all inclusive. We know that White people come from Black people because if you
take away all of the color, you get down to White. You strip away from Black to get it. You add
to get to Black. Black is the mixture of everything together and then you pull away. You get purple
and these others… chartreuse, paisley… you know over time. So, we're on all a spectrum, just
parts of the spectrum, but we're also colors. So, I just… the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.
I've dated women so brown, it's just beautiful ass women. That's the been the majority of my
dating experience. My affinity for women of color. Black women of color. Although, I will say
that I'm surprised, beyond my wildest dreams, I walked into a store and saw this Black woman.
So Black I've never seen a woman this Black. I felt, and this is when I had a transcendental… like
I thought, this is what White people must feel like seeing a Black person for the first time. Like, it
blew my mind. She blew my mind. Being in her presence blew my mind. And that wasn't like, I
was ashamed. I wasn't mad. I wasn't angry. I was just curious. Like a child. Not like, can I touch
and rub it off. Like, wow I've never seen a person so Black and so beautiful. Flawless skin. She's
not a blemish. How can you blemish that? Even your pimples match your skin [laughs]. There's
no contrast to that. As a light-skinned Black guy, I'm like, I got fifteen…

I – everyone sees everything. [laughs] but even in the ways you've played into the associations
that come with being a Black man and how that made you play a role in your sexuality, it seems
as though over time, you accept the fact that people exoticize you…it seems like it's easy for you
to slip out of that. And those aren't the defining moments.

J – I think I realize… the moments when I've handled exoticizing has been the times when I'm
not with people of color. People of color, Black women or anyone… it's like you're my brother or
my cousin. Or I like you because you're yella, or I like my coffee like your skin tone. Well, I say,
I like my coffee like your skin one. Chocolate. I like vanilla. But I like the chocolate first. It's like
matter of preference. You like chocolate, you like vanilla, or you like it all. But you like something
first. Maybe you like light-skinned people with freckles. Or with sprinkles. Isn't it about the quality
overall? I think that's why I've been blessed with this experience. Quality people all around the
world. I have a brother, speaking of class issues, we had an exchange student from Spain when
were younger, and I have a brother from Spain, "hermano blanco" my White brother. Went to
Spain, but their whole group when they came over, they wanted to go to the Black churches. They
wanted to have this experience. And I get it. Come on, why not. When I go over there, I plan on
going to your cathedral. Or wherever. But that's the appreciation of the learning of each you, you
know? I'm taking this experience and learning it and not demonizing you and embracing what I
can. And acknowledging what I can. And asking about what I can. If those honest conversations
can happen, those things can change. Especially to men when it comes to race and sexuality and
gender. Black men have a range. And this perception that Black men are these tough, brutish, kind
of monolith comes out of fear. Comes out of a perception that media perpetuates, and people buy
into. But it's also a survival skill. When the man is silent, a man of few words. Maybe he's
intimidated by the language in the room, or maybe he's like "I don't want to say anything to these
foolish people." And that's wisdom. Wisdom speaks in silence. My hope is that: A. people of
color, Black people, Black men, get to honor themselves in their range. Yes, we have people in
jail, and we have violence in our community. Yes, we have made bad choices. Yes, yes, yes, yes…

and. It's like that both/and. But, when you only want to tell me I'm this, then my little Black boys can't see me, or my little Black girls can't see me as anything better for them. And then the lies that the White community is telling them about themselves, they're not holding a mirror to themselves and going "We can't do any better in our community." Because if you're looking at me at the all-sinner, all-evil, you're leaving yourself vulnerable to tackling your own community. We know statistically, all statistics and all the cops and all of the lawyers all know that, people of color attack people of color in close proximity to them, and White people to the same to those they're in close proximity to. Let's talk about the real statistic about who is hurting who and why they're hurting them and let's get to the root to that. Because the honest conversations protect our lives. Help us move forward and help us have a fuller life and a range of life.

I – So I hope you don't mind if I keep you for five more minutes. I know we definitely went over. I just have one more question for you and you've already answered this in so many different ways. But the last question and something I've been thinking about with my dissertation to, kind of like, give it an addition purpose. Do you think sexuality can be empowering?

J – Absolutely. I think because sexuality is a universal, sex itself is universal of all creatures, and sexuality can be… it can be a conversation that you're having verbally, physically, emotionally, it's like the wind. It's an undercurrent that's a torrent. everyone sees the tornado, but you don't always see the breeze. You see it on the trees, right? It can be something that flavor and move things. You have to think about all of the sexual revolution and sexual movements when it came to the gay community. What was the place in New York…? If one embraces their sexuality, they embrace themselves. Spirituality is another part of that. Self-love is the beginning of loving others, when you can say that… when I think about the worse sexual scenarios that I have ever heard of, it's frightening right? You're violating people's rights and thing that aren't legal, but not even illegal, because things that aren't legal now aren't legal now. When you're at the risk of self-abuse, those stick out to me to as way out there and it has to be something to be talked about, because there are undercurrents of something else happening. That's my over-intellectualizing. I think that accepting one's self as a sexual being and sexy healthy behavior and healthy conversations is beginning to embrace your own humanity. It's a part of our song. Whether it's in our music or our food or family behaviors. My daughter is 23 now. And it's oh I know what you're doing. "Dad I don't want to talk about that." You're an adult, I found the condoms in your room. How about you don't put the condoms in my house. Like how do you think you got here? Because at some point, that uncomfortable conversation had to be had. I have to embrace it as a father that my daughter is sexual being. Now, do I want to embrace if it happened as a teenager, or a mid-teenager, or as an adult? At someone point, when you give them away in marriage, if you give them away in marriage, there's a sexual component to that. It should be a part of empowerment and embracing of existing. We teach kids that cats and dogs do… so I think it can be empowering. I also think the inverse is so. People have used sexuality as a weapon, they've used their ability to procreate as a weapon. And as a control mechanism and as a…

I – It's the dialectic of empowering. Where empowerment can be enlightening, it can be fulfilling, and it can be reinvigorating or invigorating. It can also be oppressive.

J – The walk of shame after an encounter. Do I really want to own this? Do I really want to do this? Such an interesting point for me. You can willfully engage in the action at the moment of

completion… it can be emotion encounter, too. Not just sex. And still feel shame. Betrayal. You'd have to feel the inverse of that. So, it can have such a speak and downward spiral at the same time. Because we have loaded it with such stuff. It shouldn't be the atomic bomb in people's lives. It should be a small skirmish if you will. It doesn't have to be a full-fledged war. Especially if it's a war we repeat frequently. At some point, it becomes how do we embrace that sexuality is for all, and it has a time and place. No way that pre-schooler or elementary school kids should be doing things on buses. They should be enjoying colors and my little pony and transformers and video games. Let's take that out of their hands. But it seeps into our conversations about food, about selling cars, about real estate. Kids can't avoid it. So, in some ways we have… and I don't want to normalize it because people are so desensitized to it that people are like meh… because it should be something important. But yeah, sexuality… it's such a big part of existence and we try to capture it small ways that, to me, it doesn't do it justice to who we are as the speaking, talking, creating human beings that we are. It's almost like an end to the idea that human beings are the only creations on the planet that find new ways to kill themselves. Like, oh a new bomb, or a new bomb. We're finding new ways to enjoy sexuality but also to destroy it the goodness about sexuality. Being able to feel oneself, there's nothing wrong with that. But being able to kill yourself? Fancy new ways. Why? At some point stop.

BRANDON

Interviewer – Just say a little about yourself, say a little bit about how you identify, what you do, stuff like that.

Brandon – So, like my job and stuff.

I – Yeah.

B – Well, I'm the type of guy that is about his family for sure. That's number one. Family is most important. Of course, I'm in sales. I'm handling my business. Getting out there, chasing the sale, all of the good stuff. But, more importantly, I like to relax, chill, I'm mellow, I'm nice. Unless, you know… I don't gotta be[laughs]. Unless you fucking my shit up, but….

I – Profanity is not an issue [laughs].

B – So, I would say, the way I view life is you gotta cherish everyday period, especially being an African-American man, the stuff that is going on nowadays, it's going to raise a red flag for you, regardless of what side you're thinking about. So, if you're somebody, if you're a White American, and you think, "Oh, Black people deserve this," or "BLM is cool," at the end of the day it doesn't matter if you're Black or White, but to me? My goal? I mind my motherfucking business. [laughs] You know what I'm saying. I'm all for my race, but my household is what is most important. I'm all for my brothers and sisters, but this most important to me. I'm all for every nationality, but for me right now? What's going on is, everyone needs to mind their motherfucking business. If you get your ass up, you go to work, you do your thing, you go the fuck home.

I – [laughs] So you're saying, first and foremost, a premiere part of your identity, even a general sense, not necessary as an African-American man, but also as a person [B – As a human being] in general is the fact that you're a family man first. You consider your partner, you consider your child, you consider your family first and foremost. And, you respect other people and their spaces along the way, but for the most part it's you. It's you and your family. So, what does being a Black man mean to you?

B – It means the absolute world. I wouldn't want to be any other race. I wouldn't want to be White, you Indian, I just want to be Black where it's at. And when people see Black people in general, some people may look at you and think you're a thug or that you're broke, or struggling, or however you carry yourself. People get the wrong impression. And you ask yourself as a Black man, "Do I blame them?" And that just goes back to me saying… "guess what? I don't give a fuck anyway." But, I think I wouldn't change it for the world. You might have people out there that hate Black people, I don't give a shit. You wanna know why I don't know? Because I'm minding my own fucking business. You can do whatever you wanna do, I don't give a fuck. You can go say nigger, you can go say coon, fucking hangs all Black people, as long as you don't hang in my realm, we're good to go. As long as you stay away from me, you'll be good to go. Stay in your life because even though you were racist or whatever, they have families too, and they may not grow up like that. So, you can't deprive someone of their parents because of how their parents are. I don't judge nobody, if you're a dick, you're a dick. But, being a Black man, I wouldn't change it

for the world. I think, to me, it shows… it gives you an opportunity to kind of prove people wrong, and it really… not change your identity, but how people view your race as a whole. Because, a lot of people say, "Black people they go around doing this or that" but, White people, they're just as fucking crazy. You know what I'm saying? You got your serial killers, they're all White, you got mother fuckers eating people. What, was he White? You know? What the fuck, people are crazy. But, you know, White people are crazy in their own way, Black people are crazy in their own way, everybody has their own bit of crazy, it's just how you view it. If someone is White, they just have more they can say about me because of how we're stereotyped. But, fuck what they think, I love being black. Wouldn't change it.

I – You're going to do you.

B – I'm going to do me regardless, you know? Do what you want, that' fine. It's not going to change the fact I'm trying to get more money than you, I'm out doing my thing. Mind your fucking business. Stay out of my shit. `

I –What I really like about you said is that there can be a long history or stereotypes or bad images of Black people or Black men in general that maybe compound with you by association, but you do everything you can to overcome that or to rise about it. To provide a different or better example for your race. But, also something that is true to you. Do you have any examples or stories that come to mind that exemplify that idea?

B – I got a lot. One in particular, let's say a job interview. I come in, and I'm 6'2, 230, Black dude. Your first thing you may think is, "Who the fuck is this guy?" But I go in, "My name is Brandon." Blah blah blah. That first impression is how you change someone's thinking. So, I feel like that first impression is key and if you can change the way someone thinks by the first impression, the rest of the conversation can go your way. I'm just using an interview as an example, but a real-life example let me think… So, the eyeglass store? So, I'm at the eyeglass store, I'm sitting there and a White couple walks in and they're like "We're looking for glasses." I'm like "Yeah, I can definitely help you." "Do you take our insurance?" "Yeah I take your insurance. No problem I can check. I'll see how it covers…" blah blah blah. And they're looking around and say, "This is a pretty wonderful place, but who is your manager?" So, I stop right there.

I – That's a fascinating question!

B – Like, why can't I be the fucking manager? You don't know who I am? I can't own it? So, I go, "Oh no, I don't have a manager. I'm actually the owner." And they're like "Oh really?" "yeah, from when I checked, I'm the owner."

I – Look at all these documents, look at all of these papers, my name is on them on.

B – Like, when I last checked, I owned this mother fucker. You just bought glasses off of a Black man. But, I was like "Yeah I'm the owner with a partner of mine. We're co-owners together and he's another African-American. So, we started this out the trunk of our cars and came up this way…" and they were so amazed by me doing it. I don't think they'd be as amazed by a White guy, you know? I think that my initial reaction after they said "Really?" could've gone one of two

ways. I could've said "What the fuck do you mean? Get out?" but I walked them through and it gave them another view of me. And now they always come back.

I – What motivated you to go one route as opposed to the other?

B – Just who I am. What was that going to accomplish, saying "fuck you" or "get out?" What would that accomplish? I'm trying to get their money in my pocket, that's number one, number two, how could I change how someone views me? And that's how someone does it? I don't write everyone off as racist, they're just ignorant. They don't understand.

I – You're saying they could say something that could be interpreted that way, but sometimes they don't know.

B – She may have honestly just been shocked that I owned the store. I can't just say "oh fuck you." She may have really just been shocked because it's a beautiful store and they kept saying it. They were very respectful, but that did hit me like "Oh yeah, what are you talking about?" Then now, they're repeat customers and they're the sweetest people in the world. I think this goes on both ends. If White people can change how we view them, and we can change how they view us, everything could be much better, and it's all about how you view someone. I could see someone walking down the street and I might say, "they're probably racist as fuck." But, how would I know, I don't know them? You know what I mean? They could be thinking "Oh, he wants to rob someone." But I don't wanna rob anyone. I don't want to look at you walking down the street, god knows if you call 911 and say a brother is walking up down the street and he looks wild, they're gonna shoot my Black ass. I'm cool. But, you have to know which routes to take based off of your goals. It might be going off, but when I say that, my goals… back then I didn't have my son, but I knew I wanted to get to a place in my life where I could be making six figures by 30, I'll be out of debt by 31 and it all starts by changing your attitude, so I could try to change you, but I have to change me first. Because you need to be able to see the change in me in order to affect you. So, what motivated that were my goals, like I wanted something this way, and this is how I fucking do it. But, the first I'm gonna take is changing me and that's it. It's hard for the majority to disrespect someone that's respectful. People do it, though, don't get it twisted. It happens, but it's tough. If you came to my house and you were like "hey, how you're doing" and I just said, "fuck you" and you just kept going "Oh, sorry about that, I just want to talk to you", after a while, I'm just gonna be like "look, man, sorry" I think what motivated me to take one route as opposed to the other, is just the goals you put in place. It's the road you plan on taking. The goals can really help your actions and how you conduct yourself. I'm at the point now where I don't even think much about it. Now, no one is going to come up to my face and call me a nigger, that's not going to fucking happen. But, your goals can really help you make your decisions. We're human, people are going to hate you, what are you gonna do?

I – So, if you can give me permission to interpret what you're saying.

B – Of course! Say what you want to say.

I – I just want to make sure that I don't put words in your mouth. But it seems like the central tenets to your identity as a Black man is not just to strengthen your own goals and your own

trajectory, but to also see how you can change other people's views of Black men based on how you change and view yourself. That would be an essential part to who you are. You say that being a Black man is all about overcoming challenges and solidifying your foundation and also being someone who is able to provide new and maturing experiences for people. But, also being challenging, too. You don't want to box someone out because they don't know that something is insulting, but you also want to teach people through being a premiere example of being a Black man. Do you see that factoring in to you becoming a family man and raising a kid?

B – They work hand in hand really. Now, what I do, he watches. So, this is a young Black man in the making and what he has to understand is that there are people who are just not going to like you because of the way you look, the way you talk, act. And they may not necessarily be racist. They can probably be another black person. So, you have to teach them both sides of the fence. So, there are White people, Jewish people, Chinese, Japanese, they may not like Black people. But that's life, you gotta move through. Stay away from it. There are gonna be people who love you and they have no problem with anyone. But I feel like the things that are going on today, I have to act a certain way because it affects him, it affects the family life. It's not about me. You have to sacrifice how you act and what you want so your kids have a good influence or, so you can be the influence. So, I think that way I act and being that family man, it affects the household. You gotta know how to carry yourself. I may be dropping a lot of f-bombs now. I would never do this if we were on stage talking. But, you can show this to your class, I don't give a shit, they can hear it real. This is the real. These are good questions, because they make me think, what else do I have to critique in order to make sure he can comprehend what is right, what's wrong, when to say something, when not to say something. That's crucial. So, the change in… I think, me and my wife are the most influential people, so I can't just be doing anything and saying anything, I need to know that when I'm around him, I'm good, I need to make sure it's positive.

I – Are there any key things you want to teach him about being a Black man?

B – Yeah, as far as being a Black man, I think the things I want to teach him is respect. You have to show respect. Because, being a Black man, your word is your bond. Your word is your word. I have to show you how to respect not just Black people but, White people. The other thing I have to teach about respect is being taken for granted. Making sure that no one mistakes your kindness for a weakness, that's when you turn on it. Don't, if someone disrespects you, say "Oh, man, it's cool." Respect is key. Give someone a reason to respect you, don't give someone a reason to disrespect you. You don't want to initiate that shit, but I think a very thing is something I didn't take seriously is school. I didn't give a fuck. I went to school for business management, that shit isn't very hard. But, you really need to try to hit this shit hard because the motherfuckers that know this shit… look, it sucks to say, but these White people got school down. Because their parents know… their dad might be rich. You might have money and they go and say, "go ahead, make money." They're not going to go live poor as fuck, they're gonna get this money. Some mother fuckers be fucked up, money isn't everything, but I think knowledge is crucial to us. Don't get caught up in this bullshit, all of this fuckery all of the dumb ass shit that human race alone, not just Black people, but White got dumb ass shit, too. I really gotta teach him how to stand on his own two to try and instill some sort of independence.

I – Instill fundamental skills that he can build upon on his own, some initial examples that he can build upon on his own. At the same time, teaching him that when the time comes he can be on his own. And emphasizing a perspective on education is one of his premiere values.

B – Independence is key man because there could be a time when I'm dead or not around and he's on his own and he has to be able to make the decisions on his toes. Like, I even have to tell my wife, when we're out I'm never really comfortable because the world is so fucked up. Someone may jump up with a gun at the movie theater, you may be at the mall doing some weird shit. Or you might see someone racist as fuck that wants to do harm to you. So, I have to teach him to also keep his head on the swivel. Because you never know. Like, when we go outside and walk around the street, this is a nice little neighborhood. It's nice as hell. I still get nervous. I still got the same friends I have since I was three. So, always keep the head on the swivel. Because you never know who is gunning for you. And this is the biggest thing that he needs to know being a black man, and it's fucked up, but I have to teach him what he needs to do when he gets pulled over. And that's fucked up.

I – Yeah. The rules are not the same.

B – They're not the same for us and everyone is trying to sugar coat. If you get pulled over and you're Black, there's a risk that they're going to blow your fucking head off. You know?

I – You've been pulled over before.

B – Have I? I've been pulled over, yanked out, patted down. I've had a cop ask me where the AK-47s were. I said, "What do you *mean*?"

I – When did that happen?

B – 4 years ago, 5 years ago. "Where the AK-47s?" They're up your fucking ass. I don't have no fucking AK-47s. You know, I'm broke and I'm in college. I don't got money for nothing. I barely have money to buy toilet paper and wipe my fucking ass let alone an AK-47.

I – You were at UPG. One of five Black people.

B – Yeah. UPG. One of five Black people the other one. That was it, we were just up there doing our thing. I've been pulled over so many, but I always tell my wife there are steps when you get pulled over as a Black man. You throw on your four-ways, both hands on the steering wheel. You put the car in park. Turn that off. Hit the window before he gets to the door. You ask if you can do anything. If he says, "License and registration" you say, "Yes sir, it's in my glove compartment, may I go and get it?" If he is feeling funny, say "would you feel more comfortable getting it yourself?" You ain't blowing my fucking head off because you're a bitch and you're scared. Or you're trigger happy. Or you don't like Black people. Or you're a fucking weirdo. Like, he has to know that, and I hate that I have it to him.

I – I mean, you remind me of the times when… I've been pulled over 3 times for very similar reasons, I remember the first time I was ever pulled over it was the scariest thing ever. But they

treated me like… it was after my dad's funeral, too, it was the first time and they were… just because of how I was dressed for some reason they thought that I was not only drug dealer, but a successful drug dealer, that I knew a bunch of stuff and shit was about to go down and they treated me accordingly. And I did nothing, but the two times afterwards, I was dating these women and they were both White and the way they treated me was completely different. Seeing them.

B – Bro, I almost thought about just driving around with a White girl. Just to see, but they'll definitely treat you a little different. As a Black dude, I try to play devil's advocate just to see what these mother fuckers are thinking too. So, like, if I'm White, walking up to this car, and this Black dude is in the car, and I'm already thinking you're already stereotyping me, what are they going to do? They're going to put their hand on their gun, they're gonna look in your car, hey what's going on. If I'm looking in someone's car, you start fidgeting, I'm gonna point that out, too. "What the fuck are you fidgeting for?" You know what I mean? I try to put myself as an asshole White guy and think what he would do. So, I make sure to not do any of the weird shit. Even… me and her got pulled over three months ago and he walked right up to the car with his hand on his gun. And I'm like "sir, you good?" "yeah, we're good." Little does he know, I'm dressed, I'm suited down on the way to work. I have a suit on, she got her dress clothes on, obviously I'm dropping her off at work. And clearly, he's seen what was going on, so he eased up off his gun, and he's like "Oh, okay, what's going on?" He let us go. "He said hey, just take your time, don't roll through yellow lights like that. There's a school down here and I don't want anyone getting hurt." And I'm like "Oh okay, have a good day officer." Now, what that might've did for him is say "Hey, every black dude I pull over isn't an asshole and going to shoot me," and what he did for me was "Not every White cop is going to blow my fucking head off." But, it's up to me to try and control the situation by my actions. Now, can you stop a cop that's a straight dick? No. there's nothing you can do if you're doing the right thing. You know? But, like those key things we talked about, he's going to have to deal with that. He's going to have to understand, I can control as much as I can. And if a cop wants to be a little off and say I have something that I don't, and grooving and doing this and that, and he shoots me, pray to God I survive. Key factors and we'll go over them again. Learning independence, gotta teach him how to get pulled over….

I – But for you, it really sounds like you're trying to set examples for him, but you're also trying to set examples for other people. So even though it's kind of painful to know that whenever you encounter law enforcement there are ways you should act, but you're trying to show, not just by showing him but by showing law enforcement like, every encounter with a black person is not a threat.

B – Yeah, because we don't want to deal with those mother fuckers. We're more scared of them than they are of us, because we don't want to deal with the cops. Man, stay away from me. And I wish, man, if this could be on CNN, I'd tell em, people say fuck the police, but, yall mother fuckers, they have to take responsibility for the shit they're doing. And it always seems like, they jump the gun, like, why can't you at least taser them. just taser them. I'll go down if you taser me, shit that shit hurts like hell. If you tase my ass, I'll be a fish out of water. Everyone is. But, you know, I feel like, they now, feel like there's a target on their back. Everyone is on edge, that's why I mind my business. That's my main thing. That's why I go out and have a little bit of fun, my wife and I go out, have fun, get something to eat, take the baby out, have some fun.

I – The fact that you have a kid gives you a different focus. So, going along to the other questions, keeping all of those things in mind, and this may sound like a completely unrelated question, but what does sexuality mean to you as a black man?

B – Bro, I'll tell you right now.

I – Okay. Please, by all means tell me.

B – I think that Black man is the most sought-after piece of meat out here. Believe that. So yeah, it's a beautiful thing. I think the reason why the black man is desired the most is because we can throw it down the best. And I think that uh… you know, I'm not hating on the White boys out there! [laughs] There are some White guys that can do their thing. I bet there is.

I – How do you know?

B – I don't know! But, I'm just not trying to hate. I think that it's uh… the reason why I think that we're desired is because White girls always looking for a brother. You know. They love a brother. I feel like we feel exotic to them. I think like a Black man and sexuality, we don't care. We're not scared to fuck with a White girl or a Spanish girl, or… ooh we don't want a Spanish girl [laughs]. We're very open. There's no boundaries. I feel like us being free enough to do that gives us a lot more diversity and aside from the sex, I feel like we can have some fun. We're not easily embarrassed when it comes to sexuality. What I mean by that is I'm not scared to, maybe go take out this White girl and go, "this is my woman, this is me, I'm not afraid to love, I care for her, so I take care of… and in sexuality, it doesn't' always gotta be fucking. It can be the foreplay before that, it can be an all-day thing. You can wake up in the morning, give her a little kiss on the cheek, tell her "I'll be home later," come back later, bring some flowers and get something to eat. That whole time, you might be getting her wet you know what I'm saying? That whole time she may be saying, "I'm going to break him off tonight." I feel like the black man's sexuality, it's not a 15-minute foreplay thing. It's an all-day thing. We try to get creative.

I – But it sounds like you're saying that for Black men, sexuality, for it to be an all-day thing means it's not about sex in and of itself, but it's also about the certain things you do and around that. Not only just openly going out and dating someone but doing things you may identify as romantic. You know, it could mean sex, it could not be. But you're saying… when you say all-day, I'm thinking everything that constitutes a romantic thing.

B – I know exactly what you mean. Let's take it from the top. Let's take it from the top. I wake up in the morning, I might be rushing on my way to work. But let's say I cook some breakfast, you know, oh that's nice. You're trying to build your web to get her in your web, you know what I'm saying? You shoot her a text, "Oh how's your day going, you make it to work on time? Cool." Talk to her a little bit after work, it's like "oh, let's get something to eat." I'm hungry, and maybe we'll go somewhere fancy somewhere nice, have a nice conversation. You know, the black man knows how to infiltrate a woman, so, what do women like? They like the conversation, they like when you pay attention to them, so you do those little things and then maybe towards the end of the night, you slide in like… what's up for later? And they're already down, they know they're gonna give up. But, it's an all-day thing. Another good thing about it is, if it's time to go, we're

like, what's up? We're gonna get it on, we're gonna throw down, not taking no for an answer. That's what I don't get. If a woman's beautiful, she's beautiful. If I'm racist, and I see a White girl walking around and I'm like damn she looks good, what? Am I gonna go "Oh fuck her, she's White?" Pfft. That's fucking gay. Now I'm starting to think racist people are gay. And there's nothing wrong with being gay. If someone's gay, they're gay. That's their business. I'm just gonna mind my business. If you're gay, you're gay that's your business. But all women are beautiful. You can find the beautify in any woman, Chinese, Japanese, it don't matter. And that's what I think is a Black man's angle. If you look good, you look good.

I – So it sounds like you're saying that Black men have the space to be as sexually expressive as possible. Whatever that means. And for you, that means not just sex, but it means anywhere between checking and communication, and also doing these really small… make you breakfast, checking in on someone's day, seeing what you can do in between… and then, you know, once that comes into play, there you go, cool!

B – I won. I nailed it. And listen, some people, some girls may just want you to tell them what you're going to do to them. You know, so hey I can do that too. I think that, what being a Black man, with the sexuality thing, it ties into versatility. You're versatile with it. You adapt to it.

I – What do you think allows men that unrestricted expression nature.

B – the restriction we have from all the racism and hate and all of that shit. It's like, oh we can do what we want now? I'm good, I'm gonna talk to little Betty Sue down the street. I'm good! You know, so all of those years of racism, Whites only water fountain, I can't talk to you or touch a White girl or touch this person because, even our race don't accept it. If a Black girl, if she says a Black dude with a White girl, she's all of a sudden acting funny, like oh fuck her. But we don't care, and I think it's because of that restriction from the past. And Black people we like to go up against stuff we aren't supposed to do. So, talk to a White girl, whatever kind of girl, it doesn't matter, I feel like it's because of that restriction from the past.

I – So, there's this long racial history of segregation and discrimination and isolation, and all of a sudden, at least in terms of sexuality, we're given this arena to be who we are, whoever we want to be, and it's like… since we can do whatever, we can do whatever we want with it and call it a day. So, you can answer this question if you want, you don't have to if you don't want, but do you have any examples that pop into mind for you personally that demonstrate or exemplify your perspectives on Black sexuality.

B – Yeah. Me myself, I never really dated a White girl, because I fell into that dumbass bucket of 'why you dating a White girl.' Now, that I'm older, there's nothing wrong with it. If you like someone you like someone, you can even take into consideration, you can use my wife for example. You know, when I first met her she didn't like me. She thought I was a regular old little nigga, little Black dude. I don't blame her. I expected it. What I did, was… my first impression, it probably changed her thinking. I came at her a certain way. First time I met her, I said Hi and walked away. I talked to her for a quick second. Then, days couple days went by I've seen her again, "Oh hey how you doing? All right all right cool, nice to see you again." Walked. I just kept throwing little jabs out there. Just the little stuff we were talking about, just little jabs, little jabs,

got her number. Then, I would just walk her to class, carry her book bag, all of that little shit. I did that, and then… two months in…

I – How long before you guys dated?

B – About four months. So, the thing about it is, and I'm not saying that because I think I'm smooth. I'm saying that because I plugged away and did the little things and after that, she was comfortable enough to say, "this dude, he's all right." It's all part of sexuality, because there was an attraction there, I knew I was trying to get some, she knew I was trying to get some, she made me work for it. Now look what we got, we got a one-year old. [laughs] So, I think that, if you want another one. I can't give one, it's a little vulgar. I won't say it. I think the example I gave you with her, it's probably my best one, I really did put in work as far as wanting her. I just played it to how I rock. And, how I plugged away, all of the little things that played a part in getting her and I still have to do that to keep her.

I – Do you feel like your idea of how this image of Black sexuality and Black prowess factored into how you approached her or thought about yourself in how you approached her?

B – I don't know, that's a good question. I mean, yeah. Because I mean, as a black man, who doesn't mimic our culture? I thought I was smooth. I'm not scared to talk to a female. I'm not afraid to go up and talk to anymore, especially a female. I'm going to say what's up, especially if I'm attracted to you. Like the Black culture, prowess, all of the stuff. I think it added to it. When you're Black, there's an ego, you always think you have swagger. You got your blazer, you got the light browns on, come on. But you got to think about it, Black culture is the best culture. people try to mimic our culture, it's cool, we got swagger. They use our words. They try to use our styles, I bet you someone is going to try and take that word and be like on "the light browns on." And it'll be a White boy. I'm very open to them using our shit, that lets me know I'm some type of influence.

I – They have value.

B – Of course. I think a lot of that played a part in getting her and getting to where we're at today. A lot of growth.

I – Do you feel like that factors into how you express yourself now in the same way?

B – Yeah, I value her well-being. I want to protect her and make sure she's cool. You know, I try to do everything I can for them, and I think all of the work that was put in before, led up to day and I value that. It wasn't a cake walk, we've been through ups and downs and all of that shit so yeah, it plays a factor for sure. I think so.

I – So, the last question I have for you then, do you feel like Black sexuality as it was described can be empowering?

B – Yeah.

I – In what way?

318

B – I think by our actions and the way I explain sexuality, it's not all fucking. It's sexuality, it can be your swagger, the way you carry yourself, what makes you want to fuck a girl? Oh, damn she looks good. Or, she can carry herself well. Damn, she got swagger. What makes a girl want to fuck a guy? She may think he's attractive, he got this, he got that, he knows how to carry himself. Could be the same factors. So, you know, being smooth initially can fuck you or it can help you. You can be a smooth dick head and it'll fuck you, but you can be smooth and respectful person, White or black, when it comes to sexuality, you can get what you want. But I think sexuality is not just fucking, it's a whole bunch of different things. So, I think that, for Black people, we have advantage for sure, like, I'm sure when your fiancée seen you she was like "ooh damn, who's that brother over there."

I – Oh no, she hated me.

B – Well there we go. Fuck. Same shit, but, I mean, think about it. Think about how far we've come in general and the development we've made and when you talk about sexuality as something that we learn probably we watched a lot of music videos… you know, you can go that route. When I used to watch… what was it on BET? *Uncut*! You remember *Uncut?* I used to love *Uncut*. But see, that's another form of sexuality, you can take it a certain way. But, another form of sexuality is the reason why we think we're smooth and we can get bitches is because we throw on "Tip Drill" and make them twerk. I mean it does play into a factor of that, you just need to learn how to control that shit.

I – it sounds like for sexuality to be empowering it, it's a lot more diverse than sexual practice. It can be that, or it can be your demeanor, or be the small things like how you respect someone, like sexual empowerment requires diversity in order for it to be so. So, I'm not sure if there are any other things that come into mind for you, or anything else you want to add or include.

B – I would say, all in all, that being a young Black man, in today's world, all in all, it's kind of scary. I would say, and I'm not saying I'm a scared little bitch, but it's scary because if I do get pulled over and killed, I got life insurance and sure, but money isn't gonna bring me back and my son would have to grow up without a dad. That shit is scary. I don't care if a mother fucker creeps up on me with a gun, the thing that scares me is what would happen to my family. I think another thing is the change that the change that needs to be made in society about the perception of Black people is huge, too. It seems like as much as there's black advocates and marches and protests, it just feels like it's not getting nowhere. I fucking hate it. I want to see it get better and I feel like it's not. And then you sit there and think to yourself, oh well, how can I get involved, but taking care of the home front first. Teaching him how it needs to be and where it needs to be from. So, for me, that's my personal opinion, it starts at the crib.

I – I can get a sense of how parenthood transform how you think about sexuality and how you think about blackness and Black masculinity in general. I notice that a lot of things that come up are sort of the values you have to impart on him. And that's you, and I feel like there are a ton of values that we can touch on, but it feels like parenthood transforms how you think about sexuality as a whole.

319

B – it ain't about fucking now, I mean it might. AS a whole, though, it's different now, a lot different. I think that he will go through the same phases – want to get, want to get it – but when you find someone of value, you kind of change. When you find someone, you care about that's when it changes, that's you do the nice things, that's why you do the stuff to win them over.

I – Do you think you're going to let him go his own route and let him discover that for himself. Or do you think you'll try to impart the same things you've learned?

B – I don't know. It seems like he picks some things up pretty fast, and I think that I will try to school him in some aspects, because he has to hear something from me. But, if for the most part, do your thing. You like a girl, go talk to her, this is what you do. I'll let him get the bumps on his head with the rejection because that's gonna happen. I'll let him do him. He's gonna be a man someday. He may not be now, but one day he will be my age.

THEO

Interviewer – Just so my committee can get a sense of who you are, you don't have to share your name, but you can tell me what you do and how you do identify in terms of race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation and things like that.

Theo – Okay. I am a 26-year-old Black man.

I – Okay, do you identify as straight or…?

T – I identify as straight.

I – What do you do, what would you say your occupation is?

T – I'll be a sales manager, but right now I'm a sales associate. I'm also a bouncer at local bar at […] and I'm also an Uber driver, so I'm self-employed.

I – Yeah, you're kind of spread across many fields, then, at the moment.

T – Gotta try and get the money.

I – I understand that. The first question related to the subject matter that I wanted to ask you about is what does being a Black man mean to you?

T – That's a tough one! Being a Black male, in my terms, it means strength, a lot of strength. You may not see it, but also a lot of unity. Power. That's what I see being a Black male. Power, untapped potential that I'm trying to show to the world.

I – Can you say a little more in terms of what you mean by strength and power? What do they mean to you?

T – Strength and power, so education. Educated. As a far as straight up knowledge, I mean there's an area that's straight up physical but also mental. So, it's a presence of strength and power. When you walk into the room, you take the attention. Along that line.

I – So it sounds like for you, it really comes or derives themselves from a sort of confidence and holding yourself well. [T – Correct] It's not just being … it doesn't just come from physical strength or being imposing. It's just exuding a certain level of confidence. So, in what ways do you see those qualities influenced by being black.

T – You see it from the culture pretty much. And it doesn't just come from being a male, it comes from all Black people in general. There's strength to push beyond our means even though the odds are stacked against us. It's out culture to work hard. To achieve more. Because there's not a lot offered to us and we're under a microscope. So, we're always pushing forward to get what we need.

I – There's always that additional hurdle to overcome when it comes to blackness and being a Black person in general. There's always a challenge that you need to meet and astound to. DO you have any personal experiences you're willing to share where you feel like your sense of self as a strong, independent person exemplifies your identity?

T – I can give you a story. It actually involves football. You know I came into football as a 24-year-old man, I hadn't played since high school, and we had a year of training… coming to […] compete with kids six years younger than me in football, so in that I took it personally to compete. To show that I could compete at the level they can. Then I experienced I had a set back where I became ineligible because of grades, and I had to dig myself out of another hole. But, I was able to demonstrate to my coaches that I had enough, that I was tough, that I was… no matter what needed to be done, I was going to sacrifice to get it done, no matter if it was for myself or for my team. In that, I won the Mac Award which was for hard work, dedication, it's all voted on by the couches. You can honor that through my two years of football and school, it shows that people are always watching and the strength and the leadership you have.

I – Congratulations for that award, but that story also seems like it demonstrates how you were under a lot of scrutiny but how you overcame a lot of the challenges put before you, too.

T – The challenges we got to overcome regardless, and it's all a matter of how you face them, no matter if you're a superstar or a regular day person. It doesn't matter, everyone goes through the same thing.

I – In terms of Black masculinity and black manhood, are there any notably influences in your life that taught you what it meant to be a man, or what it meant to be a Black man.

T – My father and my cousin. My father was always there, he took me to games. He took me to my athletic sporting events, like baseball. Always there for my games. He showed me what it took to be a leader as well, because he's been working for corrections for almost 25, 30 years. So, he was able to touch people in a dark place, so that instilled in me that you gotta be a light in a dark place. It reflects that leadership he showed me on to other people. As well as, my cousin, he was a big influence in terms of me pushing forward in terms of education and sports. He went the same route, playing football in high school and then in college before he went off to start his own business. He was a big influence when I was younger because your dad, your dad is there. You're always going to look up to your father. But, there will be outside influences that shape you as a man. And I watched him, I worked with him, I trained with him, he was my trainer for me coming to football. But, every time I trained with him, it wasn't just training, it was life lessons. Every time I talked to him it wasn't always just football. So those two helped to shape me into being the man I am today. And also, my mother. She told me… my mother and my sister, they always look out for me and kept me in things that were good or allowed me to demonstrate my manhood. So, I was on my way to Buffalo, NY and there was no leader for my nieces 6th grade class, so I would go there and be a leader there. For boys, I would be their camp counselor. For a few days, or my mom at another school, I would be a vocation bible school teacher. I would touch kids that way and give light into their eyes. Give them a younger view of someone doing well. So that's what helped shape me.

I – it seems like for you, for one, that wasn't just taught to you by the men in your family. And it gave a lot of avenues to demonstrate that in a variety of ways. So, it wasn't just sports, it was also education, it was leadership, it was doing everything you can to be a mentor, too. So, it was just something that stood out to me. Is there anything you'd like to add to that?

T – That pretty much covers it. There's a bunch of examples I can think of and other people. Like community people or uncles, but we'll be here all day. There are a lot of stories.

I – Do you feel like your identity as a Black man or your race in general influence your relationships with other people outside of your family?

T – It definitely has.

I – In what way?

T – I really do think that being Black and being viewed in a positive light, by other races, is a plus. It changes their mind on how they view people, how they view black people. At the university, you meet a lot of people. White, Black, international, that they don't know a lot about each other. I mean, I grew up in the city, Pittsburgh, so we know a lot about… its diverse. But, you get a lot of people that come from small towns that only have three or four Black families. So, they only get to see Black people on the news, on TV, never really in person. So, in school or when I work at the local, I don't try to use my masculinity to intimidate people because my mom always told me... I'm always going to be a target because I'm bigger than most people. They want to try me no matter what. So, why not just try them with kindness instead of beef with them? So, the people of the 60s like MLK, they use their voice to touch people. So, that's what I try to do. So, they could see that this guy they could think "it's not black or White." Human change, you know. With some people, I do talk to them, I don't get into race wars instead of an understanding of each other. That's the way forward.

I – So for you, you said while your race or gender, with people seeing you as a Black guy and given the sense that you're super tall, at least compared to me, for one, you can identify that through those factors, some people may initial impressions of you. But, it also seems as though you do everything you can to treat them as respectably as they can and change their perspectives on you as much as you can and try to treat them as an equal as possible.

T – Yeah, it's the golden rule, man. Treat others as you want to be treated.

I – Do you have any notable examples of that?

T – Yeah, I can think of one. I had this one friend that I met in school in the first semester, he was in the Navy. I was just talking about this yesterday. And he… I'm not sure where he was from, but I'm pretty sure being in the Navy, you meet a lot of different people. But, we talked a lot, being the same age, so we had a connection from there. We were cool. Flashforward to this summer, one of his friends was also a Navy SEAL came to the bar… so I'm a bouncer, I had to check his ID, he had a little attitude. Pat comes in and I don't check his ID, I shake his hand, talk

to him a little bit, I don't check his ID, and he goes to the bar. He starts talking to the other guy and I guess someone in the bathroom heard him say that… "Hey, is that bouncer cool?" "Yeah, he's a good guy we're real cool." "okay, okay." So, I just changed that one person's perspective about me… I don't think he had a bad perspective about me, but Pat changed his perception of me, because we had a good relationship.

I – So, treating someone as an equal, treating someone cordially, allowed this narrative of yourself as a genuine person to be disseminated to other people, they learn about your efforts that you demonstrate for other people.

T – Yeah, pretty much.

I – If you want to add anything, stop me along the way. So, the next question I had for you is, what does sexuality mean to you?

T – I guess it means who you choose to love, I guess? That's the best way I can describe it. Or what gender you choose to love. That's a tough one, too. I've never been asked that question.

I – So, just tells me your personal thoughts about it. There's no right answer to it.

T – I guess it's what I said, then. Sexuality is who you choose to mate with. That's the best way I think about it. That's my best answer, man.

I – That's fine. So, sexuality for you is derived from, or based on, who you decide to love regardless of the race, gender, or ethnicity and so on.

T – Yeah, pretty much. You said something about ethnicity, I don't think ethnicity has anything to do with your sexuality. Well, I don't think it does. I do think it's a choice, I don't think you're born that way, I think it's a choice, but… my first roommate was gay, but he was younger, so I was like "I'm not sure…" I didn't question it. He told me. His cousin told me. But, we've never had any problems. He'll watch stuff that I'll watch, so… I do think it's a choice. I do think it's what your raised around. I think if a bunch, or a lot of women, are around you can come off more feminine. Not saying that you're gay, but I do think it's a choice. Certain things happen that drive you to that point.

I – Right, so you're saying that certain perspectives that people may hold may see sexuality as something you're born into, you feel as though sexuality is something that's more environmental and lived and influenced by the people around.

T – You're adapting to the environment you're around. And it's true, you see it all of the time, it's always about the company that you keep. I see people who are around the wrong crowd and they take on the wrong persona, even if they don't know it consciously, subconsciously it's going on whether it's positive or negative. You're going to adapt to what you're around.

I – So, how do you feel like your sexuality was cultivated in your family and culture?

T – How was it cultivated?

I – Yeah.

T – Um…That's a tough one, give me a little more clarification on what you mean.

I – Sure.

T – like, how it was shaped up?

I – Yeah. So, the way I took your response was... if I'm thinking about my own situation and experiences, the type of family dynamic I have, the friends that I have, the experience that I have, it influences different facets of my family. It influences how I look at myself as a man, it influences how I look at myself as Black man, and how I look at myself as a straight Black man. And I feel like there are key instances and experiences in my life that I can think of now that I associate with all of those different identities that I hold on to. So, I guess I'm wondering for you, how is your own experience cultivated or influenced or played a role in the development of your sexuality.

T – I think the biggest influences are my parents. Them being married and me seeing that all of the time. I always see my parents together. That right there. And then even when it came to my family as a whole, there was no… there wasn't any homosexuality. It was always one man and one woman. So that's how I grew up seeing things and to this day, it's the same way. That's the culture. Not saying that they're going to ban someone for being gay, but that's what we know, that's who we are. Like, there's no way around it. Your culture shapes you. Growing up, everything I'd seen was like that. My parent's friends, they didn't have gay friends. They had straight friends, man or wife, or single. I always around kids my age and my cousins always played… I had one boy cousin my age, we played together, we were tight. And then I had a cousin that was a tomboy, but we treated her like she was a girl. Even though she was a tomboy, we knew she was a girl. She had Barbie's, she played with Barbie's. I'd bring my ninja turtles and beat em up and leave. Stuff like that. So, for me, it was established. Growing up in the 90s that how it was. It's not like how it is now. That's what shaped me.

I – You're saying that just the fact that you grew up in a straight, heterosexual culture, the people you're with, seeing your mother and father together, seeing how boys and girls interact, it's what you're exposed to the factors into how things developed, and it seems like there's a lot more exposure to different ways of sexuality that could play a role in how diverse people could feel about their sexuality.

T – Correct.

I –So, do you feel as though your identity as a Black man played a role in your sexuality and how it developed?

T – Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Growing up [laughs] you know, it's like… music. Music played a big part, you know? It's always about chasing girls and doing things like that. That's what you see,

325

that's the stuff we were built up for. It painted pictures of beauty and that's what you see. That was the choice.

I – What kind of music popped into mind when you said that?

T – R&B and Hip-hop, that's shaped everything. That shaped me as well as outside influences.

I – Yeah, when you said music, I was thinking "oh my god, I can think of so many songs where that was the topic of the song."

T – I can think of a song for anything, you can't go wrong.

I – Is there a formative song for you? A song that stood out in your mind as a kid or even now? That demonstrate that?

T - There are a whole bunch of songs, man. Ginuwine is probably the best person I think. He painted pictures… R&B in the 90s, R. Kelly in the 90s, that's the stuff I listened to. I shouldn't have been listening to it, but I did.

I – I was just telling someone the other day that 90s r&b is filthy and it's super sexual. But it's also super catchy. It's fun to listen to.

T – it's fun to listen to. And it's fun to sing! At karaoke night, it's hilarious.

I – So, you're saying that hip-hop and r&b, those are two musical elements that really helped to influence how your sexuality developed, at least in terms of a racial standpoint and your identity as a Black man. Black men seeing rap and r&b, they, and maybe I'm putting words in your mouth, but they act as the quintessential models or examples for what it meant to be a straight Black guy in a sense.

T – That's pretty much it in a nutshell.

I – Okay. Do you have any additional personal examples where your race or gender played a role in how you express your sexuality with other people, or just in your family?

T – An example of how race and gender played a role in how I express my sexuality… I think it comes with it. I think it's molded into me. Imprinted into my DNA I'm not born that way, but I like said. Years of how I've been raised and what I've seen, my mind was already made up. That's how it's supposed to be. I can change… it has to do with religion, too. It always has to do with religion, too. Aside from religion, like I said, it's just the way I am. The best phrase is, "it is what it is." When you see me, "it is, what it is." There's straight words. There's no doubt. You ask and I'll give it to you straight. It's hard to say that, but I just feel like my… I don't know, it's just a tough one to ask.

I – I can give you my sense of what you're saying. But it seems to me like you're saying, maybe race and gender play a role or influence your sexuality or your sexual development. But, you're

saying that sense… given how all of those factors developed the core of your identity, you don't think about it as one thing or the other… or one element at a time. Everything just seems to be integrated all of the time for you.

T – I guess you can say it's instinct.

I – It is what it is and there's nothing more or less than that.

T – That's pretty good.

I – So how about your religion? You mention religion a few times so far. How do you feel like your religion influenced your sense of sexual identity?

T – Oh yeah, it's definitely a major part. That's part of the culture I grew up around, too. Church, same way. One man, one woman. That's how I've seen it, that's how I view it. That's not to say that I don't… Gay marriage is a tough thing, I know if you love someone, you love that person. Love is love. But, I just don't, from what I see, I don't fully agree with it. But, I'm not against. I'm not going to hate someone for loving some. There's just something things… I'm not going to go out my way to hate someone. I'm not Donald Trump. I'm going to love them the same way as a person. Whether they are gay or straight. But that's just showing god's love. Religion is just to show God's love. I'm about religion, that's what my church talks about. Religion can be misconstrued… people think the wrong things about religion. I believe in God, I believe in the Bible, so I go by that.

I – Do you have any notable examples, notable stories or examples where you feel like your religion influenced your sense of sexual identity.

T – No notable examples, just the same thing as you asked before. It's what I grew up around. It's what I knew. It's what I seen. It's how I'm going to go forth.

I – You mentioned before that people may see you and make presumptions about you based off of your race and gender, seeing as a Black man, this tall black man. Do you feel as though that ever happened in regard to how people identify you as a sexual partner? Have people made those assumptions of you based on being a Black male? Like someone that's interested in you make all these prejudgments of you based on being a Black male?

T – From a gay person or a person in general?

I – In general.

T – Most times… The way you dress says a lot about you, people assume a lot about you. I don't dress… I dress good, I don't dress to… I dress like a 26-year-old man would, simple and to the point. I don't think that anything I do gives off the vibe that I'll be approached by a gay person. Not to say that they won't be attracted to me, but I am pretty sure they know that's not going to happen.

I – Can you say a little bit more about how you dress saying a lot about you.

T – I don't go out, I don't wear tight jeans. I wear jeans that fit me, and my clothes are fitted enough to where… I'm not trying to pop out my muscles, but you can see the definition, you see the masculinity in me.

I – Your attire compliments your physique for the most part.

T – IF you look at how they dress in hip-hop, older hip-hop, older people, I want to say more like late 20s early 30s… more business casual.
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I – Always professional kind of way. So, it sounds like you're saying that if people approach you whether or not they're interested in you, you feel as though the way you carry yourself carries more of an influence their thoughts about you more than your identity as a Black man does.

T – I would say that. I think they go hand and hand, because, people are afraid of Black people. It's not… I'm not saying all, but I'm saying most. There's no other way about it. First off, they may be afraid. Then they see me as a 6'4 Black man, they're like "uh oh, what's going to happen today?" I sit down at the pharmacy, I see clearly what they're judging in me. I'm proper, I speak clearly. Sometimes I don't want to talk all of the time, but I know when to turn it off and turn it on. Yeah. That's just how I was raised.

I – You know how to code switch.

T – Yeah. You know, I'm not saying that some people call it "speaking White" but I see it as respectful, but it doesn't matter if they're an older White person or an older Black person, I'm going to talk to them the same way. But if they're a younger person, I'll talk them as I should. As I go forth, everything I do, I met a lot of people in the last couple of months, and the way I carry myself, I just make conversation. So Uber'ing, bouncing, as a sales associate, I talk to people all of the time. I try to show that I am more than just… I don't want to say the average Black male, but what's perceived by the media. I want them to get a real view of what a Black man really is. Even if it's the most illiterate person, give them a positive view.

I – It sounds like you do everything in your power to make sure they don't undermine and if they do make some prejudgment about you, you want to make sure you can change them. In regard to sexuality, to have any thoughts about Black sexuality in terms of what it is or how it's expressed?

T – I didn't know there was a separate part to it.

I – Maybe that's a question I should ask. Do you think Black sexuality is a thing?

T – Nah, I think there's just gay or straight. Sometimes you'll see gay men dating Black women, and there's Black culture they're trying to imitate. But it's not so much Black sexuality, but it's Black culture. they still try to adapt to what we do. I do think that Black male are seen as going down that route of… I won't say more, but I do see a lot of it on TV a lot more gay Black males

on TV shows, drag and stuff. There are all types of people on there. I just never saw it growing up, Black men dressing that way. I probably knew few, but I never really noticed it. It's weird to me. Like I said, I never seen. But it's something that you have to get used to. My thing is, I don't have a problem with people… I mean, if there's a Black gay male, it's just a flamboyant one… most people stay in one area, but you're always going to have a bad bunch of an ethnicity or religion, you know radical Muslim, radical Christian, radical African-Americans, radical gays… those are the types you see displayed on the media and it gets misconstrued. You can get misconstrued. Social media has a lot of play on people's views.

I – Are you dating anyone right now?

T – I am.

I – Do you feel as though your identity black male comes into play in your relationship?

T – It has.

I – In What way?

T – it makes me a bit more responsible. Trying to create more opportunities and not only for me and my girlfriend, but also for people in her family. It's making me drive more, not just for me or my girl, but also cousins, nieces, nephews. There's always more in the relationship. It's a push, you push each other.

I –You're really trying to find some way to provide and give back in a way.

T – Show each other… you can teach a man to fish or you can give a man a fish kind of thing.

I – Right. So, I don't know how long you've been in relationship.

T – Almost seven years.

I – Oh, that's a long time! I was going to ask a question about when you were single, but now I'm like, oh man since it was so long in the past, I'm not sure if it's worth it.

T – I have a good memory.

I – Okay, so one of the things I was wondering about while you were talking is the fact that essentially, it's really important to show that you have yourself together. You're really goal oriented and that you are, in a lot ways, really independent and someone who can provide for himself, for his family, or become that in time. Have you ever felt like... previous sexual partners made really bad judgment calls, or what you feel like were really bad judgment calls based on the fact that you're a Black male? I'm just about the previous women you've dated, if they had thoughts about you being a Black male.

T – yeah. Of course! I know people that… not like sexual relationships, people that I've known where, just because I'm a black male, they're attracted to me. Nothing about my personality, just the fact I was a 6'4 Black male who had everything going for him. Or was working hard, that stuff right there, that happened a lot. It also happened because I'm a 6'4 Black male with dreads.

I – It definitely happens a lot. Are there any notable experiences or stories that you have that demonstrate that?

T – I don't have any stories… it's just what… when I work places, people come up to me and it's like "Oh, I like them tall dark and handsome." People say stuff like that. It happens all of the time. They flirt with you. But it's like, all right not, come on. I ain't got time for that.

I – Keep it professional.

T – You got to.

I – So how does that make you feel?

T – Funny. It's like yeah, you got the juice and you can probably get any woman you want, but you got to show self-control, but it's always funny, though. It's always funny. I always sit there and laugh. Or my manager will come over and say something like. Too much, too much.

I – So it's really important for you to not fall into the stereotypes or prejudgments that people hold. You're trying to maintain yourself and your professionalism. Maintain your boundaries. So, one of the last questions that I had for you was if you thought that sexuality could be empowering. So, not just sexual orientation, but sexual practice and sexual expression, stuff like that. Empowering or liberating.

T – I think it can be liberating. You can relieve a lot of stress through sexual practices because we have a lot of frustration. But most of the time it's all about the person you're with. Sometimes it may not be worth, but sometimes you could be like "Okay." But it's all a matter of who you decide to mate with.

I – You're saying, it almost sounds like it's another form of developing a relationship over time, all about connecting with a person that you're with in some way. You're not just doing it to do it.

T – Yeah. If you're doing it to do it, it's not going to empower you. There's nothing empowering about that. But if you have the right person and you have a connection with them, even if it's a conversation that you have. You have no idea what it could lead to. But that plays a major a role… I think sexual practice can be liberating. I'm not too sure about the other part you said…

I - Liberating or empowering.

T – I don't think it can be empowering… maybe if you're a player and you're trying to go through as many people as you can. I mean it's all about choice too. If you're single and you can get with some pretty ladies and they're okay with that, that's empowering. You have that

330

persuasion. People want to be with you. And if they don't get connected to you, that could be empowering. But, I think it's more liberating than that.

I – So, one of the things I've been wondering about especially in terms of wondering and doing all these interviews and hearing these personal experiences from people is, whether or not... or how sexuality can be more liberating for Black people. And I think the type of narratives and stereotypes that circle around us a lot of the time, people think we're players or super sexual or sometimes it's the music you listen to that promotes or endorse that idea. So, my question for you is, how do you think sexuality can be liberating for Black people or even Black men.

T – Man, what's smooth? It's just something that you can be. I mean some people, there are smooth people in all races, but it goes into how you carry yourself. Confident. Most people don't care… like we're vibing, vibing to music and we'll be dancing. You know, so I think there's a lot of confidence that comes into play. So, you said that Black sexuality can be liberating for Black people? It's just, I don't know how to explain it. It's just wonderful. That's to the point. It's just wonderful. It doesn't get any better. And I think… our music, the way we describe it, the way we describe love, we don't hear any other music or even poetry describe love the way black people describe it. You go to a poetry slam and there's a lot more put into it when it comes into being Black. We put a lot more time to it.

I – It's a lot more affectionate, it's a lot more passionate it sounds like what you're saying.

T – It's not rushed. It's love. It's not sex to us, it's making love.

I – I think that's a really great distinction to make actually, that when it comes to sex, it's not just sex. It's making love.

T – There's two types of… sex and love are two different things when it comes to that situation. You can make love, it's just a lot more passionate. Sex is just getting in and getting out.

I – It's passionless.

T – There's no passion behind it.

I – But I definitely like what you say in terms of sexuality being empowering for Black people, involving a lot of passion, and involving a lot of love and a lot of affection, and not engaging in the physicality of it. Not being about sex for the most part.