

Copyright

By

Jeremy O'Brian Griffin

2016

The Report committee for Jeremy O'Brian Griffin

Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

Unmaking Him: Lee Daniels' Empire and the potential Black Masculine

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____
Xavier Livermon

Matt Richardson

Unmaking Him: Lee Daniels' Empire and the potential Black Masculine

by

Jeremy O'Brian Griffin, BA

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2016

Dedication

I dedicate this report to the queer in all of us and the willingness of each of us to imagine newer freedoms. If we can't imagine freedom, we might never find it.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge the spirit of Essex Hemphill and his entire legacy. Having shaped my identity and politics immeasurably, it is in his work that I begin to see the worthiness of queer visibility. I want to acknowledge the labor of my advisors and mentors: Xavier Livermon, Matt Richardson, Lisa B. Thompson, Omi Joni Jones, and Omi'seke Tinsley. What they've given me as a scholar and future educator transcends my wildest imaginings. Their patience, insistence, dedication, and attentiveness to the work I've done and continue to do have impressed upon me the ever-present need to love both people and the craft. They are friends of the mind.

I want to acknowledge and thank my mama who has been the most amazing force in my life to date. Her love takes me to places that are beyond comprehension. She uproots and plant in one instance. A gem is what she is. To my Auntie Tywana and Uncle JJ, thank you for your unwavering support at the site of both favorable and unfavorable decisions on my part. Grandma, you're the real OG. To my family, thank you for simply not understanding why I'm still in school, but being proud in that same instance. It's a nice break. To my tenured friends Dominique Woods, Michael Shavers, Richard Moses, R'Mickel Robinson, Landon Thomas, and Ray C. Mays, thank you for simply loving me, seeing me, demanding mutuality, and taking every journey with me.

I want to thank my UT cohort members – Angelica, Kate, and Paul Joseph- for their willingness to see me when I was unable to see the beauty of my own reflection as a scholar; thank you for being a support to this little first generation scholar from the woods of Mississippi. To Frank Henry Wade, III, thank you for being consistently supportive of all I

am. Erica, Danyell, and Chaquina, you've been my lifeline since 1991. Thank you for sharing in this journey in untold ways. To the Mighty Theta chapter of Men of DISTINX, Inc., thank you for being a brotherhood of college educated queer men who are incessantly committed to social justice and the work of the soul.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my niece/princess Mariah Griffin, my little brother Shannon Griffin, and my cousins Trey'Various and Brandon Collins. You guys keep me planted and inspire real reasons to imagine newer freedoms for black girls and black boys. If I were not doing it for you, I would have nothing to prove. Truly, I stand on the shoulders of people who love me.

Unmaking Him: Lee Daniels' Empire and the potential Black Masculine

by

Jeremy O'Brian Griffin, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

SUPERVISOR: Xavier Livermon

This paper uses Lee Daniels' hit show *Empire* to examine the relationship between two fictional television brothers- Jamal and Hakeem Lyon. In examining this relationship, I employ black feminist and black queer theory to interrogate the ways in which Lee Daniels' particular representation leads to an expansion of current notions of black masculinity within the quotidian. I argue that through re-representing the ways in which black men interact and are intimate, *Empire* helps to unmake ideals of black masculinity steeped in stabilizing patriarchy and moves to expand what and how black men can be. Through imagining that the promise of black feminist and black queer theory is the ability to remake self outside of the normative, this project moves in the vein of such to imagine what potential alternative black masculinities look like.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Unmaking “Him?”.....	7
What a Man.....	17
The Promise of Boyhood.....	24
Multiple Masculinities as a Family Song.....	27
Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	39

Introduction

In 2015, season one of Lee Daniels's blockbuster *Empire* began airing on FOX. The show depicts the everyday occurrences of a family-owned record label- Empire – and exposes the homophobia, misogyny, and betrayal that presumably permeate the culture of hip-hop. While the show has received overwhelming critical acclaim, dissenting voices have expressed concern about how the show might complicate the advancement of black families and black life due to seeming celebration of particular pathologies. In moving beyond the seeming pathologies to see the potential for expansion of black folk's daily realities, I've decided to make Empire the center of my project.

This is a project about the intersections of freedom, queerness, blackness, and boyhood. I imagine freedom as “a verb, an act, a wish, a militant demand.” (Kelley 2002) This is not a project about exodus or a desire to leave a place. This is not a project about wanting to eradicate all of the “isms” – colonialism, imperialism, sexism, racism, and etc. – in hope of a better tomorrow. However, this is a project about functioning and working within a system or society so heavily power-laden. This is a project that seeks to imagine newer freedoms.

Out of representation comes an ability to imagine. From Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage* (Tinsley 2008) to Carole Boyce Davies's exploration of the meanings of Caribbean space and community, black feminist scholars have imagined moments and movements – past and present – that give way to a reconfiguration of histories and realities for people through out the diaspora. While I am not going on a journey across waters to imagine freedoms beyond a given set of histories, in the

spirit of my aforementioned, I do hope to underscore how the images in the media give way to imagining possibilities that might create a reconfiguration of the ways in which the black queer (boy) subject is represented and treated in the future. Similarly to scholar Jose Munoz, I am interested in the queer possibilities since “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” (Munoz 2009) I want to imagine queerness that might extend beyond the abstract to lend itself to the work of black feminist scholars. I want to imagine that the way people are presented within the media informs the way they are treated within a quotidian framework.

I grew up in a small town in the Mississippi Delta called Lambert. At a very early age, I was made aware of both my gayness and my queerness. I did not have a name for this position that I inhabited, but I knew what was deemed normal for most boys my age did not apply to me. I remember secretly internalizing the desire to have Barbie dolls on Christmas along with my power rangers. Around sixth grade, I had fallen in love with writing poetry and song lyrics. Sure, in hindsight, I was a terrible poet. However, the point I wish to make is that when measuring these desires in relation to all of the other boys, I was not particularly adhering to the gender norms. What boys learn by the age of “sixth grade,” is that your humanity as a boy is linked to your performance so one should always be striving to prove masculinity. For me, I was disinterested in such a thing, so I surrounded myself with the girls. Girls could play with Barbie, girls could write in diaries, girls could sing in the church choir, girls could like boys... girls were the fun folk. Now, I didn't want to be a girl. However, what was evident is that a type of freedom that came with femininity that masculinity did not, and arguably does not allow. At some point, I had mastered the politics

of performance. While I was not some hyper-masculine boy child, I was able to hang with the fellas in ways that allowed for a negotiation of my queer identity at the hands of boys who'd be taught, explicitly or inexplicitly, that queerness was a threat to their masculinity.

I played sports. I remember only playing football with the other boys because of the permissible physical interactions, but, too, it was because it gave me credit and helped to normalize me as a boy. I felt safe. When playing sports, the only question was, "can you play?" And, I could. This reality allowed me to hide myself, those parts of me that created a sense of perpetual discomfort, and to discover ways of passing.

It is this personal history that informs the scholar I am today: this history of having to ultimately negotiate self as a mechanism for survival. Every since I can remember, I've always been a pariah. I do not know if it was because of my own knowledge of self or other people's projections that I came to occupy this pariah status, but I definitely occupied it. These many experiences with having hidden myself also informed a desire for social justice. I started to be more attentive to the ways that boys were allowed to interact, and I hated it. Where as girls could hug, boys had to interact in a way that resisted intimacy. Where as girls could be communicative, boys communicated through violence and aggression. Even when girls would lose friendships, it would typically be about a boy. I hated the expectations placed on boys and girls, expectations centering maleness. From a very early age I had decided to dedicate my life to the possibilities of alternative masculinities: masculinities that would endorse male intimacy, see the potential in differences, and work outside of a misogynistic regime; alternative masculinities that might now be referred to as "carefree black boys." For me, the carefree black boy movement moves beyond simply wearing

clothes that might be gender bending to include the many ways boys resist ideas that might deny certain forms of intimacy on the basis of masculinity. The carefree black boy movement is about the hugs between boys when a handshake might suffice; it is about the ways adages like “you good, bro,” translate into a coded language of love. It is about the lack of concern for expectations.

Coming of age, I watched a healthy amount of television. From court shows to Jerry Springer, I was often engulfed in television. My earliest memory of seeing black gay men on television was on the Maury show. There was this extremely effeminate, “non-threatening” stereotypical black gay man appearing as a guest on the show. I was sitting in the living room with my mother, and all I remember was my entire body tensing up. I couldn’t move. “Look at this shit,” I remember my mother exclaiming. In her voice I could hear the complete and utter disgust. That was my first lesson. Unbeknownst to my mother, that “shit” was within the confines of her own home. That “shit” was of her very own flesh. That moment taught me a very important lesson in being black and gay, it taught me to hide myself away. So, I did. Moreover, this moment taught me the power of the media and representations within the media. It taught me that the way people are represented is the way they are treated. Sure, it was not that simple, but, loosely construed, the way people are represented is the way they are treated within a quotidian sense.

In hindsight, what my mother referenced as “this shit” was not the simple reality of this man’s gayness/queerness. It was his inability to perform masculinity in a way that was acceptable to the gender norms of the time. However, this is what stabilized my shame. It was in the limpness of his wrist that I saw my reflection in this brother. It was in the

willingness to perform against the norm that I found countless possibilities for what the grey area between the binaries might look like. It was in his feminized masculinity that I found my place of comfort, and, for that reason, I was ashamed. I internalized this lesson into adulthood.

My sophomore year in college, I came “out of the closet.” I had broken up with my first boyfriend, my best friend and I were not talking, and I had no one to confide in. So, I came out. I called home, I cried, and I told my mother how my queerness was not some phase to be transcended. My queerness was a stable position that I had occupied for quite sometime. That moment was the beginning of my burgeoning relationship with my mother. That moment, and moments that followed, taught me the potential of visibility. No longer would I be forced to sit through mindless conversations about “this shit” that was being represented on television. For my mother, my visibility helped to humanize those subjects in the media who had, prior to my coming out, simply been “shit.” In learning that “visibility is about recognition, since it is only through the experiences of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings,” (Livermon 2012) I decided that the work I would do in this world was always be in conversation with the project of imagining, constructing, reconfiguring, and making visible black queer subjects.

Early on, without having a name for it, I realized the world we live in demanded we all be a reflection of one another in the most stifling ways and I refused. That refusal is in large part the reason I sit here writing a paper on Lee Daniels’ *Empire*: a paper that seeks to undo and redo our present understandings of black masculinity. Sure, this paper is about seeing queerness on television that goes beyond stereotypes. However, this project is, too,

about much more than *Empire*, much more than seeing queerness on television. This project is about the ability to imagine black queer boys as “socially viable beings.”

Unmaking “Him?”

I hold in my hand a book: *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. In reading some of the essays in this book, I start to ask myself: what are queer politics and who can be queer in this world? This very question guides this paper. While *Empire* has a gay queer character, I would like to argue that many of the non-homosexual subjects often inhabit queer sensibility.

I find this idea of a queer planet to be rather captivating as I imagine and employ queer critiques that doesn't move to exclude anyone, instead it moves to seek the freedom of all of humanity. “Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal.” (M. Bailey 2013) Many might argue that in a power-laden society, it is almost impossible to not recreate the very power imbalances for which we seek to eradicate. However, today I want to be a complete and utter optimist. Through *Empire*'s insistence on brotherhood that works beyond sexual difference, I want to imagine that a queer planet is a place where we are all, regardless of sexuality, race, and gender able to access levels of freedom that might make us all socially viable.

In doing so, through this paper I hope to work to imagine a world that operates outside of what might be deemed as normal or traditional. In trying to make sense of one simple idea -a queer planet- I move to imagine queerness as being both tied to sexuality and not tied to sexuality. It has been articulated over and over again how complex it is to imagine things that are beyond what we know to be true, as truth is constructed through the subjective. So, how do we begin to unearth these truths that don't come so easily? I employ

feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and gender theory to imagine ways of unmaking and remaking “him,” as he is symbolic of a model of masculinity constructed by and against hegemonic masculinity to police the ways in which men and women negotiate performances of gender, race, and sexuality.

As it relates to television, “we are living in an era of the new homo-normative queer visibility.” (Elia and Yep 2012) Much of the work produced seems to make an attempt to be overtly political insofar as there is an obvious move to politicize the bodies of those subjects at play. But, what might it mean that the messages are not fixed or determined by the sender? Even if there was intent to elicit a particular response, many things play into the receiver’s understanding of a message within a work of art. So, I’m in search of a reading practice that allows for queer possibilities, but is conscious of the many things that factor into the ways a receiver might decode a message regardless of the encoder’s intent. Moreover, I want to consider the ways in which we might move to collectively read for the purpose of expanding, progressing, and uplifting particular subjects.

Reception practices depend heavily on a lot of things- from the way media construct characters around stereotypes to the subjectivity of those subjects who are receiving and engaging with the material at hand. It is also influenced by what might be deemed as popular or reflective of a certain demographic: a demographic that is namely minority and constructed by the hegemonic. “Popular culture is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is ground on which the transformations are worked.” (Hall, Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' 1998) Popular, too, can hold various definitions. I would like

to think through the ways that “the things which are said to be ‘popular’ because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full. This is the ‘market’ or commercial definition of the term.” (Hall, Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' 1998) In thinking about the popular being tied to consumerism, I use *Empire* as a site where Lee Daniels uses the commodification of "gay" as a trend to produce work that lends itself to having real implications for how and who we are within the quotidian.

It is my contention that no “art” is perfect, but suitable art does lend itself to having real viable implications. Within the show, *Empire*, the real implications are that there is a depiction of black family life that is complex and multi-layered, and, in doing the work, there is space for an ever-expanding reflection of gender black subjectivity.

Thinking through the many ways in which woman is often seen as a category that most obviously opposes that of man, I want to be conscious of the ways in which the binaries of woman and man move to stabilize maleness as the superior category while femaleness assumes the position of subordinate.

Through such an exploration, I move to underscore the ways in which representations of alternative masculinities within the media can offer new possibilities for expanding our fundamental understanding of what black masculinity is and move to undo the misogyny that permeates because of these ideas. The masculinity in which I address, and seek to expand, is a kind of hegemonic masculinity and “this hierarchy of successful and failed manhood matches up to the White normality/ Black deviance framework that accompanies racism.” (P. H. Collins 2005) I would be remiss if I did not point out the ways

in which Black masculinity is structured against the dominate, hence the emphasis of a “Black” masculinity. Whiteness is presumably the norm and anything that deviates from whiteness has to be named and perhaps defamed in an effort to uphold blackness as most heavily opposite of whiteness.

If we take seriously assertions like Frantz Fanon’s, who argues “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,” (F. Fanon 1999) then it becomes necessary to think of constructs of white masculinity in opposition to blackness. In expanding our understanding of black masculinity, it is necessary to interrogate existing conceptualizations of such a thing. In being man, one must position self as opposite of those subjects that are constructed. Nothing in this world most strongly opposes man than that of woman. While we understand this simple binary, when race and sexuality are considered, things are complicated. . Nothing opposes masculinity more strongly than woman, nothing opposes whiteness more strongly than blackness, and nothing opposes heterosexuality more strongly than gayness as it is seen as both unnatural and socially constructed- “a lifestyle choice.”

This paper thinks through the ways black masculinity and queerness, together, are represented and understood in contemporary American Television. Historically, gender has been understood by way of binaries constructed to draw distinctions between the categories of woman and man. Within these binaries, there is an understood rule that suggests, overtly, that woman is that of the more subordinate category, defined against the other. Much like gender, race has function in a very similar way; blackness depends largely on whiteness to exist. In trying to construct identity, black subjects are understandably constructing ideals

against the existing model man, which translates as white cis-gender male.

I underscore these points to invite an intersectional examination of race, gender, and sexuality and to emphasize how they all work to stabilize a world that is largely anti-black, misogynistic, and power seeking. In accentuating these points, I hope to offer that the more contemporary representations of black masculinity in American television might lend itself to an expansion of how black men are treated. In reviewing literature on the subjects- black media studies, black feminism, and black queer studies- I seek to deconstruct and reconstruct a working definition for the black masculine.

For a long time, it seemed that queer visibility was reserved for white cis-gender men, then white cis-gender women, and so on. Within the chain of command, blackness was understandably the most opposite of white, which rendered it most closely associated to non-human and a kind of social death. The presence of the black queer men in American television has long been elusive. When we did find these depictions of black gay men on the screen, we found that they were caricatures of many stereotypes of black femininity, made to be non-threatening, an inferior ontological representation, and often not-fully-realized subjects. However, with the rise of shows like Mara Brock-Akil's *Being Mary Jane*, Tyler Perry's *Haves and Have Nots*, and Lee Daniels' *Empire*, it seems we are moving into an era that works against the invisibility of black gay men on the screen- one that moves to (re) place queerness, situating it as a commonality.

Traditionally, when we have been offered images of black queer men, they operate within strict binaries of feminine and masculine, often painted as feminine to create the contrasts and departure from "acceptable masculine representations." Masculinity is locked

in the use of the phallic and measured through the use of it. Through coming out- becoming vocal- there is not space to project a heterosexual identity. While “it is important, however, to be aware that the proliferation of queer images in popular culture has not eradicated the problem of hetero-normativity or anti-queer violence,” (Elia and Yep 2012) the fluidity present in the performances of the characters, on and off stage, in *Empire* lends itself to a conversation about the many ways that an expansion of what is considered masculine might give way to an eradication of homophobia and misogyny in real time. Take for instance the entire “carefree black boy” movement. Robin D.G. Kelley suggests that the best movements “do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society.” (Kelley 2002) In this vein, I see Lee Daniels’ *Empire* being a part of that movement. Daniels often uses personal experiences to relive horrors of being a black gay boy/man. In many of those same moments, too, he uses his experiences to tell of male intimacy that might free space for all of those subjects willing to take part.

Within this carefree black boy movement, men are beginning to blur the lines of what is feminine and what is masculine. In many ways, straight men in the media are re-shaping how queerness is represented through operating within the binaries of masculine and feminine and not at the margins. From Jaden Smith’s androgyny to Drake and Odell Beckham’s public bromance, black men are testing the limits and stretching what is acceptable.¹

¹ Odell Beckham Jr. is a pro-football player who, in recent months, seems to have become closely associated with Drake (the rapper).

They've been spotted in public together on countless occasions, and they often make appearances on each other's instagram page. The beauty in these interactions, though, is the way that these men occupy time and space. They are not confined by idea about masculinity. Even amid tabloid criticism and gay rumors, Beckham continues to publically embrace discursive masculinities and unconventional public appearances. From the way he wears his hair- honey blonde tips and natural- to the clothes he wear-from red snake skin blazers, sneakers with roses printed fabrics, leather pants with t-shirts that are cut up and extending past the knees, to flora printed short shorts- he operates in ways that seek to suggest potentially unprecedented ways of being and interacting with other black men in the public eye. Too, these interactions seem to transcend sexuality and gender; interactions that are in many ways in conversation with the myriad representations of black men on the silver screen.

In a recent interview with Rolling Stone, Beckham spoke about Drake as his inspiration. He contends: "I think the reason I am so fascinated by him is that a lot of his songs, it's almost as if he wrote 'em and like had me in mind." In making such a claim, we're able to hear in Beckham's voice a softness that tells of deep admiration and close ties. Such a proclamation, in compilation with their multiple appearances together in the media, offers ways of seeing black male intimacy in a light that function outside of a gay regime. In another interview with Rhonda Rousey, Beckham reveals that he is "staying at [Drake's] house while he finishes the album. He contends, too: "we just click on a level like that."

It is worth noting, too, that much of the backlash has less to do with Drake as a figure and more to do with Beckham's twenty-two year old public person. Earlier this year,

Beckham posted a video to Instagram in which he and a college friend were dancing. Many took to social media to suggest that the kind of mannerisms displayed were of a “non-heterosexual” nature. For me, such backlash points to the ways in which we all can benefit from an expansion of black masculinity in real time and through Beckham’s many bromances and the way he operates within them, we get to see the possibilities and what might ensue from such an expansion.

These multiple public declarations open up the space to dismantle existing systems and schools of thought that place damaging stipulations on [black] male interaction. So, how does all of this lend itself to my project? Well, my project is about the potential of a black masculine representation that does not operate within the strict binaries of gay and straight, a representation that possibly functions in a way that does not at all take into account sexuality and does not measure the humanity of boys through toxic notions of masculinity.

So, who is he and why are we seeking to unmake him? Well, he is a traditional ideal of masculinity that restricts male intimacy and upholds misogyny and homophobia. The simplest articulation of him would be: a subject constructed by a society that sees woman and man as two very different beings, and, in so doing, it becomes necessary to continuously construct ways of endorsing moderately severe ideals of masculinity and femininity. In unmaking him, I move to consider how society places strict ideals on both man and woman for how to operate. If woman is communicative, man is not. If woman is to be interested in domesticity, man is innately invested in the project of hard labor. If man is physical, then woman is non-physical.

In *How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay*, an essay by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sedgwick

highlights the way society shapes and makes boys through the confines of masculinity. She addresses the ways in which gender has been treated and viewed- “ones basal sense of being male and female”- to police human interaction in a way that oversimplifies and compiles gender, sexuality, and performance in ways that work as a disservice to all of humanity. She, too, paints how masculinity, for many boys in our society, is far too often tied to constructing humanity: “the first, imperative developmental task of a male child or his parents and caretakers is to get a properly male Core Gender Identity in place, as a basis for further and perhaps more flexible explorations of what it may be to be masculine- that is, for a male person, to be human.” (Sedgwick, *How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay* 1993)

Underscoring how the partial humanity of boys as constructed through hegemonic masculine ideals, Sedgwick helps to highlight the varying ways masculinity is constructed as something opposite of femininity or femaleness. Through having boys prove their personhood through their masculinity, they are simultaneously proving they are not like women.

So, as I make efforts to “unmake him,” I think of a subject who operates under a regime of hegemonic masculinity. As Patricia Hill Collins sees it, “hegemonic masculinity becomes defined through its difference from and opposition to women, boys, poor and working class men of all races and ethnicities, gay men, and Black men.” (P. H. Collins 2005) Under Fanon’s law of logic, any man outside of hegemonic masculinity has little ontological resistance. So, in “unmaking him,” I move to re-humanize a subject who was potentially non-human from the start. Humanity constructed through a hegemonic masculine apparatus is not humanity at all; it is a way of existing that dismisses the usefulness of the erotic and

those attributes that have been constructed to be viewed as feminine. He is only an object of patriarchy used to keep in place laws that only contribute to power imbalances and the many “isms” that are apart of our inequitable society. In unmaking him, we remake and reimagine the possibilities for the ways in which both women and men function.

What A Man...

While I know that dependency on stereotypical tropes tend to inform and influence the way people receive certain groups of people due to the limited portrayals of those subjects, I know that reception practices depend very heavily on a host of things- from the way media constructs characters around stereotypes to the subjectivity of those subjects who are engaging the material at hand. It is also influenced by what might be deemed as popular or reflective of a certain demographic: a demographic that is namely minority and constructed by the hegemonic.

The title of my essay is largely reflective of my expectations: articulating the potential that grows out of unmaking our current ideas of black masculinity, ideas steeped in a hegemonic masculine regime. I am interested in the many ways that acknowledging the “feminine” in men can lend it to expanding notions of black masculinity and create multiple/alternative masculinities. Underlying my desire to expand masculinity is the desire to make space for black women who are, arguably, the most oppressed group in the world. Often black men are taught that measuring masculinity depends largely on pivoting it against femininity/black women. There are concerns that woman and man are two very different beings and that this truth justifies a distinction between the two categories. However, what might it mean to live in a world were the binaries between straight/gay, woman/man, and masculine/feminine are blurred so heavily that it lends itself to eradicating the always already present ability to police women (and others outside of the masculine apparatus) based on assumptions that women are to be nothing like men and present for the male gaze.

Keeping in mind how subjective and discursive gender performance is, for the sake of simplifying things, I offer a definition of the feminine that grows out of my understanding of femininity. In the case of this project, femininity can be understood, very loosely, as these three things attributed to that of women: being communicative, intimacy among the same sex, and acknowledging the value of human emotion. Within many spaces, men who are communicative, intimate with other men, and emotional have been regarded in very gendered ways. We see these men as being alternative, but what is the potential of these alternatives? Maybe it's helpful to understand femininity as the "use of the erotic." Audre Lorde: "we [women] have been taught to suspect this resource [the erotic] vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence." (Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic* 1984)

As Lorde sees it, the erotic has the potential to liberate and uproot in a society so power-laden and dependent upon the subordination of the other, empowerment and information that is only accessible through the feminine and things attributed to that of women. I argue that both women and men have been cautioned against the use of the erotic and ways to understand our "capacity for joy." For Audre Lorde, her interest in the "uses of the erotic" was situated in a concern for the myriad ways female sexuality was policed, but I want to imagine the possibility of the erotic being a space for both black women and men. I want to imagine "that self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived with

the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor god, nor an afterlife.” (Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic* 1984) The erotic holds potential for all, regardless of gender, to become empowered and uprooted through alternative ways of existing outside of the pedagogies of hegemonic masculinity theory.

I do acknowledge my own personal privilege and how one might see this project as problematic given that it is male centered and is somehow supposed to lend itself to the freedom of women, too. I am not remiss or negligent. I understand that only a project that centers black women can truly most effectively lend itself to the freedom of those subjects. However, I find that by acknowledging the feminine in men as something viable and real, we acknowledge female masculinity and male femininity, both of which allows for an expansion of expressions and performances typically restricted on the basis of gender. Through expanding masculinity, we open up for the possibilities of a world that works to empower the entire black community including black women.

I see *Empire* as a project that lends itself to a conversation that is much needed, a conversation about the potential of multiple black masculinities in a homo-social space typically reserved for heterosexual bodies. Part of being a man is to position one’s self and make distinct the ways in which one is different from women and/or gays. In *Empire*, the relationship between the brothers offers some very interesting dynamics for representing, or re-representing the black masculine.

I analyze the relationship between *Empire's* characters Jamal and Hakeem to suggest novel possibilities for understanding its representation of intimacy in the context of black men. I consciously do not engage the oldest brother, Andre, as there is limited interaction

between he and Jamal in season one of the series. However, Jamal and Hakeem's queerly avant-garde "bromance," I argue, dismantles and reconstructs notions of black masculinity, black brotherhood, and black-phobias. In so doing, it offers novel paradigms for understanding and re-representing black masculinity.

For me, my use of queerly avant-garde draws from two very particular definitions of queer, while avant-garde is denotative. My first use of queer is queer as "the abnormal, the strange, the dangerous. Queer involves our sexuality and our gender, but so much more. It is our desire and fantasies and more still." (M. Bailey 2013) Here I emphasize the "strangeness" that is innately apart of queerness, strange in the way that it is "queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was suppose to cease to exist." (Tinsley 2008) Queerness is not necessarily a thing that is reduced to that of sex and desire, but very much so an act of resistance and reimagining newer models of existing that opens space for more freedom and ways of being beyond mainstream offerings.

So, what becomes queerly avant-garde within Empire is the new ways that black men interact on screen to tell of victory and reconfigured love between gender(ed) bodies who are not suppose to feel warmth among other men. Brother to brother, Jamal and Hakeem act in a revolutionary way through communication, affirming each other at the site of non-normative masculine performances, and by empathizing when current notions of masculinity suggest violence might suffice. In the ways these two brothers interact, a lot of the damaging tropes usually associated with masculinity are at risk of being eradicated. So, my use of

queerly avant-garde bromance emphasizes and “examine[s] how society, through popular culture, has [generally] assigned boundaries to these friendships and how it polices gender, sexuality, and intimacy.” (Chen 2012) More over, I move to reconstruct a definition of bromance to go beyond the simple understanding of abnormally intimate “friendship” to include blood ties/brotherhood.

Bromance at a fundamental level could be understood in terms of stressing the ways men interact to complicate notions of both “brotherhood” and “romance.” Love theory teaches that men are socialized to receive love, but are often unwilling or not socialized to return said love. Within Empire we see a concerted efforts, without regards to sexuality, to labor in ways that more fully underscore the potential and promise of male intimacy in a misogynistic and homophobic society.

I think the misogyny that undergirds patriarchy can be located at many levels; the fact that women plainly reference these types of “intimate interactions” as friendships, points to a flaw in the fabric of our society. Masculinity has proven to be so fragile that friendships that are even remotely reflective of the way women interact with one another has to be reclaimed, renamed, and re-identified as a romance between brothers.

Historically, American culture has endorsed moderately severe ideals of masculinity and permissible gender behaviors on the basis that man was a superior being, behaviors that were always negotiated based on the assumption that gender creates within the category of man and woman a very distinct difference. The gay man is most often associated with a type of emasculation or being womanish as the binaries of woman/man are buried due to his complicated positionality within a space that under values the feminine, over values the

masculine, and repulses anything that moves to destabilize these binaries- binaries thought to be fixed, intelligible, and not socially constructed.

The media is one of the driving forces for stabilizing such a system, given the ways people are represented in the media have large implications for how they are treated in real time. Traditionally, women have been represented as the subordinate to man. We live in a world that demands everything be centered in a way that secures heterosexism; heterosexism being understood generally as ideas that permeate to suggest the world was designed for male to female interaction, restricting differences through policing sexuality, gender, and performance.

Moreover, the need to center men can be proven in the media through things like the Bechdel test, especially if we see the media as a space and source for informing our lived daily realities. The Bechdel test is an assessment of the female presence in film that gauge whether there are two named women in a given scene who interact with each other without centering men as the topic of engagement. Often, most films fail this test, as the women in the film are often unnamed and do not interact. Many have argued that the Bechdel test in and of itself produces a kind of problematic reality as it un-complicates a lot. Much of the fight of feminism (and many movements that work from the margin) is to underscore the nuances that are within any given group of people, and to complicate images that are often uncomplicated and presumably fixed. The Bechdel test, while pointing to very interesting phenomenon, can also help to stabilize patriarchy and hetero-normativity. In the way that the rule are simple- have two women in a given scene, humanize them through naming, and allow them to talk about anything other than men- in many instances within these same

movies, these women are still in search of a common goal: a man to solidify their existence. It adheres to problematic patriarchal expectations in the way that it allows for freedom but not really. In the end, it is still propaganda to reinforce ideas that in order to access happiness and a level of peace otherwise inaccessible women need to find “the one.”

I make these points to emphasize that the struggle for queer visibility, alternative gender expressions, and female visibility are inextricably linked. In the same way that the intentions of the Bechdel test is about something “other than men,” so is the need for alternative masculine performances and queer visibility as man is often thought to be cis-gender, unlike women, and most obviously opposite.

The Promise of Boyhood

For me, Empire is about much more than the pathologies: a black family who navigates a business that typically seeks to exploit black talent while reaping the benefits. It is about the promise that society makes to every boy: the promise of freedom through male intimacy. From an early age, boys are socialized to value intimacy between other boys while being cautioned to not engage with women until a certain age. Of course, that age when boys are expected to engage with women is during puberty and beyond. How misogynistic is it that boys are socialized to not view women as subject through which intimacy can be obtain unless there is sex involved? However, the promise of boyhood is, though rooted in misogyny, the promise that as a young boy you have other young boy with whom you voyage, but society teaches all of us that at some point- puberty – that intimacy and that promise is no longer a thing to honor or look forward to. You hear things like, “go outside and play with the boys.” Maybe every now and again you’re admonished to “leave them fast tail girls alone,” which sexualize black girls and inexplicitly and explicitly teaches boys that those girls with whom they aren’t engaging are “fast tailed” and have to be distanced until it is time.

So, as a boy child, male intimacy becomes sacred and a necessary part of feeling like a normal boy, but when boys are advised to not invest in male intimacy in ways that was once vital to their existence they have to develop different ways of interacting. Generally, these same boys who were once intimate, communicative, and open are forced into spaces of being closed to communication, violent, and proving their burgeoning manhood through

the exploitation of women as objects (never seeing them as subjects). Men are pushed into a mental space that demands any visibility by male counter parts is to be denied but for measuring masculinity.

If the general notion about masculinity is to never feel, only show anger, and be nothing like women, then the boy in all of us becomes lost as we journey to obtain masculinity: an intangible and elusive thing that sends us spiraling. However, within *Empire*, I see a shift to reclaim boyhood through the characters Jamal and Hakeem. Many of their interactions are about the ways they both become planted through trusting, entrusting, and investing in one another as subjects. As I will demonstrate later in this paper, it points to the potential of seeing multiple black masculinities on screen as something that is both common, necessary, and a part of our make up, as it allows for a type of reimagining of how our world might be expanded through the pedagogies of people and theories working from the margins.

I am constantly asking myself how two brothers loving one another is a potential site for expanding black masculinity. Masculinity theory suggests American culture is one that is largely anti-homo-social in the way that men are not suppose to interact too closely with each other, which underscores the saliency of alternative forms of male bonding that surface as a result- bromances, fraternities, “brother from another mother” ships, and those familial ties formed through kinship networks. The potential lies in the ability to both, imagine newer ways of seeing masculinity and, too, re-imagining familial ties through the relationship between black men who consider one another to be a brother whether there are blood ties or not. What is always present and evident is the need and desire for male intimacy at the site

of relationships that have long endorsed a dismissal of said intimacy. Through the relationship between Hakeem and Jamal in *Empire*, we see how queerness is imbedded in their determination to self make, become intimate, and still claim a masculine identity. In this way we move from re-inscription to an expansion of what it means to be a black man in our society. In the same way that, as Audre Lorde states, “the true feminist deals out of a lesbian consciousness whether or not she ever sleeps with women,” these interactions allow for a newer reflection of the black masculine, one that deals out of a queer conscious regardless of sexuality: queer in the way that commodified flesh is engaging as opposed to ceasing to exist.

Multiple Masculinities as a Family Song

The episode of *Empire* in which I will be examining is the eighth episode from season 1: *The Lyon's Roar*. *Empire* is a show steeped in the culture of hip-hop. It moves to reflect all of the elements that is a part of hip hop culture, from the competitive nature of the business that often comes to test friendships and familial bonds to the invisibility of queer subjects. This past year, VH1's reality show, *Love and Hip Hop Hollywood* dealt with similar issues as it featured its first openly gay couple. On the reunion show, this couple- Milan Christopher and Miles Brock- spoke to the things they've faced in the industry as openly gay men interested in being hip hop artist. Many of their concerns are in conversation with the concerns of the characters, mainly the patriarch, in *Empire*: concerns that suggest in order to successfully navigate the business; one must negotiate their sexuality.

However, while *Empire* is in conversation with VH1's *Love and Hip Hop*, it, too, moves to imagine novel possibilities within the same spaces that it interrogates. Early in the season, in the first episode, we see a conversation between Lucious and Jamal where his father is basically demanding that he never come out as it might jeopardize his career. While I have no intentions of examining this relationship between Jamal and his father too closely, I would like to underscore the ways in which the show, very early on, establishes this conversation of negotiating one's identity. Also, I would like to highlight that it is between two male characters. What the viewers find out is that Jamal is out to his entire family, and, while his father takes issue with his sexuality, hardly any one else around him is concerned in such a way. And, if we consider the *Empire* as a kind of patriarchal masculinist construct, we

know that queerness cannot exist within a system that is situated in relation to capitalism, sexism, and misogyny. So, throughout the first season, we journey with Jamal as he makes tough decisions about whether or not to come out and how to do it. In pilot episode of the season, we see a conversation with Lucious and Jamal that works to situate both their position to one another.

Lucious: “Your sexuality, that’s a choice son. You can choose to sleep with women if you want to. I’m saying this to help you because I know eventually you gone release another album.”

Jamal: “Yeah, Dad. I get it.”

Lucious: “...and there are people out in this country who don’t appreciate people like you.”

Jamal: “...cause a sissy can’t sell records to black communities, I get it.”

Here we are introduced to the potential influence of his father, but we also get to see how ideals of brotherhood surface and operate within this same space through his relationship with his brother earlier in this episode. The pilot introduces the two of them - Hakeem and Jamal- at a Yacht Party the Lyon family is hosting. Inside a somewhat private space, we see both Jamal and Hakeem interacting with one another through the music. Jamal is playing the piano and singing, Hakeem is rapping. Jamal sings, “things are looking up, I’m ready for tonight. I feel good, real good, can’t nobody hold me down. I’m gone take advantage of all these flashing lights.” Through this song, their interaction with one another, and their mannerisms- the way Jamal smiles when Hakeem raps, the tapping of Jamal’s shoulder as a kind of endorsement or request for endorsement on Hakeem’s part, and the lyrics of the song that fundamentally speaks to a kind of inhabited freedom- we get to see how the two perform. What becomes salient is the ways in which this same kind of staged

performance surfaces within their personal interactions that are less about performance and more rooted in a genuine way of being. Above all, though, we are welcomed into a sacred space that he and his younger brother share- a space where his sexuality is not at the center, masculinity is not a source by which humanity is measured, and those characteristic typically thought to be feminine are a part of their relation to one another.

However, episode eight draws very distinct parallels to the pilot and Jamal and Hakeem's relationship. Loosely, the episode opens with Cookie deciding that there should be a family song. This song will be a re-recording of a song that was once Lucious' in the prime of his career as an artist. However, the lingering question becomes: who will get the last part on the family song? For both brothers, going last on the song symbolizes a kind of public status as an artist and is reflective of their influence as artists.

Through a host of encounters the viewers are welcomed to a more intimate picture of who the Lyons are. This depiction of the family helps to better situate Hakeem in relation to Jamal and vice versa. In prior episodes, too, most of the drama was centered on Cookie- the matriarch figure- being released from jail, the family trying to come to terms with this reality, and Jamal and Hakeem finding their brands as artist. Cookie becomes Jamal's manager and Lucious- the father figure- is Hakeem's manager. Because of Cookie and Lucious' tension, the two brothers are often placed in competition with one another. While those prior issues and questions still secure the season, what becomes very intriguing for me is the unwillingness to be pivoted against one another on both brothers' part. Episode eight

underscores the heart of both their relationship to one another, which is why I've chosen to focus very specifically on this episode.²

In making space for multiple black masculinities it becomes necessary to imagine black men free, and, in so doing, we have to rethink what freedom looks like. In order to do so, though, it is necessary to know what freedom is not. We cannot gauge progress without first being conscious of the things hindering us. I think Lee Daniels offers a look into one possible freedom in this episode through reclaiming a kind of feminist aesthetic and allowing an embrace of those things through the male characters. One way of thinking about a feminist aesthetic in relation to my project might be to consider how Lee Daniels works against ideas that suggest “the two most common pieces defining masculinity are, at all costs, not to be like a woman and not to be gay,” (Chen 2012) and how he creates homo-social spaces that are not exclusively for heterosexual subjects.

I grapple with this idea of “a family song” as I try to make sense of the possibilities of multiple masculine identities/performances and sexualities within a homo-social space typically thought to be reserved for and exclusive to heterosexual subjects. Family denotatively highlights diversity and differences, but it, too, points to an ability to function because of said differences. I would like to posit that maybe the possibility of multiple masculinities and expanded notions of black masculinities is located in an ability to function as a whole, conscious and welcoming of differences in a world that emphasis masculinity (sameness) is what makes boys human.

² Many of my observations are about moments where Hakeem and Jamal are on screen together. I am not often interested in much else that is going on around them, unless I deem it necessary for the reader.

In this episode, they've just discovered their father is dying from a rare disease- ALS. This new knowledge has inspired them- Hakeem, Jamal, and Lucious- to do a family song, a song that was Lucious' in the prime of his career. This song drives the entire episode as everything that happens is centered on the song and whether or not they will complete it. Underlying this idea of a family song is the question of whether or not they can properly function as a family. Given the reality of queer visibility, I see the show extending itself to this large conversation about family and the way that queer visibility challenges notions of family through providing a new test. In the way that Essex Hemphill underscores the saliency of coming out and staying home in his work *Ceremonies*, Lee Daniels work reveals the possibilities of queer visibility in familial spaces. Still, evident in Jamal and Hakeem's relationship, the show points to an ability of the family- the literal family and America, as we know it- to withstand the test and become undone for the sake of redoing. It lends itself to a future that seeks to move toward a queerer planet.

Jamal and Hakeem's first interaction of the episode happens in a church. Hakeem is praying as Jamal enters. They discuss Hakeem's choice to meet in a Catholic church and their father's greed. The first moment that underscores the way their relationship might move to dismantle existing masculine theories happens when Hakeem asks Jamal if he is going to do the family song. In spite of all of that, Jamal is interested in his relationship with his brother. Instead of sweeping things under the rug, he moves to voice his concern:

Jamal: What about us?

Hakeem: What you mean?

Jamal: Last time we was on stage together it was a mess.

Hakeem: That's why it can't happen again.

Jamal: You really want me on the song?

Hakeem: Yeah, come on. We'll kill it.

Here we see a different form a brotherly love, one where at the center of who they are to one another is steeped in willful communication and vulnerability not often attributed to black men or represented in the media. These two have chosen an alternative form of existing and performing through choosing paths to resolutions that are not substantiated by violence or the objectification of women. Even in this scene, Hakeem, who had been at odds with his mother, agreed to work toward being warm because of what his relationship with his older brother symbolizes for him. It is that promised of male intimacy that drives change for the both of them. At the center of this homo-social encounter is warmth that does not allow alternative sexual identities to cause a tear in the fabric of the relationship.

However, the shift in their relationship comes when Hakeem's older girlfriend convinces him that it is in the best interest of his image as a rapper to be last on the family song. After contemplation, Hakeem goes to Cookie who is producing the song and expressing his desires to go last. Though he had already agreed to allow Jamal to go last on the family's song, the conflict between career and family influence him to retract. Jamal discovered his brother's desire to go last at his father's all White party and threatened to not do the family song, but Cookie cautioned that she would allow Lucious to go last as a way of avoiding any foreseeable issues between the two. Here we see how the black matriarch, in the vein of a black feminist praxis, works toward the peace for all involved. I highlight this moment to acknowledge that I have no desire to paint a utopian picture of who these characters are, as both of them are further humanized through their messiness and desire to be visible. It is through being made visible that any of use feel a sense of humanity. However, what becomes salient in these moments is the ways in which these characters come back

from disagreement in ways that debunk existing ideas about masculinity and male interactions: ideas that might suggest the only resolution is to behave in a way that most strongly opposes that of the feminine.

At the All White party that happens in this episode, Lucious suggests that Jamal perform during the live streaming. Jamal complies. Unbeknownst to Lucious, Jamal had prepared a version of the family song that will disclose to the world, while live streaming, his sexuality. As he prepares to perform, he offers: “the most brilliant man I know told me that music is the truth. I’m honored to use his music to explain to you {the viewers} some of my truth.” As the music starts, the camera pans on Lucious who stands blissful amid a crowd of party guest. The crowd is anxiously awaiting the performance, while Lucious is excited to witness.

His father has agreed to allow him to sing under the impression that Jamal would mask his sexual identity. Jamal started to sing the song, which at first reads as very hetero-normative. However, once he reaches the hook of the song, irrevocable damage is achieved. The hook: “this the kind of song that makes a man love a man.” While the crowd is unbothered by Jamal’s declaration, Lucious stands frozen and sullen. It’s interesting to see the contrast between the crowd’s reaction-which included his mother, brothers, and uncle-and his father’s reaction. Moreover, what comes through in this moment as Hakeem sits glaring blissfully at the stage in his all white is his admiration for Jamal’s choice to come out. There even seems to be a lack of consideration on both of their parts about the will of their father, underscoring the ways in which brotherhood moves to do work that is important to the tenets of black feminism; work situated in a kind of community building effort in which

support and a move toward dismantling a system is at the center of the operation of things. While the crowd was unanimously unaffected by Jamal's coming out, the father figure was one of the only people in the room really affected by the display of male-to-male desire.

It is interesting, too, to point out Jamal's fairly masculine gender performance, one not necessarily masked or hyper-masculine. Traditionally, when we have been offered images of black queer men, they operate within strict binaries of feminine and masculine, often painted as feminine to create the contrast and departure from acceptable masculine representations. Here, Jamal does not adhere to this stereotypical way of representing the black queer man. Still, Lucious's reaction points to the ways masculinity is locked in and measured through the use of the phallic. Coming out the closet becomes problematic through the visibility of once invisible subjects, invisibility that contributed to the rendering of queerness/ gayness as abnormality and oddity, which helps to further stabilize heteronormativity.

What this contract between Lucious and everybody else does, though, is allow us to see the promise of the potential located in an embrace of queerness and alternative masculinities and sexualities; the promise to co-exist regardless of differences made obvious through social constructs like sexuality. This contrast helps to underscore the potential of multiple masculinities in homo-social, or social spaces typically thought to be reserved for heterosexual subjects.

The potential really comes through in the last interaction of the episode between the two brothers. Knock! Knock! It is the morning after the party. Jamal opens the door to find his brother Hakeem, though they had fallen out due to differences with how the family song

should be tended to, they were still in communication. “You’re famous, huh?” Hakeem asked Jamal in a mocking tone to which Jamal replies, “and you stupid. You want something to eat?” Still sustaining the smile with which he entered, Hakeem goes on to apologize for asking to go last on the song.

Hakeem: “Look, my bad for asking Cookie to go last.”

Jamal: “Yeah fool. Thought we wasn’t gone fight no more?”

Hakeem: “But truth be told I ain’t come here to talk about that, the song, Empire... none of that. I came brother to brother to tell you how proud I am of you. I think it’s the bravest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

I want to first point out the moment where Hakeem speaks “brother to brother,” echoing the spirit of queer writers Joseph Beam and Marlon Riggs. In the way that “black men loving black men is the revolutionary act,” this interaction between Jamal and Hakeem tells of a movement, a revolution of sorts. In this moment, we witness black men loving each other on multiple levels and acting outside of a regime that suggest male intimacy is reserved for heterosexual white men. We are invited to imagine a space where the black community is moving toward a place of inclusion and acceptance. The party scene emphasizes a vision, one where the patriarch is the only one left to still fear sexuality as everyone else around is embracing the complexity of it and, in many ways, normalizing it. It’s a newer freedom being projected: a freedom that accounts for the feminine in all of us, the queer in all of us, and one that works from the margins. Through Jamal and Hakeem’s relationship we are allowed to reimagine freedom that moves to endorse a disruption of the normative and offer up additional ways of doing blackness and maleness simultaneously, in so doing this show offers a representation of black masculinity that is unprecedented but familiar, functional, layered, and progress in search of newer freedoms.

Conclusion

So, I hold in my hand a book: *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. I ask myself: what does a queer planet look like? A queer planet, in this moment, from my point of view, looks like black men loving black men in revolutionary ways. A queer planet looks like black men being able to carry the promise of boyhood well into adulthood. A queer planet looks like black men, black boys, and black communities developing praxis of resistance that doesn't teach black boys to see young black girls as "fast tailed" and an object by which to keep distance until the time is right. A queer planet looks like a reconfiguration of things we've seen already.

In a power-laden society, sure, we can only recreate what we have seen and we are bound to re-inscribe imbalance at a point. However, a queer planet allows for a sort of toiling that makes it okay to try, get it wrong, get back up, and make efforts to get it right. In the age of a new "carefree black boy movement," multiple representations of black masculinities and sexualities, and praxis that resist binaries, I am not so sure we are in "fear of a queer planet" after all

So, yes I continue to grapple with the question: "what's so radical about two brothers sharing moments of intimacy?" However, I have an idea. What makes this relationship so radical is the willingness of two black men to come together at the site of seeming opposing sexualities, debunk ideas about the function of black masculinity, create space for the expansion of black masculine representation and feminize the masculine which lends itself to a freer world. This show is radical in the way that it re-recognizes the boy in all of us, that part of us that bought into the promise of male intimacy as vital to our being.

The potential is that by existing -boys, multiple masculinities, and feminized subjects- we move to eradicate misogyny and blur binaries that are more about the fragility of masculinity than any real substantiated concerns. We move to make space for a reality that does not demand young black boy construct their humanity through socially constructed and damaging ideals like masculinity. The potential is that we create a family song, a song that accounts for all of our differences and we allow those who are at the margin to go last and lead in our progression.

Lee Daniels offers an “ethics of self.” Within this “ethics of self” is the potential of black feminism’s promise outlined in Lucille Clifton’s poem *won’t you celebrate with me*:

“won’t you celebrate with me/ what i have shaped into/ a kind of
life? i had no model./ born in Babylon/ both nonwhite and woman/
what did i see to be except myself?/ i made it up/ here on this bridge
between/ starshine and clay,/ my one hand holding tight/ my other
hand; come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to
kill me/ and has failed.”

“I made it up,” she says, pointing to the potential of black womanhood and blackness to create and recreate at the site of having no model for being and existing. She emphasizes the non-humanness of black womanhood to suggest an understanding of blackness that transcends that of human and whiteness- one that exists when it was to be a dead subject. This poem emphasizes the queerness of black feminism and the queerness of blackness. It emphasizes the superhuman-ness of subjects feeling when they were suppose to cease to exist. “To be a “death-bound subject” is to be a queer subject, always in danger of being destroyed. Physically. Spiritually. Representationally.” (Jeffrey Q. McCune 2015)
However, Clifton sees being a death-bound subject as a chance to reconstruct the self at the

site of being non-human and non-white- black.

In this way, I imagine the potential of black feminism within the Empire. Black feminism lends itself to the reconstruction of black, queer, and other(ed) subjects at the site of seeing nothing else to be but the self: a self that functions and is constructed outside of the dominating forces of patriarchy and white supremacy. This is the potential of unmaking him. This is the promise.

Bibliography

Bailey, Marlon. *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* . Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press , 2013 .

Bailey, Moya. "Homolotent Masculinity & Hip Hop Culture." *Project Muse* (State University of New York Press), 2013 : 187-199 .

Baldwin, James. "On Being White... and Other Lies ." (Essence) 1984.

Beam, Joseph. "Introduction." In *In The Life* , by Joseph Beam. Washington , DC : RedBone Press , 2008 .

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble* . New York : Routledge , 1999.

Carbado, Devon W. "Privilege." In *Black Queer Studies* , by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, 190-212. Durham : Duke University Press , 2005.

Carby, Hazel V. "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women.'" In *The Jazz Cadence of American Blues*, by Robert G. O'Meally, 470-483. Columbia University Press, 1998.

Carey, Tamika L. "Take Your Place: Rhetorical Healing and Black Womanhood in Tyler Perry's Films ." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (The University of Chicago), 2014 : 999-1021.

Chen, Elizabeth J. "Caught In a Bad Bromance." *Texas Journal of Women and the Law* 21, no. 2 (2012): 241-266.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bullgadders, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." In *Black Queer Studies* , by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, 21-51. Durham : Duke University Press , 2005.

Collins, Patrica Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* . New York : Routledge , 2005.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* . Vol. 1991. Routledge Press .

Cvetkovich, Ann. "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture ." *Camera Obscura* (Duke Univeristy Press), 2002 .

Davies, Carole Boyce. *Caribbean Spaces: Escape from the Twilight Zone* . University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis :

University of Minnesota Press , 1993 .

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* . Maryknoll , NY : Orbis Books , 1999.

Durham, Aisha , Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris. "The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay ." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (University of Chicago) 38, no. 3 (2013).

Elia, John P. , and Gust A. Yep . "Racialized Masculinities and the New Homonormativity in LOGO's Noah's Arc ." *Journal of Homosexuality* (Routledge), 2012: 890-911.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Mask* . Grove Press , 2008 .

Fanon, Frantz. "the fact of blackness." In *Visual Culture: the reader*, by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall , 417-420. London : SAGE Publications Ltd , 1999.

Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* . Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press , 2003 .

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* . New York : Vintage Books , 1990.

Gray, Herman. "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture ." *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995): 401-405.

Griffin, Horace L. *their own receive them not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* . Eugene , Oregon : Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.

Halberstam, J. Jack. "Gaga Feminism for Beginners ." In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* , by J. Jack Halberstam, 1-29. Beacon Press , 2013.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In *The Cultural Studies Reader* , by Simon During.
Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'." In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, by John Storey. Pearson, 1998 .

Harris, Laura Alexandra. "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle." *Feminist Review: Contesting Feminine Orthodoxies* (Palgrave Macmillan Journals), 1996 : 3-30 .

Hemphill, Essex. *Ceremonies* . San Francisco, California: Cleis Press Inc., 2000.

Hendricks, Amber. "The Creation of the Ideal- Masculine Rhetoric to Construct Black Male Identity." *Valley Voices: A Literary Review* 74-83.

Hoad, Neville. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* . Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press , 2007.

Holland, Sharon P. ""Hom" is a Four-Letter Word ." *Black Queer Studies* (Duke University

Press) 1 (2005): ix-xiii.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators ." In *Reel to Real: race, sex and class at the movies* , by bell hooks, 253-275. NY , 1996.

—. *We Rea Coole: Black Men and Masculinity* . New York : Routledge , 2003.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . Dover Publications , 2001 .

Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr. "The Queerness of Blackness ." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* (Michigan State University Press) 2, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 173-176 .

Jenkins, Ramon DeMar. "Black Fraternal Organizations: Understanding the Development of Hegemonic Masculinity and Sexuality ." *Journal of African American Studies* (Springer+Business Media, LLC 2010), 2012: 226-235.

Johnson, E. Patrick. "'Quare' Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother ." *Black Queer Studies* (Duke University Press) 1 (2005): 124-158.

—. *Appropriating Blackness* . Durham : Duke University Press , 2003.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* . Boston : Beacon Press , 2002.

Livermon, Xavier. "Queer(y)ing Freedom: Black Queer Visibilities in Postapartheid South Africa ." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Duke University Press), 2012: 297-323.

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House ." In *Sister Outsider* , by Audre Lorde, 110-113. Berkeley : Crossing Press , 2007.

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic ." In *Sister Outsider* , by Audre Lorde. New York : South End Press , 1984.

Magee, Lenox. *ChicagoNow*. October 29 , 2010 . <http://www.chicagonow.com/lenox-and-the-second-city/2010/10/another-african-american-gay-male-commits-suicide/> (accessed December 14 , 2015).

McBride, Dwight. *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays On Race and Sexuality*. New York : NYU Press , 2005 .

Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* . New York : NYU Press , 2009 .

Perez, Hiram. *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* . New York : Univeristy Press , 2015.

- Tongue Untied* . Directed by Marlon Riggs. Performed by Marlon Riggs. 1989.
 Robinson, Philip. "When I Stopped Kissing My Father ." In *In The Life* , by Joseph Beam.
 Washington , DC : Redbone Press , 2008 .
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet* . Berkeley : University of California Press ,
 2008.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay." In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer
 Politics and Social Theory* , by Michael Warner, 69-81. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
 Press , 1993.
- Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Enuf* . New
 York : Scribner Poetry , 1997.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle
 Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14 (2008): 191-215 .
- Walcott, Rinaldo. "Reconstructing Masculinity; or, The Drag of Black Masculinity ." *Small
 Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* (Duke University Press Journals), March 2015: 75-89.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist
 Theories of the Human* . Durham : Duke University Press , 2014.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. "Doing Gender ." *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (June
 1987): 125-151 .
- Wright, Michelle M. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Durham : Duke
 University Press , 2005 .