

# Courting the Object: A Taxonomy of Black Queer Rhetoric

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**J**amal Lewis, Class of 2014, returns for his annual homecoming event at Morehouse College wearing a shirt with “Morehouse Fag” on the front. In the wake of the historically Black all-male college’s controversial dress code from 2009 that garnered national attention for banning men on campus from wearing women’s clothing, a reporter inquires about the shirt’s meaning for Jamal: “What that shirt really meant for me in that moment was that I was Other, and ‘fag’ was the only language that I had to really capture that otherness,” Lewis tells the reporter (Giorgis). As part of an op-ed about the “archetypal Morehouse Man,” he poses for a photo in front of the gate that leads into campus while wearing tightly fitted velvet spandex pants and a short-sleeved matching leather top. His nails are semi long and painted. His hair is short and dyed blond. His eyes are covered with large circular shades. Indeed, he queers the demarcated material, aesthetic, and discursive terrains of the so-called “Morehouse Man.” In the aftermath of what some argue is an indictment on a few students “living a gay lifestyle that is leading them to dress a way we do not expect in Morehouse men” (Mungin), Jamal’s self-celebratory presence was as much about his right to reinterpret the gendering of language at his alma mater as it was about his right to name Morehouse College as a habitable space for Black faggotry.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, what we learn from the discursive practices of queer Black college men like Jamal demonstrates how we might locate language rights at the intersections of sexuality, race, vernacular language communities, and Black sexual politics. In his recent work “Black Masculine Language,” David Kirkland acutely articulates that we need a nuanced perspective on what he calls

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Black masculine language practices that clarifies its importance in American linguistic heritage and “frees Black people from the tangles of linguistic racism and deficit logics” (835). I agree. But we also need a perspective that challenges asymmetrically ascribed gender orders with underlying status privileges and linguistic agency, especially when they exist in vernacular communities. Eric Pritchard suggests that we must take an intersectional approach to “explore multiple oppressions and identities in ways that do not elide the specificity of difference but resist the undertheorizing of identities by acknowledging their complexities in our analysis of the everyday” (“For Colored Kids” 324). Therefore, paying attention to multiple subject positions can reveal how orientations to knowledge-making are layered and informed by intersecting elements shaping the daily lives of Black LGBTQ students.

I seek to understand how queer intersectional practices become especially critical for considering queer Black male college writers who factor their sexual identities into their embodied language experiences. In order to do so, I profile two students, Damon and Leslie,<sup>2</sup> focusing more extensively on Leslie. I consider how these identities are factored in and across situational articulations of Black expression and everyday life, and how queer Black college men are gendering and being gendered by language. I demonstrate how these cultivated language behaviors create various contexts for subject formation that queer Black college men perform and contest across place and space. As Pritchard eloquently states, for many Black LGBTQ people, “historical rootedness is a key ingredient to Black LGBTQ identity construction, affirmation, values, ways of knowing, and ways of being” (“Like Signposts” 31). Thus, we must ask: What are the rhetorical tools that give queer Black college men a way to maintain a reflexive stance in this “rootedness” as they performatively experiment with and interrogate a range of symbolic Black masculinities?

In my plunge into the textual lives of two queer Black college male writers, a few arguments surface as especially important for situating Black queer rhetoric<sup>3</sup> as a framework for understanding how writing, language, and queer Black male identity formation intersect. First, Black queer rhetorical practices call into question ways Black college men have learned to negotiate their relationships with African American Vernacular English (AAVE). But more specifically, as writers, queer rhetorical practices demonstrate how queer Black college men come to terms with, challenge, and change the realities that homophobic vernacular creates. Secondly, queer Black college men are using rhetoric to demonstrate the critical capacity and ability to manage the dissonances they experience in their home lives when these realities are the designated spaces that they call community. These are spaces where their biological and fictive kinships are cultivated, solidified, and affirmed by and through how they communicate with

their genders to one another and how they participate in language communities.

A theoretical framing of queer rhetorical practices locates visibility and erasure as central aspects informing the process of identity formation. Erin Rand's notion of queer critical rhetoric argues that we need a rhetorical approach that "examines previously overlooked queer objects, but in doing so . . . reveals the blind spots of analysis both inadvertent and intentional and forces a recalibration of theories that previously have rendered such objects invisible, inconsequential, or irrelevant" (534). I extrapolate this framework in formulating a taxonomy of Black queer rhetorical practices that characterize ways queer Black college men make discourses, bodies, and language practices visible and possible that have been, as Rand argues, "excised" from their queerness.

Queer Black masculinity as an interpretive framework is useful for identifying and contesting sociolinguistic constructions of race and gender that "fix" subjects "outside of the purview of the public sphere" (Munoz 8). It can also be a subject of inquiry for theorizing African American Vernacular English (AAVE) practices as counterhegemonic by and through an ontological undoing of language practices that are connected to ways of being. Furthermore, a Black queer rhetoric factors race, class, gender, and sexuality as "intersectional paradigms" rather than "mutually exclusive" categories (Collins, "Gender" 41; Crenshaw 1242). Kimberlé Crenshaw's Black feminist theory of intersectionality is useful here in how it contends that both racism and sexism are interlocking constructs that collectively factor into violence against women of color. She contends that we must "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1245). While it is important to acknowledge how Black women are oppressed on the basis of multiple identity markers they embody, intersectionality is also useful for understanding how queer Black male bodies are constructed within a matrix of interlocking significations that can be oppressive (Matua 22). A Black queer rhetoric considers how the terrain of hegemonic Black masculinity is made unsteady when queer Black college men practice reflexive positionalities within and beyond vernacular discourses. This enables a queering of masculinity that "is all about excess, pushing boundaries of the possible, showing up language and discursive categories more specifically for their inadequacies" (Giffney 8). From this perspective, it becomes possible to construct a queer imagination that accounts for ways that language and the body collectively enunciate "embodied resistance" and designates the queer Black body as "a site of proliferative resignifications" (Rodriguez 277). Within this theoretical framework, there is an inventive/resistance experience that is critical for understanding orientations to knowledge-making when queer Black college men take into account how their bodies communicate as classed, racialized, erased, and sexed by and through language systems.

**PRECARIOUS PEDAGOGY: INVENTING  
THE SITUATION FOR WRITING**

After accepting my first tenure-track job, at Catholic Vincentian University, I learned that the university had not allowed the LGBTQ student body to operate as an organization for the previous twenty-five years. The student governing body had opposed their requests because the group's aims were not consistent with the religious values and beliefs of the university. Meanwhile, I designed a composition course titled *Gents, Jocks, Jerks, and other Queers: W(r)iting Masculinity in College Culture*. I wanted a way to engage our student body in conversations about gender and rhetoric. Because our university was ranked as one of the most ethnically diverse university in the country, I was interested in having conversations about the intersectional spaces of gender and sexuality and how they aligned with diversity matters in college culture. Teaching a writing intensive course on college masculinities and language was not a deliberate response to the university's rejection of an LGBTQ campus organization. But I did see the university's conservative history as an opportunity to explore how institutions use language to mark and marginalize different student body groups. Thus, language, the body, and how we construct social and material geographies became a central theme in our semester-long conversations.

Students composed a language autobiography that explored how language influenced their understanding of gender and sexuality. This personal essay was framed as a formal research project that asked them to situate the personal narrative within a larger academic conversation that required citing secondary sources. This was a different approach to how I usually taught narrative writing. An additional learning objective was for writers to explore how a public perception or institutional value informed their personal beliefs and shaped their experiences. This was an opportunity to politicize the personal by situating it within a formal academic conversation about gender, language, and sexuality. I wanted them to experiment with designating their own stories and voices as essential sites of knowledge-making. This kind of research writing as a cultural rhetorical practice works against prioritizing what Royster and Williams call "the primacy of officialized narratives that sanction mind/body splits when doing knowledge work in the academy (563). This was not done without regard to acknowledging the multiple situations that would call for students to use one voice or another beyond our class. Wallace and Ewald assert that the "pedagogy that pretends that students can write in any voice and any style without regard to others' perceptions and expectations is naïve at best" (137). But this doesn't mean that the various voices that students use must be dispelled in the making of knowledge and doing formal research. Rather, the personal voice is connected

to a history, and histories are always-already located in a social and political universe. As Nancy Shoemaker states, the personal story “invites different interpretations” and challenges the authority of institutions like archives or courts without conceding complete relativism (23). For student writers, discovering ways to position their stories in and between academic conversations, or what we might otherwise call secondary sources, is a counter hegemonic practice of centralizing alternative orientations to knowledge making, alternative voices, and Englishes if the situation deems it necessary.

#### LISTENING AS THEY SPEAK: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DAMON

*You see, there's a difference between formal schoolin' and education from the streets. I'm from the education of the streets. ~Damon*

It's Friday and Richard Blanco's "Making a Man Out of Me" is on deck for discussion. We talk about family and belonging. We testify about our languages of intimacy and the rhetoric underlining our affirming kinships with mothers and siblings. We reflect on how our mother tongues evoke nostalgia. Some students acknowledge how family life is where they first learned how language could be used to enact forms of violence and trauma. Damon sits quietly in the back of the classroom looking down with his laptop open. He rests his chin in the palm of his hand. Most days he did not feel compelled to speak, but when he did, he spoke with a nasally deep southern drawl. He sometimes spoke with dismissive nonchalance, as if the readings assigned were situated in a fantasy, as if the ways that we made meaning of texts were impractical or did not have any relevance to what was happening in the real world. Damon had a way of positioning himself as part student, part life teacher, and part tourist passing through the ivory tower.

I wondered if Damon offered the distinction between formal and "street" education as a critique of how juxtaposed our ways and his way of ordering the world seemed in his mind. Perhaps it was a world he believed was painted so colorfully distinct from any world that neither his classmates nor I had lived, a world which seemed so far removed from our classroom, yet critically relevant and close. Perhaps he asserted this position as a way of establishing his ethos as a twenty-seven-year-old who had spent time sleeping on the streets of West 22nd between 10th avenue and West Side Highway, had lived in LGBT homeless shelters, battled and overcame drug addictions and was now in a writing class full of eighteen-year-olds, some of whom were experiencing their first taste of independence. Perhaps his assertion was an indictment on our privilege to talk about ideas just for the sake of sharing and building knowledge. Maybe Damon felt that merely sharing and building was just a waste of time if it did not amount

to a tangible change to his immediate socioeconomic conditions. Damon had indeed been schooled by the vicissitudes of life. And as a self-identified Black gay man “from the streets,” he offered narrations of this life in class as well as in his writing:

In the beginning I moved out of my parent’s house due to the fact that my momma and I wasn’t seeing eye to eye about my sexual[ity]. She stated to me that she ain’t raising no faggots in her house. So I made the conscious decision to move out at 18 years old. From that point on I know I had to do whatever it was that I needed for me to survive without having to go back and live with my momma . . . Then I moved with my father who abused drugs. By him borrowing money from me three and four times a night. After I stopped lending money out [to him] then later I had to move because he was so called upset that I was gay but he really suggested that I leave when he saw that [I] wasn’t lending any money anymore. (“My Belonging Essay”)

Damon frames his sexuality as the floating signifier in searching for a sense of belonging as a Black queer man who navigates the identity politics of a southern Black family structure. The intersecting themes of homophobia and displacement, as articulated through the voice of his Black mother and being evicted by a Black father, are what Jose Munoz would call “enactments of erasure” (9). These erasures construct a conditional identity politics that situates Damon in multiple dichotomies: being vs performing, personal choice vs biology, being a Black son vs being gay. Maybe Damon was raised in a family where one could never be a faggot unless he chose to be one, and his choice to willfully opt for abjection was the reprehensible sin that threatened the Black family unit. Damon’s story suggests that Black queer bodies, even our own sons, can and will find themselves on the proverbial chopping block and sentenced to a social death for being gay. Even our own Black sons can and will become disposable in the name of preserving the heteropatriarchal Black family as a safe and sanctified space. This illuminates the precarious relationship between Black gay men and Black institutions, such as Black churches, barbershops, historically Black universities, the Black family, and the Black home. These language communities become sites of “contestation, violence, [and] exclusion on the one hand and resistance, negotiation and revision on the other” (Bailey 2). Furthermore, Damon’s familial relationships crystallize how Black queer college males are either forced out of or choose to leave the biological home. Marlon Bailey states that those who choose to remain face the “‘familial ultimatum’ that requires them to hide or dispense with their non-normative gender and sexual identities and practices in order to remain a full-fledged part of both the (biological) family and home (concrete building) in which the family lives” (8).

Damon “disidentifies” with his “illegibility” as a faggot in his momma’s

house (Munoz 14, Neal 8). And this offers a moment for understanding how he subsequently imagines the Black queer self through both rejecting and reconfiguring homophobic language informing Black family structures that he either forsakes or is forced to leave. This becomes evident when Damon leaves home and finds another family:

Kareem Williams was like Big Mama to all the younger homosexuals in town in which wasn't many, Michael, Shavon, Steven and Ishmel and where there are homosexual there are the Fagg Hags, Tasha Hampton, and Tasha Jackson, and Mika Jackson from New Jersey. However Kareem was the center of the circle and I was included. I thought that I found real friends and family that love and cared about me. So I became addicted to the gay lifestyle seeking acceptance, not realizing acceptance of our addiction is something that goes beyond my conscious admission, due to the fact that I became an addict long before I pick up the drugs. I became addict to the gay seeking acceptance, so when Kareem went to the mall to hustle that is where I learned the art of Boosting<sup>4</sup> clothes.

Damon uses addiction as a meaningful metaphor to tell a story about love, hardship with drugs, and petty larceny. But there is also a language play of inversion used here that is critical for illuminating the rhetorical potential of the Black family structure as maternal and affirming of queerness. In his chosen family, Kareem is the "Big Mama" who looks after "all the younger homosexuals" and "Fagg Hags." Through this rereading of family, Damon renames and "counter identifies" with the Black heteronormative home that he previously experiences. Furthermore, he queers a traditional Black parental figure and positively inverts the linguistic value of the "fagg" as an agent for creating meaningful social bonds. The Big Mama in Black communities is the Black grandmother, typically a central figure in the Black family household, who is the anchor and core that holds the family together (Smitherman, *Word* 68; Holston 5). Damon reconfigures the Black grandmother through the material condition of Kareem's body (and possibly his sexuality) and makes possible an alternative and nuanced iteration of Black maternal love that is accepting of Black queer bodies.

Furthermore, the "Fagg Hagg" (more commonly *fag hag*) is framed within this context as a family member and friend who reads as authentic, inclusive, and cares for Damon. The fag hag in gay male social spaces is typically identified as a heterosexual woman who spends much of her time with gay men. She is the gay man's best friend. We might suggest that the fag hag symbolically represents the possibility of a feminized or cis-gendered female embodied love and affirmation of queer Black subjectivity. In Damon's story, the fag hag's place and meaning are juxtaposed to the Black mother who "ain't raising no faggots in her house." By and through nuancing identity formations in and between vernacular understandings of family and sexuality, Damon imagines, constructs, and articulates a Black love

for queer bodies that is made possible within the Black family structure. And more critically, Damon's Big Mama, a staple Black maternal figure, is a citation of the traditional heteronormative Black family unit that is not always- already "culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying [gay] subject" (Munoz 9). Damon's new family—new mama, fag hags, and all—are articulated between and through a language of subalternity. And this creates a meaningful space for making the rhetorical situation of communion a possibility.

**"THAT NIGGA GAY AS HELL": MAKING SPACE IN  
THIS LANGUAGE I CALL HOME**

*My paper is intended for everyone to read and I say this because the culture that we are in teaches us what sexuality and masculinity is in such Black and White terms and I want to break the typical thoughts and stereotypes of masculinity and sexuality ~Leslie*

Leslie sits expressionless at a table of four in our college writing course. He wears a large red bubble coat with fur lining the hood, a pair of cinnamon-colored Timberland boots with snow residue on the soles and black sweat pants. He is the only Black student in the class. It is the fourth week in the semester, and the first major writing assignment is due today. As our class ends, students stack their final drafts on my desk on their way out. Leslie lingers behind, turning in his paper last. "I decided to include a visual aid with my essay. I just felt it would add a nice touch to my paper," he mumbles in a scratchy baritone voice, without stopping or making much eye contact with me. As the class empties I take a look at Leslie's visual aid on his cover page. It is a large black-and-white close-up photo of two young, muscular Black men lying on an empty beach. It pervasively takes up most of the white space on the page. One man is straddled on top of the other. They wear Speedo swim trunks and passionately kiss each other. Grains of sand stick to their skin. The one being straddled has both hands on the ass of his lover. One hand pulls his swim trunks down in a sexually suggestive manner. The image is unabashedly erotic. And above them is Leslie's essay title that reads in bold quotations, "That Nigga Gay as Hell."

I utter the title in a hushed tone to myself. The sounds of Blackness echoed in the empty space between "Nigga" and "Gay" otherwise occupied by the conventional copula. I listen to my own voice as I try on different intonations of the phrase. It is strangely familiar. It is familiarly strange. It recalls for me the homophobia that masqueraded in joking verbal exchanges young Black boys and I dealt each other when we got too soft or hugged each other for too long at morning bus stops or in afternoon locker rooms. We uttered and performed our masculinities with Black idioms on neighborhood basketball courts, freestylelin'



on yellow school buses or high sidin' in barbershops on Saturday mornings. We used language to police our bodies and to keep our masculinities in check. And when a brotha broke step with the gender norm, "That nigga gay as hell," was the verbal corrective that he was swiftly dealt. Unlike Damon, whose situation seemed to leave him no choice but to forsake his language communities, Leslie's story is about negotiating these verbal correctives in his home and school life. It is about how queer Black bodies elicit a level of fear, resentment, and discomfort that necessitates the naming of being gay as a transgression. It is about how that fear, resentment, and discomfort are used to justify correcting what kinds of Black bodies matter. It is about how queer Black boys find inventive ways to fit within Black communications systems informed by heteronormative and homophobic Black identity politics.

Leslie's frame for understanding Black masculine tropes "according to how [his] city, Detroit defined it" illuminates a process of negotiating vernacular discourses that "link Black hyper heterosexuality with racial authenticity" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 106). His essay demonstrates a conflicting allegiance to Black hegemonic masculinity—a reality that is often symptomatic of the cognitive dissonances young queer Black men experience while navigating college campuses. Vershawn Young's ethnographic study sheds light on how these rhetorical situations call for Black men to "put on contradictory displays of masculinity" and the linguistic and embodied practice they use to enact these roles (54). Taking into account Young's exploration of how the "burden of racial performance produces social and linguistic pressures that coerces [Black men] to give conflicting gender performances" (54) Damon's and Leslie's stories call for us to consider how the role of the vernacular as "a system of living" and being in the world (Richardson 16) plays a part in queer Black college male subject formation. They demonstrate the viability of the intersecting and linguistic performances of race and gender. That Damon is twice faced with the dilemma of being rebuked and cast out of his home might indicate that he must perform gender with a necessary fluency, a feat that we will later discover Leslie endeavors to achieve.

Furthermore, framing AAVE as a worldview considers the ontological relationship between language, social practices, and reality formation. Sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman maintains,

Reality is not merely socially, but sociolinguistically constructed. Real-world experience and phenomena do not exist in some raw, undifferentiated form. Rather, reality is always filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape. (Smitherman, "Talkin' and Testifyin" 43)

So how might queer Black college men like Leslie and Damon be interpolated through these sociolinguistic constructions of reality? Nothing exists outside of

language. Thus, how we actualize Black masculinity by and through the vernacular begins with how we name it and ascribe these names onto bodies, sexualities, and genders. Furthermore, how we name and qualify masculinities creates a sexual politics of identity formation in which Black men are subjugated to and by the call of language to live out sanctioned sexual identities. For example, when, as a young Black boy, I first heard my grandmother say, “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” it did more than claim what she believed was the natural way of being in the world. It did more than clarify her dogged devotion to her most high God or illuminate her steadfast moral convictions. The performance of her proclaimed truth had a vernacular affect that was actualized in her idiomatic expression, her matter-of-fact intonation, her defiant hand on her hip, her blurted “oooh Lawd!” and “Jesus help us!” when gay men paraded across her television screen. She “performatively spoke” into existence the kinds of masculinities acceptable for me and every other Black boy in the ’hood to emulate (Yancy 291). Her words were both prophetic and warning—that should I want Adam instead of Eve, my sexual transgression would also be called and cast out, judged and condemned by God and her. These utterances were in communion with those echoed in the churches, barbershops, and on the street corners of my Black working-class community on the south side of Dallas, TX. They were personified in my father’s dramatized struts around our suburban home as he chanted military cadences in the kitchen on Saturday mornings when back from the military base. These were the makings of gender tropes that I dismissed with nonchalance yet secretly desired. These strutting masculinities had a language about them. They had a way of speaking eloquently to the world what I often stuttered as I wrestled with when and where I entered the spectrum of masculinity as a young Black boy. These utterances revealed how our everyday domestic, cultural, and academic practices casually and simultaneously construct closets where we are to bind and confine our abjections.

Leslie’s title and story are spaces for raising questions about the discursive limits of vernacular masculinities. For example, if the *nigga* serves as a staple of Black heterosexual masculinity in vernacular culture, how do queer Black men interrogate the discursive limits of the *nigga*? How are these limits defined by a vernacularized sexual economy of race that elevates and sanctions the value of heteronormativity in spaces occupied by young Black men? And how might Leslie reveal how queer Black men simultaneously navigate heteronormative politics of the vernacular while creating spaces of possibility within its discursive frameworks? I begin to answer these questions by examining how Leslie uses writing to interrogate, imagine, and perform possible racial and gendered selves. As a student attending a Catholic university on the East Coast, Leslie’s exploration of sexuality through the prism of language, place, and space also speak to

larger institutional rhetorics that marginalize and mark LGBTQ students on a college campus.

### LOCATING MEANINGFUL SPACES: DETROIT MASCULINITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF LOOKING

Leslie was a college freshman from “the D,” as he often called it in our classroom discussions. “White folks like to say they from Detroit but they really live in the ‘burbs,” Leslie said on our first day, when we did class introductions. “They ain’t from the D. I live in the D. There’s a difference.” This naming distinction invokes Detroit’s long history of class and racial polarities between its Black and White communities. But more critically, it reflects Black folks’ annoyance and dismissal of peripheral suburban Whites masquerading as inner-city natives for street cred. Leslie’s vernacular distinction of Detroit as “the D” asserts a class identity and heritage of place. He is proud of where he is from. And yet, this allegiance is betrayed by a homophobic Black identity politics:

As I recall I have always been an awkward individual, I never really fit in with anyone. I still have fresh memories of all the taunting, teasing, and bullying that I endured not only in my elementary school career, but my middle and high school careers as well. Most of these years, I received much verbal and physical bullying; high school was the only exception. The main word I’ve heard from dudes throughout my life has been *GAY*! When I typed that last sentence thoughts of children tossing that word at me come to mind, and I must say, though it has made me stronger, it used to hurt like hell . . . I loathe the word *gay* more than the most wretched I have ever known. However, I hate the word *fag* even more. I would hear dudes say that word as I walked by. Though they were not talking to me, I was more than fully aware that they were talking about me. Both words irked me to the core, but they were eventually substituted for the phrase, “that nigga gay as hell.”

Leslie reflects on the evocative power that language plays in creating social geographies and the conditions that constitute an inclusion/exclusion dichotomy. While *gay* and *fag* work as signifiers of difference and displacement, they help frame the rhetorical situation of Leslie’s schooling experiences and create underlying assertions for him about what kinds of bodies and sexualities can exist in the spaces he occupies. They also indicate the linguistic consequences of cohabitating this space with presumably heterosexual Black college males. Leslie’s recollection of his deep past with homophobic language reveals the emotional work of still coming to terms with how the signifying power of AAVE functions in the urban Black spaces where he is socialized into gender norms. The extent of this power is made evident even as he types words to the page.

While Leslie reflects on the effect of language he experienced in grade school, he presently works through this affect as a strategy for ultimately taxonomizing “that nigga gay as hell” as both a label and discursive space that he is assigned. While *gay* and *fag* invoke a past of verbal abuse and bullying for Leslie, I wondered if being called a nigga indicated discursive possibility for Leslie. In “Mommy, What Does ‘Nigger’ Mean?” Gloria Naylor explains how *nigga* was reserved for a man “who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought approval for his strength, intelligence and drive.” Furthermore, it represented “the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against odds into a victorious statement of being” (345). It indicated that he could still be Black or at least be organically connected to Black culture. Being called *nigga* still functioned as a symbolic indication of cultural membership. It still implicated his body alongside the bodies and lived experiences of those other Black boys who called him out.

If this linguistic maneuver was part of the performance politics of privileged, heteronormative urban Black masculinity that his Black male counterparts embodied, then maybe Leslie still had a chance to elude the social death of being coded as *gay as hell*. Unlike Damon, maybe it indicated that Leslie could still effectively function by the rules of discourse sanctioned by the Black men on the block who gazed at him with curiosity and disdain. His astute awareness of this performative wrestling with social markers is evident in his attempts to “reclaim his masculinity.” He writes,

I made a conscious effort to try and change my behavior. By this time I had figured out that I liked males and I was making a desperate effort to fight it. I started behaving more like what a man from Detroit behaves. I replaced my friendly hello with, “What Up Doe.” My music selection became more violent, because that’s what I was expected to listen to. I gave up songs I liked for songs I loathed. I became more materialistic, everything I wore had to have a label on it and it was mandatory for my clothes to baggy. I had to sag pants because that was the only way I could reclaim my masculine identity. Nice Leslie was replaced with a “macho”, “brutish”, heterosexual version that emerged from the inside from everything I observed about gender roles and internalized. I did all those things and it still did not work . . . Even though I was still being called gay and referred to as the nigga who was “gay as hell”, my efforts did reduce the amount that I had to hear these things. I still kept my secret to myself for two years.

Leslie’s experimentation with social markers calls into question the notion of “looking” as a corporeal experience of constructing an urban Black masculinity that is cloaked by vernacular ways of being and stanching in stereotypical pathologized notions of Blackness. Performing masculinity symbiotically connected to Detroit identity politics calls for Leslie to consider the consequences and affordances of looking: looking gay or straight, the elusive maneuvers one

learns while being looked at, and the language acts utilized to change how one looks in a heteronormative space. Vershawn Young's ethnographic account gives a useful explanation of how Black college males who exist on the margins of "nigga-gender" find themselves in collision and collusion with gender performances "that the terms *nigga* and *faggot* signify" (53). This means that queer Black subjectivity in heteronormative Black vernacular speech communities can be contingent upon how queer Black men perform authenticating discursive moves that enable them to "counter oppressive representations of themselves" (Johnson 3).

For Leslie, Detroit masculinity is bound up in a language of looking practices and material conditions. He frames his criteria for Detroit masculinity as if they were established rules imposed upon all Black men. Black masculinity needs to be aggressive, articulated through AAVE, and exemplified through clothing and music. It means putting on a shallow façade of someone you are not. It means fully knowing that masculinity is shrouded in performance but willfully complicit to those performances if survival calls for it. It means maintaining asymmetrical power relations between straight and queer Black men. And this has much to do with how we use language. In other words, naming what we see, how we decide to respond or not respond to external naming. What we decide to name ourselves is bound up in a logic of subject formation that either aligns with sanctioned language practices and embodied performances or interrogates the marginal spaces they assign transgressive bodies. As Leslie gradually realizes his attraction for males and fights these attractions, he fights against the constraints of heteronormative Detroit masculinity. He interrogates its viability for achieving what he might see as an authentic self. Performing this sanctioned masculinity gives him reflexivity for making conclusions about how gender signifies through language, music, clothing, and how it functions as a mechanism of social control. From this vantage point of awareness, Leslie can make critical interventions in how he is constructed as both a "nigga" and "gay as hell" through queering the boundaries of their cultural meanings.

**THE DAY I FOUND KARAMO BROWN:  
THE GAY NIGGA THAT YOU WANNA BE**

Leslie's critique of the limited representations of queer Black men in his life also raises questions about the kinds of queer Black male identities that are allowed through social media. Indeed, queer Black men are making strides for more visibility; but those who are prominently celebrated in popular culture look like Michael Sam, Jason Collins, or Derrick Gordon—all of whom play professional or collegiate sports. And while their bodies have not allowed them to hide from

homophobic sanction, especially in social media spaces, their bodies and athleticism are accorded worth and aesthetic value that align easily with the dominant images of Black masculinity in social media. In these historical moments where Black queer masculinity becomes more visible in popular culture generally and in athletic culture specifically, the celebrated bodies (read as *straight*) in which queerness has been actualized may not be sufficient in undoing the narratives of pathology that continue to render other Black (feminized) bodies as invisible. Some of us will have to find our redemptive power in bodies that are hated and condemned. Others will look for those we can mirror, those who give us a lexicon for naming who and what we are. They give us metaphors for languaging how we want to be read by and exist in the world. Leslie chose Karamo Brown, a somewhat dated popular culture figure, as the “masculine gay male” ideal that fluidly navigates across gender binaries in a way that disrupts the boundaries of sanctioned vernacular Black masculinity.

My favorite example of a masculine gay male is Karamo from the *Real World*. Karamo is not what hip-hop culture defines as masculine but he definitely not feminine. He comes off as the average masculine straight male and he is only being himself. He dresses in a masculine manner and not only that his mannerisms are masculine as well. I identify myself as a gay male but have banished my former notions of what masculinity is according to what Detroit is and adopted new ones.

Karamo was part of MTV’s popular reality television series, *The Real World*, which casts seven strangers to live together for several months and follows their daily lives. Based on a Google search, I found Karamo’s “visible legibility”—his fashion sense, his deep voice, his lean muscular frame—marking him as straight (Neal). He code-meshes with Black vernacular and the Englishes of his White roommates with verbal dexterity and charm. He is prototypically handsome. His roommates’ visible surprise at his sexuality after he outs himself reflects his privilege to pass as straight. Since *The Real World* casts predominately White characters, Karamo’s demonstrated linguistic dexterity and button-up polo shirts and khaki shorts indicate that he can effectively identify and participate in the mores and class performances of mainstream (White) culture. In other words, his weaving in and out of vernacular codes positions him as Black enough to not have his authenticity challenged yet seemingly invested and assimilated enough into mainstream culture to be relatable to his White peers. He is the “safe” Black man who can cater to White audiences’ sensibilities and comfort zones that reflect the kinds of Black masculinities that are digestible for them. “He broke the stereotypical idea of what a gay male should be like, how he should dress, sound, and behave. Prior to him, I do not recall too many more examples of Black gay males that are masculine being displayed in the media,” says Leslie

after we discuss how he learned about Karamo. Leslie draws on popular culture for queer Black male representations that disrupt the hegemonic thug or gangsta image. But more critically, he searches for a Black masculinity that is translatable in the language of his own gender politics and can easily and comfortably shift across vernacular and mainstream contexts.

While Karamo does not actively challenge hegemonic masculinity, perhaps for Leslie his audacity in being unapologetically gay and Black on reality television and in clear public view is both realized and radical for popular culture television that traditionally allows only certain types of Black bodies to be visible and celebrated. Karamo Brown lives out his sexuality with a kind of blatant truth. On *The Real World*, he invites other queer Black men over to the house he shares with White roommates and performs public displays of affection. Perhaps flaunting his sexuality in front of the camera—and in the public gaze—is an extension of the erotic photo Leslie included with his essay. Karamo makes sense in Leslie's logic of Black queer sexuality because he performs gender in a way that privileges both fluidity and mobility. "Being a 'thug' or a 'gangsta' in appearance does not determine your masculinity," Leslie concludes in his essay, "masculinity is the ability to be male in any social setting." Leslie troubles the boundaries framing the vernacularity of "that nigga gay as hell" by coding Karamo as one who can be a nigga if the situation calls for him to be one, while not forfeiting his sexual agency as a condition for nigga subjectivity. Rather, Karamo inverts the interpolative power of "that nigga gay as hell" by simultaneously queering and effectively performing Black masculine heteronormativity. If Leslie represents the Other in the eyes of his homophobic Black male counterparts who call him "gay as hell," being self-defining in a framework of homophobic sexual identity politics creates spaces to "look back" and assert agency and visibility in these spaces by cultivating self-awareness of how one can signify as a gay nigga. bell hooks states that looking back politicizes looking relations in such a way that "one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). I suggest that Leslie, Damon, and Karamo offer examples of how Black queer college men can use gender performance as a way of looking back and as a way to queer masculinist vernaculars. Queering the vernacular creates spaces where Black men imagine themselves differently as Black and queer without negation. While Leslie's notion of a queer Black masculinity might be read as problematic in how it privileges heteronormativity, it indicates his attempt to reveal spaces of possibility in dominant Black male vernacular discourse for "fluidity in raced gender performances" (rboylorn). Perhaps Leslie is gay but not pejoratively gay, not pathologically gay, not "gay as hell." But what seems apparent to me is that Leslie uses his language to elude the rhetorical darts that undermine his authenticity as a nigga.

Constructing queer Black masculinity through the simultaneity of passing for straight and embodying queer Black subjectivity functions as a literate strategy to navigate the kinds of rhetorical situations that call for Leslie to linguistically perform a Black masculinity that aligns with the social mores of his hometown. Bryant Keith Alexander argues that these types of passing as cultural performance “enable cultural members to understand, critique, and transform the worlds in which they live, while also providing outsiders cues to understanding cultures that are not their own” (B. Alexander 73). But perhaps Leslie finds something meaningful in Karamo Brown’s gender ambiguity. Perhaps he wants to channel a liminal space that allows him to try on different genders as he works through his own identity politics, emotional trauma, and conflicting racial and class allegiances. Perhaps Leslie makes the choice to embody a sexual identity that gives him fluidity and the flexibility to be legible in the vernacular spaces that he occupies at school and home. Or maybe he and many young queer Black men like him see language as a tool for opening spaces in vernacular frameworks that will allow them to work out ways that they and their homophobic Black male counterparts might read vernacular masculinities differently.

In any case, Leslie finds his ability to be self-defining through deconstructing gender binaries, interrogating the boundaries of Black male subject formation, and framing the rhetorical affect of the homophobic slur as opportunity for exploration, identity formation, and critique. The assertive act to self-identify is where we can begin to understand the rhetorical potential of inflecting the vernacular meaning of what it means to be a *nigga* who is *gay as hell*. This challenges gender and racial codes used for language-based discrimination in the spaces that Leslie navigates. His “occupation” of the vernacular space of the *nigga* who is *gay as hell* positions him as an agent against discriminatory language practices that “define people in terms rooted in negative stereotypes” (Alim 462). It gives Leslie a space to perform queerness as an act of disrupting and interpolating the meaning of cultural and racial membership. These performances reveal the contradictions, struggles, and tensions evident in the process of nuancing critical queer rhetorical practices and theories of identity formation that (intentionally) bump up against Black gendered discourses.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Damon and Leslie call for us to revisit the project of composition, specifically in how we think about our pedagogical agendas to develop literacies that foster opportunities for students to explore how their differences matter across place and space. Furthermore, the Black queer rhetorical practices identified in their essays demonstrate how writing becomes a necessary tool for examining a poli-



tics of visibility for queer Black men whose race and sexuality can render them doubly invisible in their communities, classrooms, and in broader institutional discourses that inform student life and learning. First year writing is a window into how the erasures of sexuality can be understood as an “expression of institutionalized homophobia, enacted in classrooms not randomly but systematically, with legal and religious precedents to bolster it and intimidate both teachers and students” (Malinowitz 23). We must create learning opportunities for students to make sense of the university when institutional constraints create conditions for subjectivity that overlook and undermine sexual identity as vital for exploring language, literacy, and rhetoric. But we also must pay attention to the rhetorical skills students bring to our classrooms and our campuses and make them a subject and source for building our epistemologies.

Consider Jamal Lewis, the Morehouse College graduate in this article’s opening. His material articulation of gender comes at the intersection of the linguistic reconfiguration of his Otherness. In his rhetorical project to be legibly read as a “Morehouse Fag,” he identifies a discursive gap on his campus and inserts himself as a kind of counter narrative. He nuances what it means to be a Morehouse man, and more critically, what it means to be a student. Aren’t these kinds of critical insertions and rhetorical moves into institutional discourse what we teach our students to do when they enter academic conversations? I believe they are. As he walks the campus of his alma mater, a historically Black college that can be considered a vernacular community in its own right, how might we interpret Jamal’s self-naming, gender performance, and critical insertions into narrow discursive frameworks as a way of teaching us how language, race, and the body work intersectionally for critiquing institutionalized forms of erasure? Perhaps he also teaches us by extension that these rules of discourse he critiques also inform what goes into our composition textbooks, steers pedagogical choices and in-class conversations, and inspires institutional policies and mission statements. If we can understand how these are all constructed by and through language and materialized through our writing practices, then we can position these elements of discourse as rhetoric. If they are rhetorical, we can change them. Perhaps Jamal, Damon, and Leslie invite us to court the abject as a meaning-making strategy so that we might turn our attention as teachers and students to how we can problematize difference and “disrupt the material conditions that have given rise to” these differences (Lu 239).

The kind of pedagogy that I propose acknowledges the viability of intersectionality when we teach about language rights in our classes. A central component in advocating for students’ rights to their own language is giving them the opportunity to make connections “between their own communicative practices and alternative cultural traditions” (Perryman-Clark). We must ask what role

the body plays as a contested site of knowledge production when students frame it as constructed and conditioned by the language of alternative cultural traditions. We must engage in conversations about language practices that are used to sanction and constrain Black queer bodies and their possibilities, especially as they occupy vernacular and academic communities. Sexuality can work as a rubric for nuancing fresh articulations of language rights rhetoric in the first-year writing classroom. Jonathan Alexander notes the ways sexual identity can be a critical component to the dimension of literacy education and development in our first-year writing course. This is especially relevant when we designate assignments that prompt personal reflection on elements of students' identities. Alexander states, and I agree, that as we begin to recognize the importance of sexual identity as vital components to subject formation in our conversations about literacy development we must also consider its connections with other intersecting constructs, such as race (J. Alexander 2006). We must create intersectional pedagogies for exploring language rights that invite students to factor concepts like race, sexuality, and class in a way that is less about being inclusive and more about creating opportunities for students to invent and explore rhetorical practices for enacting difference as a meaning-making strategy. When we give our students these opportunities, we are advancing social epistemological approaches to writing.

As Black college men and their lives and their tongues and their state-sanctioned deaths and their bodies are thrust into public spheres—spectacularized, miscarried, murdered, and scrutinized—how do they learn to speak back to, in, and between languages, texts, and marginalizing belief systems that shape the geographies they navigate? Perhaps Damon and Leslie invite us into their complicated worlds as spectators in order to see how Black queer selves are made possible, even in moments of erasure, even while negotiating unrequited loving relationships with parents who refuse to love their gay sons. And let us be clear, the language practices of Black men have received much attention and privilege, often at the expense and erasure of Black women's discourses. We need to be vigilant in engaging in the kind of critique that brings attention to these erasures. But we must also recognize how our language taxonomies that demarcate gendered Black rhetorical productions might narrow our frameworks for engaging and understanding the broad terrain of AAVE and its users.

Black queer rhetoric as a practice provides models for how students and teachers can use language for nuancing rhetorical approaches in and between the language of homophobia, university mission statements, and policies that discursively and materially displace sexual minorities. Furthermore, the language practices of queer Black college males gives a fresh understanding of how language rights are connected to the right to exist as fully embodied language users

across place and space. This has implications for how their rhetorical approaches can be situated in a multiplicity of university bureaucratic struggles and possibilities. For example, faith-based institutions can be a site where queer Black male students use language rights rhetoric as a rubric for illuminating and confronting campus cultures and university policies that potentially undermine LGBTQ students' sense of belonging. Thus, incorporating a Black queer rhetoric in and among the other theoretical lenses that we teach is a step toward recognizing how language can render Black queer subjects as invisible and can anchor the ways that Black bodies and sexualities are legible. Language also provides theoretical and practical tools for counter-identifying with those conditions of legibility.

I believe that the writing classroom creates initial opportunities for how we think about these fixations and renderings. The writing classroom is the space where students like Damon and Leslie teach us how queer Black males grapple with the messiness of language and the theoretical possibilities of intersectionality. It is here that we can observe and theorize how Black student voices and methods of critique make queer subjects visible and accounted for in vernacular and institutional discourses, especially those discourses that contribute to the perpetual construction of closets. When institutional policies and discourses marginalize spaces for LGBTQ students, when they reject petitions for gay/straight alliances that work to enhance the college experiences of our Black gay brothers and sisters, when they designate homophobic dress code policies at all-male schools, they also fundamentally sanction the kinds of genders and bodies that can exist in that space. A Black queer rhetoric provides an impetus for the kinds of action-oriented thinking and writing that students and teachers can utilize in forging meaningful learning experiences and communities that matter.

## NOTES

1. To be clear, I am not interested in pathologizing Black institutions or vernacular communities and their responses to Black gay men. And while I believe that we do have to hold these institutions and communities accountable, I am primarily interested in exploring the discursive possibilities of Black masculine language that allow for diverse masculinities and take into account the cultural contexts and histories of gay and gender-nonconforming Black male students' lives (McCready; Alexander; Johnson).

2. Student names throughout are pseudonyms.

3. For my purposes here, I define *Black queer rhetoric* as the articulated embodied and textual iterations of identity using a variation of Black male language (BML) speech events that reflect language practices, nonverbal behavior, cultural production, and reality construction (Green; Richardson; Asante). These variations reveal a complex meaning-making system of liberatory practices that link language to the acquisition, critique, and reinscription of gender identity.

4. *Boosting* here refers to stealing.

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