

# Strange Fruit

## A Performance about Identity Politics

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*E. Patrick Johnson*

### *Introduction*

Given recent developments in critical race, queer, feminist, and gender theory, I considered writing an essay that would engage the various arguments circulating among these disciplinary camps: essentialism vs. constructionism, discursivity vs. materiality, class vs. race, etc. I was going to submit the essay to the 1998 National Communication Association Convention (NCA) as part of a panel on race and sexuality to be presented in the fall of 1998. The essay failed. I lacked both the motivation and drive to write in that form. I began to write what eventually became a script for a performance of my life history. I called my colleague, Bryant Keith Alexander, to see if he had something in his performance bag on race and sexuality. He did. Thus, we submitted a performance panel to the Black Caucus of NCA entitled, "Residue Traces of a Black Gay Masculinity." The title of my performance was *Strange Fruit* and Bryant's was *Brother Scars*. Our performances at the conference in New York lasted 30 minutes each, and were followed by a lively discussion that raised many important questions about identity politics.

I continued to add more to the script and it eventually became a 90-minute performance in eight "movements." Each movement reflects a different aspect of my identity around which my "queerness" pivots. They range from my performance of drag to issues of black masculinity to how I negotiated race, gender, and sexuality in Ghana, West Africa. The show utilizes slides, music, voice-overs, dance, and encourages audience participation.

The full-length version of *Strange Fruit* debuted on 19 January 1999 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to a standing-room-only audience. I was nervous about performing such a provocative piece on the campus of a big southern university. Much to my surprise, it was well received, though not without some unexpected and "queer" responses from various parts of the audiences. For instance, on opening night—a Friday—the majority of the audience was black women academics. Not only did they register all of the inside academic punning in the performance (e.g., references to Hortense Spillers, Judith Butler, bell hooks,

etc.), but they were not shy about participating in those moments in the show when the audience is encouraged to clap, dance, or say "Amen."

The second night, however, was decidedly different. Populated with mostly black gay men—some of whom I knew—the Saturday night audience was cold and despondent. Their faces looked pained and performing for them was work. I noticed that a few black men even left at intermission. During the black gay club scene in which I encourage audience members to clap and verbally respond, the black gay men in the audience in particular sat motionless, taciturnly resisting my invitation to participate in the performance. After the show, I asked one of my good friends, who is also a black gay man, if he sensed the tension in the audience from other black queer brothers. His response was telling: "I can't believe you put our business in the street like that," he said. "What do you mean?" I responded. "The children don't want all of those straight folks knowing their business. Some of us ain't as out about that stuff as you are. We [are] *still* in the South, you know." I guess I knew, but I hadn't remembered. In the pseudo-liberal space of this "southern ivy," I did not register the anxiety that a show such as *Strange Fruit* would create for black gay men whose lives are complicated by the hegemony of homophobia not only in black communities, but also in the South in general. My representation of aspects of "the life" transgressed an unspoken contract among southern black gay men: never speak of our sexuality outside the boundaries of "our" designated spaces. Therefore, responding favorably to my show and participating would have implicated them in its discursive meanings—i.e., interpellated them as "queer." The stakes were too high—at least for some of them—for such recognition. They were fathers, schoolteachers, corporate executives, ministers even, who, for whatever reason, had not come to terms with their sexuality in ways that would allow them to be comfortable even watching a performance about a black gay man's experience—their experience.

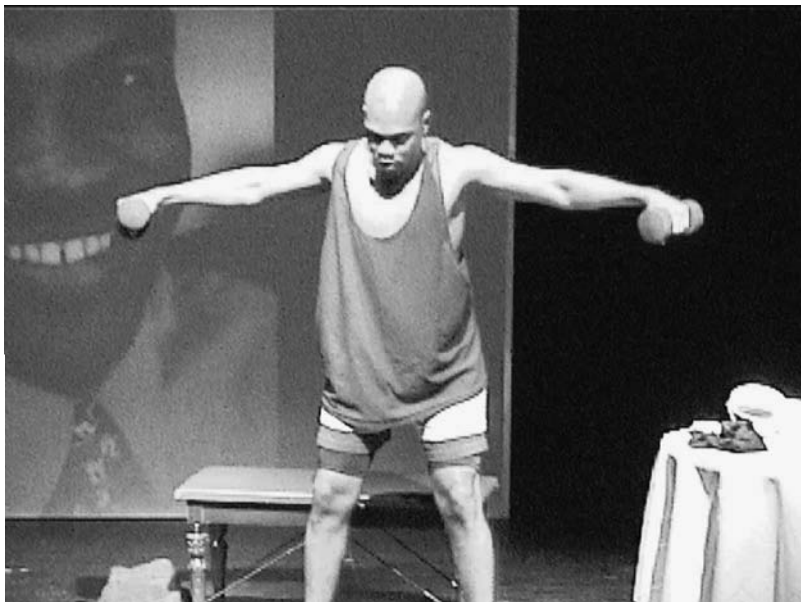
Thereafter, I performed *Strange Fruit* at various colleges and universities around the country including the University of Texas at Austin, Mt. Holyoke College, Bates College, Trinity College, American University, California State University at Los Angeles, Northwestern University, the University of Vermont, Emory University, Purdue University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the University of Chicago. Again, the show received various responses from sheer delight to utter disgust. After my experience with the black gay audience in North Carolina, I never assumed the show's reception based on the demographics of the audience. At Bates College, for example, the audience was all white with the exception of about four people of color. Yet, this audience was one of, if not the most, responsive audiences I have performed for. During the "church" scene, for instance, in which I encourage call and response, there were moments when I had to pause to let the audience quiet down because their "hallelujahs," "amens," "preach brothers," and "tell its" drowned out my "sermon."

The most moving response I had to the show, however, was at Purdue University. Located in north central Indiana in the town of West Lafayette (where, incidentally, the Ku Klux Klan is still known to march), Purdue is mostly recognized as an engineering and hard sciences university. Nonetheless, I was invited by the African American Cultural Center to come perform *Strange Fruit*. I was more than a bit anxious about performing the show at Purdue, namely because of its location, the fact that I would have to drive there, and because of all of the preshow publicity the performance received: the student newspaper contacted colleagues at Northwestern about the show; black fraternities volunteered to usher; and I received e-mail inquiries about the show from Lafayette reporters. Given the context, all of this interest in the show set my teeth on edge. So much so that I asked my partner to drive with me so that I would not be alone.

My anxiety intensified until I actually walked onstage to face a standing-room-only crowd of over 300. Students were sitting and standing in the aisles, in the back of the theatre, and down front on the floor. They hung on to every word throughout the performance and gave me a five-minute standing ovation. After the question and answer period, a steady stream of teary-eyed students came up to me to express how much they appreciated the show. “You saved my life to-night,” one white female student said. “I’ve been struggling with my sexuality for a year now. I’ve thought about suicide and everything. Your show let me know that it’s OK. I’m gonna be alright.” And with that, she embraced me in a long, heartfelt hug. I would have never expected this response to the show at a conservative midwestern university. Nonetheless, it was a pedagogical moment not only for the audience who undoubtedly were hungry for a show like *Strange Fruit*, but for me as well. The response at Purdue taught me that the places in which our work as performance artists/scholars is most needed is not in locations where transgressive work and radical discourse is the norm (if not passé), but in locales where those radical voices are muzzled by institutional racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Such responses to the show also confirm the subversive potential of performance, the interventions and “radical research” it galvanizes by “commingling [...] analytical and artistic ways of knowing that unsettles the institutional organization of knowledge and disciplines” (Conquergood 2002:151).

Always followed by lively discussions and/or debate, each performance of *Strange Fruit* accomplished what I had intended: to raise questions around race, class, gender, and sexual identity. Besides wanting to contribute to a dialogue on these issues, one might ask why I chose the autoethnographic performance mode to engage these ideas as opposed to the critical essay.

Over the past few years, I have been thinking about the connection between physical and social location and identity. Raised in a single-parent home in western North Carolina on the “black” side of town, my choices regarding race, gender, class, religious, and sexual identification were mapped out long before I would consciously make up my own mind about those identifications. For the most part, I performed according to the script: I lived in public housing, played sports, and dated girls. But there were conspicuous “misperformances” as well. I



1. “Masculinity.” Northwestern University performance (2000). (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

had a very high voice and sang soprano; I had very effeminate mannerisms; I made good grades in school and spoke in a “standard” (i.e., non-black, non-southern) dialect—neither of which were considered “black” in the eyes of my black classmates and neighbors; I pretended as if my family lived in a home at the top of our street rather than in public housing, by having my white high school friends drop me off there when they gave me rides home from school. These performative deviations from the prescribed racial, gender, and class script raised more than one eyebrow within the black community in which I lived, as well as within my own family.

It only got worse. When I went off to school to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I began to misperform masculinity. Because of the ways in which effeminacy in men is linked to gayness, my bad performance only intensified growing suspicions about my sexual identity. At the time, I did not realize how bad my performance was, in part because effeminacy was not necessarily a signifier of gayness back home. Or if it was, one’s performance of femininity had to be so hyperbolic that there was no question that the man in question was clearly a “sissy.” Because my flame didn’t burn as bright, at home I was able to camouflage my budding homosexuality. But not at UNC. I could run, but I certainly could not hide. Still, I continued to date women—one woman in particular—and perform heterosexuality.

All of that changed yet again, when I moved to Louisiana in 1991 to attend Louisiana State University for graduate school. While Baton Rouge was not the bedrock of liberalism and progressive politics, it was there where I felt most free to explore my sexual identity. While racism flourished in ways I had never experienced, I felt comfortable allowing my queerness to perform me as much as I performed it. Alternatively, my white students who were native Louisianians challenged the authenticity of my southernness on a daily basis. They reminded me that North Carolina is not *really* in the South. Besides, I couldn’t possibly teach them to forget their “heritage” by making them pronounce the “ing” endings of words when they gave their speeches in my public speaking course. As one irate white male student succinctly stated, “There’s no way you’re gonna learn [*sic*] me to forget my heritage. There’s just no *motherfuckin’* way!”

My performance of blackness held up fairly well in Baton Rouge, but varied among whites and blacks. When I met my white landlord for the first time (I rented the apartment sight unseen), for instance, she told me that I did not *sound* like a black person over the phone. “I can usually pick ‘em [black people] out,” she said, “based on the stereotype. But you didn’t sound like a black person at all. You didn’t have that drawl like most of ‘em have. I just wasn’t prepared for you to be black.” Around some African Americans, my performance of blackness proved to be off-putting because I was too “uppity” or “militant” or just... “too.” Thus, I retreated to the sanctity of my queerness, careful however, to parade it only in the presence of my closest friends.

In 1993, I received a dissertation fellowship from and eventually became a faculty member at Amherst College in Massachusetts. My days at Amherst were the best of times and the worst of times, and called for even more performances. A place where pedigree, region, and class make or break you, Amherst brought to the fore all of the “whatnesses” of my identity: blackness, queerness, maleness, lower classness, southernness, and so on. The pressure proved to be too much as I tried to conceal my southernness here, exaggerate my queerness there, foreground my blackness here, cast off my lower-classness there—the performance was spinning out of control. Then the material reality of it all set in and I became the object of emotional and psychological abuse—from colleagues and from students. Steadily, my body became the site upon which performativity met performance, where textuality became corporeality, theory became practice.

I received a leave from Amherst and moved back to North Carolina in 1998.

What a difference eight years can make. I left as a closeted “straight” man and returned as a radically out “queer” one. I still performed outside the lines, however, thumbing my nose at racial, gender, class, and sexual identifications, especially the more popular ones prescribed in the South (as nebulous as the demarcation of North Carolina as the “South” may be!). Misbehavior and misperformance became synonymous with my name. I fared well, nonetheless. My friends kept speaking to me and I never received a letter from the state’s great Senator Jesse Helms.

Now that I have relocated again, and for the first time to a “major” city like Chicago, I begin anew in my negotiations of identity. Although Chicago is located in the “heartland” of the United States—indeed, a geographical “center” where the land as well as identities are thought of as “flattened”—I am confident that identity politics will reign supreme. The point is that identity and one’s experience of it shift not only alongside physical movement, but psychological movement as well.

My personal and physical journey to various locations, sites and citations, spaces and places, provides a context for the impetus of *Strange Fruit*. At the various sites where I lived, geographically and psychologically, and within the subject positions I inhabited, my identities were affirmed according to discursive criteria based upon an identity politic. In many instances, I felt a flourish of anxiety about some aspect of the identity that I may or may not have been performing at the time. Indeed, there were many times when I felt that if I misperformed, even in the slightest way, my life might be in danger. Thus, *Strange Fruit* was born.

I take the title from the 1939 song written by Abel Meeropol (aka “Lewis Allan”) and sung by Billie Holiday. The song is a manifesto against lynching in the South:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,  
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop. (Allan 1939)

Because the lyrics of the song necessarily conjoin gender, race, and sexuality as they are mapped onto the black body upon which the violence of lynching is enacted, I, too, employ the metaphor of lynching throughout this performance. While I intentionally never play or perform the song during the show, I draw upon the title as a trope for the various kinds of “lynchings” that occur at the hands of purists who attempt to demarcate the boundaries of authentic identity. Threatened by an ever impending “exorcism” of my identities of black, middle class, male, gay, Christian, and southern (among others), I wrote and perform my version of *Strange Fruit* by incorporating my personal narrative, poetry, dance, music, and visual media to call attention to the ways in which identity is embraced and averted, adorned and discarded, authenticated and destabilized—all in relation to one’s physical, geographical, cultural, psychological, and social location.

Beyond its signification of “fruit” as the black lynched body, the title is also sig-

nificant in the context of this performance because it also symbolizes the lynched homosexual body. Originally conceived as a homophobic epithet, “fruit,” like “queer” has been reappropriated by gays as a vernacular term whose meaning is ambivalent. That this particular fruit is “strange” also speaks to the peculiarity and “quareness” of the black gay body within larger society (see Johnson 2001). Thus, the performance attempts to demonstrate this titular doubling by complicating the ways in which “blackness” and “queerness” signify in overlapping as well as disparate ways.

Identity politics is a messy business. No less messy are the theories that attempt to disentangle the knotty relationship between identity as discursive and identity as material reality. *Strange Fruit* is my attempt to (dis)inter my own body—in all of its complicity and duplicity, aversions and dispersions of “whatness”—into the groundswell of theories on identity, at the gravesite and in the womb where I and others mourn and celebrate the death and birth of “messy” bodies.



2. Opening image at UC-Berkeley performance (2002). (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

## Strange Fruit

*The stage has four performance areas: At far stage left is a small table and chair, and on the table is a mirror, cold cream, and a white face cloth; in the stage left area is a black 3' x 2' black wooden block on which are set gym clothes, sneakers, a set of two 10-lb. weights, and a tambourine; a scrim hangs center stage; stage right has a table and chair with three books; and at far stage right there is a set of steps.*

*A silhouette of the PERFORMER's effeminately posed body appears behind the scrim. It is clear from the silhouette that he is wearing a dress and a wig. The PERFORMER begins singing “God Bless the Child” and walks from behind the scrim to reveal that he is in drag and blackface. While continuing to sing, he walks offstage and into the audience, passing out gold cards to the audience that read, “Black American Express: Membership Has Its Privileges.” In the center of the card is a picture of a paper bag with a hand reaching out of it. The bag reads “Trick or Treat.” Where the account number would usually appear are important dates in American/African American history (e.g., 1640, 1776, 1865, 1968, 1970).<sup>3</sup> The name on the card is “Dr. Colored A. Negro.” At the end of the song, the PERFORMER stands at center stage and faces the audience.*

PERFORMER: “Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’

*(Slide #1 of mammy on washing powder box)*

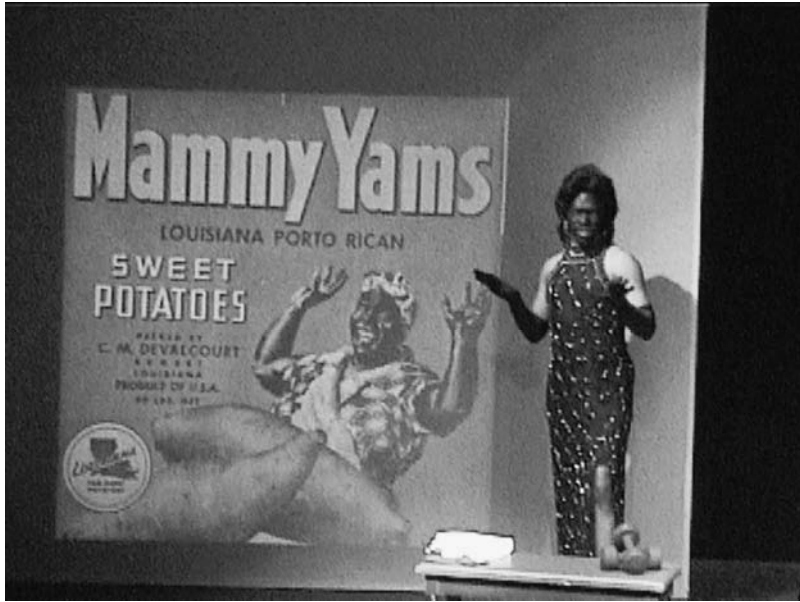
PERFORMER: ‘Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire,’ and ‘Earth Mother,’

*(Slide #2 of “Nigger Hair” tobacco can)*

PERFORMER: ‘Aunty,’ ‘Granny,’ ‘God’s Holy Fool,’

*(Slide #3 of Aunt Jemima Pancake Box)*

3. "Mammy Yams."  
Northwestern University  
performance (2000). (Cour-  
tesy of E. Patrick Johnson)



4. E. Patrick Johnson, age  
three, wearing his mother's  
wig, 1970. (Photo by Sarah  
M. Johnson)



PERFORMER: a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman  
at the Podium':

(Slide #4 of "Mammy Yams")

PERFORMER: I describe a locus of confounded  
identities, a meeting ground of investments and priva-  
tions in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My  
country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have  
to be invented" [Spillers 1987:65]. That's my alter ego  
talking: Miss Hortense Spillers.

And speaking of inventions, I bet you thought that Ma-  
donna invented the vogue. Oh no. I have been voguing  
since 1971. Strike a pose!

(Tape of Madonna's "Vogue" begins to play. Twelve slides,  
#5–16, of PERFORMER "posing" as a little boy; the last  
slide is PERFORMER in clown face. After the slides, the  
music fades.)

PERFORMER: Mama started dressing me in drag  
when I was just a little thing.

(Slide #17 of PERFORMER as child wearing a wig)

PERFORMER: Little did she know that she would  
play such a vital role in making me the "man" I am to-  
day.

(Slide #18 of PERFORMER in drag)

PERFORMER: Now, I'm not trying to suggest some  
kind of ontological link between gender and sexuality.  
Oh no, no, no. I'm much too smart for that now that  
Judith Butler has taught me that the two are not coexten-



5. Slide #27 of a lynching.  
(Courtesy of E. Patrick  
Johnson)

sive [see Butler 1990 and 1993]. All I'm saying is, Mama thought it was cute when she put that wig on my head back then, but she didn't think it was so cute when I started sneaking into her bedroom and putting it on for myself. Agency is such a drag for those in power! If you don't believe me, ask your mama!

(Slide #19 of the words "Mother's Pearls")





6. Performer removing blackface at the Northwestern University performance (2000). (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

PERFORMER: Speaking of mothers,

*(Slide #20 of PERFORMER's mother with hand on her hip)*

PERFORMER: that's mine. That's some pose, huh? Yep, I picked that one up real early as my mother gendered me at an early age.

*(Slides #21 and #22 of PERFORMER with hand on his hip)*

PERFORMER: But I was talking about wigs wasn't I? *(PERFORMER sits down at the table and begins removing makeup)*

*(Slide #23 of PERFORMER as child in a wig)*

PERFORMER: Well, mother's wigs and I go way back. She didn't have that many, but the ones she did have were great. There was something about the feel of all that curly hair on top of my head that freed me. Those days were short lived, however, as I soon traded in my wigs for football helmets. Yes, I played on the football team—well, I should say that I warmed the bench. But it didn't matter. I was a football player. A member of the team. I only played on *one* team—not the other—and definitely not both *(winks at the audience)*. I had to live up to the five other brothers who had come before me. They had all played sports, so there was no question that their little brother would as well. See, my brothers bought into the whole black macho thing early on. Check out this picture of one of my brothers, for instance.

*(Slide #24 of PERFORMER's brother pointing a gun at the camera)*

PERFORMER: It's scary to think that this notion of black masculinity was what I had as a role model. Good thing I preferred wigs to ski caps. *(Pauses)* But now that I think about it, I did have another brother who also dressed in drag. In fact, it was my most homophobic brother who dressed in drag in the eighth grade.

*(Slide #25 of PERFORMER's brother in drag)*

PERFORMER: I don't know *what* it is about those Johnson boys and drag. It's the queerest thing. But I digress. I was talking about my mother. We have a wonderful relationship and I've never given her any reason to be disappointed in me. I'm her baby.

*(Slide #26 of PERFORMER's baby picture)*

PERFORMER: Mama's baby...Papa's Maybe [see Spillers 1987].

*(Rapidly, slide #27 of lynching then slide #28 of PERFORMER's baby picture)*

PERFORMER: But again, I transgress. I mean, digress. As I was saying, Mom and I have a great relationship, but it has definitely changed since I came out to her. We're now under this complicity of silence about my gayness. It's almost as if I never told her. But that story, my coming out story that is, is not a horrible one at all. In fact, it's rather amusing: She was up visiting me in Amherst and I had decided that it was "time." We were watching the late evening news when I turned to her and said, "Well, Mama, I need to talk to you about something. I've wanted to tell you this for some time now, but I've been afraid to." And she said, "What have you done?" And I said, "I haven't done anything. I'm gay." And she looked at me and said, "Pat! You mean to tell me that you like other men?" "Yes, ma'am." "Why?" "Well, I think I've always known."

*(Slide #29 of PERFORMER in wig)*

PERFORMER: She said, “Well, I don’t understand it.” I said to her, “Let me ask you something, Mama. Have you ever found yourself attracted to another woman?” She said, “No.” I said, “Neither have I.”

*(Slide #30 of young PERFORMER kissing a little girl on the cheek)*

PERFORMER: Then she got it. She said again, “I don’t understand it, but if that’s the way you are I just have to accept it. You’re my child and I love you.” No crying. No screaming. No Bible thumping. It was great. But we haven’t talked about it since.

*(Slide #31 that reads “Transitions”; PERFORMER walks to center stage and begins to take off the dress)*

PERFORMER: Can someone help me with this? *(Gets someone from the audience to help him out of the dress.)* You know black is great for giving an illusion, but it can also be very confining.

*(Tape of “Macho Man.” PERFORMER steps out of dress and puts on sneakers, shorts, and a tank top and begins lifting the dumb bells. Music fades when PERFORMER is dressed.)*

PERFORMER: *(Looks at audience)* My butch drag. Come on, you didn’t think I was a femme fatale did you? But seriously, if you really want to “unveil” your masculinity, all you have to do is cut off all your hair—especially if you’re a black man.

*(Slide #32 of the word “Hair”)*

PERFORMER: Now, during my college days I was the queen of big hair. Check it out.

*(Four slides, #33–36, of PERFORMER with “big” hair)*

PERFORMER: But dis hair is dis-cursive! I mean, I’ve never seen so much purse grabbing, door locking, fast walking, child protecting in my life until I shaved my head! It opened up a whole new world to me! I had always theorized about how threatening the black man can be in the psyche of some white folk, but because I’m gay I thought that I would never experience that kind of race-based fear. All that changed when I shaved my head.

*(Slide #37 of PERFORMER with shaved head)*

PERFORMER: And then, I decided that I would use my new look to my advantage and perform hyper-black masculinity by playing what Brent Staples calls, “Scatter the Pigeons.” At a talk I attended, Staples read from his work:<sup>4</sup>

*(PERFORMER begins to do curls with the dumb bells as a tape plays excerpt from Parallel Times by Brent Staples)*

VOICE-OVER: I tried to be innocuous but I didn’t know how. The more I thought about how I moved, the less my body belonged to me; I became a false character riding along inside it. I began to avoid people. I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked. I let them clear the lobbies of buildings before I entered, so they wouldn’t feel trapped. [...] Then I changed. I don’t know why, but I remember when. I was walking west on 57th Street, after dark, coming home from the lake. The man and the woman walking toward me were laughing and talking but clammed up when they saw me. The man touched the woman’s elbow, guiding her toward the curb. Normally I’d have given way and begun to whistle, but not this time. This time I veered toward

them and aimed myself so that they'd have to part to avoid walking into me. The man stiffened, threw back his head and assumed the stare: eyes dead ahead, mouth open. His face took on a bluish hue under the sodium vapor street lamps. I suppressed the urge to scream into his face. Instead I glided between them, my shoulder nearly brushing his. A few steps beyond them I stopped and howled with laughter [1994:203–03].

PERFORMER: What amazes me about that passage is how beautifully Brent Staples captures how empowering it is for black men to reappropriate racist stereotypes and use them as weapons against whites. How ironic then—and unfortunate—that in the same book, he invokes that same masculinist discourse to castigate his mother's beautician:

VOICE-OVER: My mother's beautician, Gene, was the star of Saturdays. He didn't appear every Saturday but just when he was needed and when, as he said, "some heads need doin'." Gene was a faggot. He minced and twisted as he walked. But his body had wrenched itself into a caricature of a woman's. His behind stuck out so that he seemed to be wearing a bustle. He chain-smoked as he walked, with his cigarette hand at a girlish angle in the air. His other arm pressed to his torso the brown paper bag that contained his curling irons. [...] Teenage boys hooted and howled when he passed. Gene minced more brazenly then and blew smoke—POOF!—that curled over his head like steam from a passing train [39].

PERFORMER: And, perhaps it was a coincidence, but I couldn't help but think of James Baldwin as I listened to Staples describe this "Gene" character further:

*(Slide #38 of James Baldwin)*

VOICE-OVER: His voice was raspy and cawing and came out of him in a deep Georgia accent. He began his sentences with "chile" or "girl," as in: "Chile, guess who I ran into walkin' over here today?"; "Girl, I'm glad I got here when I did. This head sho needs doin'." His eyes were bulging and widely set, always blood-shot from drinking. The eyes, over his enormous mouth, made him look like a frog. He laughed with his head thrown back, and the froggish mouth open, showing the capacious spaces among his teeth [39–40].

PERFORMER: Staples went on to describe Gene doing hair. His description of Gene's hair styling was nothing short of lyrical and flattering. I was confused. How could he paint him as a stereotypical "queen" on the one hand, and as a creative hair artist on the other? My heart began to race as it always does when I'm about to ask a pointed question of someone who's really important. But, I couldn't let this one go. *(PERFORMER raises his hand)* Mr. Staples, in that last section you just read, you do a wonderful job of describing Gene doing your mother's hair. I mean, your description was so methodical and lyrical and poetic. Yet, in the preceding pages, you describe Gene as a "faggot." Can you talk about those two disparaging images?" And in the most machismo posture he could muster, his shirt unbuttoned down to his navel and his legs straddling the podium, his response to me was: "Well, he *was* a faggot. I mean, it was 1957 and that's what he would have been called. There's no other way to say it. But I tell you this, whoever plays Gene in the movie (and there *will* be a movie), he's going to win the Academy Award." Dis hair is definitely discursive.

*(Five slides of different black hairstyles #39–43 [see Mercer 1994:230–35]; slide #44 of RuPaul; tape of RuPaul's "Supermodel" begins to play. PERFORMER puts on a doctoral gown complete with hood and cap and "models" the gown in runway fashion.)*

PERFORMER: Now this is one gown I didn't mind wearing. And although I

was glad to leave LSU, I made my mark while I was there. I even became the “poster child” for minority recruitment:

*(Slide #45 of PERFORMER on LSU brochure with quote: “I think it is very important to increase the number of minority graduate students at historically white institutions. Not only do we serve as a support system for one another, but we pave the way for and become mentors for those who come after us.”)*

PERFORMER: As you can see, my “big hair” days continued well into graduate school! I didn’t begin to lose my hair until I got to Amherst College. Yep, at Amherst my hair came out and I came out—in fact, hair loss, racism, and homophobia worked together rather well there.

*(Slide #46 of Johnson Chapel at Amherst College; PERFORMER stands in front of the projected slide)*

PERFORMER: This site is named after me. It’s called Johnson Chapel. It houses the English Department at the “Fairest” College—aka, Amherst College. My office is in the basement.

*(Slide #47 of the words “Black Bucks”; PERFORMER begins to walk around the stage)*

PERFORMER: What does it mean to queer a space? How does one go about that if his body is always already bound to a contradictory discourse of hyper-heterosexuality and bestiality on the one hand, and childlike docility on the other? I mean, what’s a girl to do? Answer: examine the ways in which the black queer body is trafficked down those ivory halls.

*(Slide #48 of picture of casket being carried through a crowd)*

PERFORMER: But again, I transgress, I mean digress.

*(Slide #49 of the words “Collegiality and ‘Quare’ Studies”)*

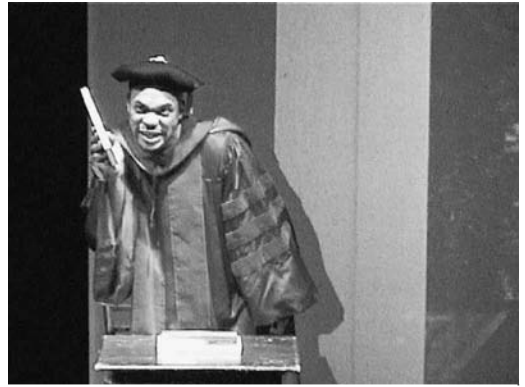
PERFORMER: I’ve always liked the word “queer” because my mother and my grandmother used to say it all the time when I was little. They’d say it in this thick, southern black dialect. They’d say, “that sho’ll is a ‘quare’ chile.” For them, queer meant “odd” or slightly off-kilter, as my grandmother might say—not exactly straight. So, it’s no wonder that my research has increasingly become more about queer studies. In fact, everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother.

*(Slide #50 of picture of PERFORMER’s grandmother)*

PERFORMER: When I went to live with my grandmother to collect her life history for my dissertation, she brought me up to date on the people who had moved into her neighborhood since my last visit. My grandmother says, “Well, we got one of them ‘homosexuals’ living down here.” “A what?,” I asked. “You know, one of them homosexuals.” “Well, how do you know the man’s a homosexual, Grandma?” “Well, he gardens, keeps a clean house, and bakes pies.” Now, all of these applied to me as well, except for gardening. I don’t like getting my hands dirty. Quare, indeed. Have I started transgressing again? Back to Amherst.

*(Slide #51 of Johnson Chapel; PERFORMER crosses to stage right and picks up a book)*

PERFORMER: The first queer thing: I’m standing at the copier, when a senior colleague walks up to me holding something behind his back. This particular col-



7. “Quare Studies.” Northwestern University performance (2000). (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

league, you should know, writes/theorizes about sports—race and sports, homosociality and sports, cheeseburgers and sports, sports and sports—you get the picture. He brings his hand from around his back to reveal his latest book. “Patrick,” he says, “have you seen the cover of my latest book?” “No, I haven’t.” In a flash, he’s holding the book an inch from my face chanting, “Isn’t that hot? Wouldn’t you like that? Wouldn’t you like to taste that? Wouldn’t you like to look at that? Isn’t that hot?” The cover is a picture of Greg Louganis in Speedos diving into a pool of water. I look at my colleague and reply,

*(Slide #52 of a Klansman “hushing”)*

PERFORMER: It’s a nice cover.

*(Slide #53 of Johnson Chapel)*

PERFORMER: The second queer thing: The second week of October is National Coming Out Week and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Association usually has events to celebrate this week of queerness. I’m running late for office hours, so I barely notice the pink and yellow chalkings lining the sidewalks. I walk into Johnson Chapel and this same colleague is standing in the hall talking to another colleague. I go into the main office, grab my mail and as I step back into the hallway, said colleague turns, points at me and says, “Oh look! There’s one. There’s Patrick.” He runs over to me and gives me a big bear hug. As I pry him off of me I say, “What are you doing?” And he replies, “Well, the signs outside say, ‘Hug a queer today.’”

*(Slide #54 of lynching)*

PERFORMER: But it would be the students

*(Slide #55 of Johnson Chapel)*

8. Slide #52 of a Klansman “hushing.” (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

PERFORMER: who would bring into clear focus the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality as they have been historically intertwined when mapping racist and homophobic signs onto the black male body. If my colleagues didn’t view me as the lurking, animalistic sex machine,

*(Slide #56 of monstrous black person chasing whites)*

PERFORMER: some of the students sure did.

*(Slide #57 of cover of Capitol Pages upon which the PERFORMER’s picture appears above the caption “Not Exactly Straight: Sexual Identity at Amherst”; PERFORMER sits down at table on stage right)*

PERFORMER: Thus, the third queer thing: A student asks me to give an interview for his magazine—a special issue on sexual identity. He asks me to talk about the intersection of race and sexuality. Little did I know that this would be the cover they would use for that edition, but that’s what I get for agreeing to this interview, and it’s harmless enough. So I think. Well, because I’m so shy and timid, I’m very candid in the interview about my experience with interracial dating in the gay community and how racism affects that coupling.

*(Slide #58 of quote from Capitol Pages about white men: “I find that I’m suspect of any white man who is interested in me.”)*



*Because I want to know why. Is it because you just love black skin?”)*

PERFORMER: Again, never be candid in a student newspaper. It will always come back to haunt you.

*(Slide #59 of “Lynch Party: Everybody Invited”)*

PERFORMER: Before I knew it, the backlash began:

*(Slide #60 of quote from The Spectator. Tape of VOICE-OVER reading quote):*

VOICE-OVER: “Super, Thanks for Asking: Prof. E. Patrick Johnson of ‘Black Gay Fiction’ fame, in the fall ‘97 *Capitol Pages* says, ‘Personally, I find that I’m suspect of any white man who is interested in me. Because I want to know why. Why are you interested? Is it because you think I have big dick?’

*(Slide #61 of Robert Mapplethorpe’s Man in Polyester Suit, then back to slide #60 of Spectator quote)*

VOICE-OVER: ‘Is it because you just love black skin?’ No, Dr. Johnson, the answer is none of the above. We’re interested in you because of your intentional crudeness, but more importantly, your supreme ignorance. Later in the article, Johnson mentions, ‘White privilege is going to be present in any context [...], where I’m automatically going to be discriminated against because of my skin color.’ We would expect that kind of jaded, extremist sentiment from some factions of the student body, but a professor should know better.”

PERFORMER: But they didn’t stop there. This prestigious student magazine gave me an award:

*(Slide #62 of “Spectator Award.” Tape of VOICE-OVER with “beauty pageant” music in the background)*

VOICE-OVER: Good evening and welcome to the 1st Annual Spectator Awards, the award show celebrating our most infamous, PC, and liberal faculty *(drum roll)*. And now the moment we’ve all been waiting for, the announcement of our “Bones Thugs N’ Harmony Award.”

*(Slide #63 of Award Star/Trophy)*

VOICE-OVER: And the award goes to our very own black buck of a professor, E. Patrick Johnson. *(Applause)* Professor Johnson wins this award for all of his “hard” work on yet another left-wing political cause.

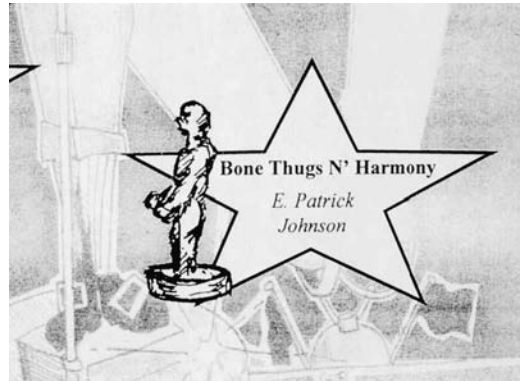
*(Slide #64 of poster of “Positively Fabulous”)*

VOICE-OVER: Especially “Positively Fabulous” that fucking AIDS benefit he organized.

*(Slide #65 of Spectator Award wording)*

VOICE-OVER: The plaque reads: “The Macho Man Johnson knows all the tools of his trade. His equipment, we hear, is not only big, but very powerful. And he’s not afraid to flaunt it. But, we’ll take his word for it. Here’s to the chocophile in us all.” *(More applause)*

*(Slide #66 of list of words — “Faggot” “Nigger” “Punk” “Coon” “Fudge Packer” “Abomination”—in the shape of a cross)*



9. “Spectator Award” given to Johnson by conservative student newspaper at Amherst College, 1998. (Photo by E. Patrick Johnson)

PERFORMER: "We might concede at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us" [Spillers 1987:70].

*(Slide #67 of burning cross)*

PERFORMER: But then again, we each have our own cross to bear.

*(Slide #68 of the word "Family." Tape of "We Are Family"; PERFORMER goes to the audience to collect "Black American Express Cards.")*

PERFORMER: "Family." Now there's a word for you. It has come to mean a whole host of things within this postmodern, or postmortem, society. But, because I fashion myself as a "black" person, I have a special relationship with the word "family." I think of love and community and struggle and pride—and inclusivity. I try to love "family" as I love "blackness"—as bell hooks suggests—as political resistance [see hooks 1995]. But what of my queerness? Can I love my queerness and still keep my black card?

*(Slide #69 of the word "Church"; PERFORMER removes hat and hood and sits on block stage left)*

PERFORMER: I grew up in the church. I didn't have a choice. My mother dragged me to Sunday school *and* morning worship service every Sunday. After a while though, she didn't have to drag me: I went on my own. I enjoyed going to church because there was so much to do.

*(Slide #70 of Morning Star Church)*

PERFORMER: This is my church back home in Hickory. I remember when we moved from the old church building to the new one.

*(Slide #71 of PERFORMER at ground breaking)*

PERFORMER: This is me at the groundbreaking. I was wearing my usher's uniform, which then consisted of this god awful animal print dashiki and a turtle neck. And, of course, big hair!

*(Slide #72 of the words "Morning Star First Baptist Church: Where everybody is somebody and Jesus is Lord.")*



10. Johnson, right of center, in the soprano section of the children's choir, 1981. (Photo by Sarah M. Johnson)

PERFORMER: This was our church motto. It's printed on the weekly church bulletin, which I receive every week from the church secretary. It lets me know what's going on back home—who died, who's on the sick and shut-in list, who's going off to school, etc.

*(Tape of "My Liberty" begins)*

PERFORMER: I have so many fond memories of church, especially singing in the choir. I joined the church and the children's choir at the age of six.

*(Slide #73 of PERFORMER in the choir)*

PERFORMER: I was the only boy in the soprano section and I could out sing all the girls. I was this fat, boy soprano with a big butt and big voice who got the church to shoutin' every Sunday with this solo. The song is called, "My Liberty"—how prophetic.

*(The music swells and PERFORMER sings along until the music fades. Slide #74 of Morning Star Church)*

PERFORMER: We had one of the best choirs in the area and I garnered quite a reputation as the little fat boy who could sing soprano. I was also teased about my high voice—especially as I got older. When I reached 15 and was still singing soprano...well, let's just say it seemed a little "quare." But I just kept right on singing my soprano, until at age 17, much to my chagrin, my voice changed and I could no longer hit those high notes and Sherri Shade took over the lead to "My Liberty"...Me? Bitter? Nooooooooooooo.

While I miss my church back home, I rarely go back. To his credit, my pastor never preached a homophobic sermon, but then again, he never mentioned homosexuality at all. And although there were plenty of gay men in the church—from the choir stand to the deacon board—there was never any affirmation of gay and lesbian members. No one talked about it. If there are three things the church knows how to do well (and I ain't talking about the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost either), it's shame, guilt, and denial!

*(PERFORMER puts robe backstage. PERFORMER begins to put on black dress shoes, black jeans, and a spandex black shirt.)*

PERFORMER: That's why I think so many gays are finding alternative routes to affirm their spirituality and sexuality [see Johnson 1998a].

*(Tape of house music begins. Slide #75 of PERFORMER dancing with other men)*

PERFORMER: It's Labor Day weekend in 1995, I take a trip to Atlanta, Georgia, to visit friends, to escape from my mostly white New England environment and to return home to the South to find a refuge amongst my black queer peers. While there, my friends take me to a number of gay nightclubs: some are predominately white; some are racially mixed; while others are predominately African American. One of the more popular African American clubs we visit is called "Tracks" or "The Warehouse," though it is gay only two nights a week—Friday and Saturday. We go to Tracks on Saturday, arriving there just a little past midnight. (Among gay bar hoppers, it is unheard of to go to a club before midnight!) Located about a mile and a half from downtown Atlanta, Tracks is indistinguishable from the other warehouses in the industrial district—indistinguishable, that is, except for the line of people that coils around the side of the building and down the block. While standing in line, we overhear the catty, yet playful conversations of those in front and in back of us: "She [he] think she cute. Too bad she ain't" (*laughs*); "Chile, I ain't tryin' to be standin' in this line all night—not with these pumps on!"; "Look, Miss Thing. I ain't got no other ID. Miss Thing at the door



better not try to be shady. I'll cut her ass." In general, we cruise and get cruised, negotiate sexual deals. We're all men on a mission. I know I'm home.

Inside, my friends and I squeeze down the staircase and descend into the sea of bodies onto the dance floor. There is barely enough room to breathe, let alone move. Every inch of the space is filled with bodies: fat bodies, thin bodies, hard bodies, soft bodies, warm bodies, sweaty bodies—every body imaginable. Clearly, the body is on display: There are drag queens in skintight hotpants and platform shoes. There are "butch" men donning their black leather jackets, lining up along the wall like two by fours holding the structure together. There are "queens" dressed in black chiffon blouses unbuttoned to their navels and tight black jeans, who are constantly pursing their lips while looking over the tops of their retro "cat-eye" shades; there are older men (in this context anyone over 45) sitting on bar stools, dressed conservatively in slacks and button-up shirts sipping their scotch and sodas while looking longingly at the young bodies sauntering across the dance floor. The hip-hop contingent is sprinkled throughout the club in their baggy jeans, ski caps, sneakers, and black shades, some sucking on blowpops while others sip Budweisers. And then there are those like me and my friends who are dressed in designer jeans (Calvin Klein) and tight, spandex muscle shirts, performing middle class (acting bourgeoisie)—as if we actually have two nickels to rub together! You can smell us coming because we sprayed and resprayed cologne behind our ankles, on the small of our backs, and, of course on the front of our chests and all around our necks. We're beyond reproach. We manage to dance—spoon fashion—against the seemingly thousands of flying arms, legs, and butts. I dance with the same man all night—Kevin—a friend of a friend. Kevin and I don't mean to be exclusive dance partners; it just works out that way. We dance close. Every now and then we back off from one another as far as we can and then come together again. We kiss. We bump booties. We hold on to each other for dear life as the beat of the music, the smells of Drakkar, Cool Water, Eternity, Escape, and CK-1, the sweat drenching our shirts and moistening our bulging crotches, and the holy sexual spirit that presides works us into a shamanistic state of euphoria. Time stands still.

Around five A.M. the mood of the club shifts and there is a feeling of anticipation in the air. The music shifts to—No it couldn't be!—what sounds like the "shout" music played in my church back home. Kevin and I stare at each other with a carnal intensity as the driving rhythm of the music causes us to grind harder.

Before long, the DJ, a 300-pound, African American man—dressed in a flowing white shirt, blue jeans, high-top sneakers, a thick gold chain, glittering rings on either hand, a baseball cap, and diamond trimmed sunglasses—appears on the stage, and begins to do a roll call of different cities:

"We got any LA in the house? Show your hands if you're from the gay mecca of DC! How about the northern children from Ms. New York City? Detroit! Chicago! We got any Boston children up in here? And last, but not least, let me see the children from Hotlanta!" We cheer and wave our hands in the air if our city is called. Then, the DJ begins to testify:

"Thank Him! For how He kept you safe over the dangerous highways and byways. Thank Him, because you closed in your right mind!

Look around you. Somebody that was here last year ain't here tonight! Look around you! Somebody that was dancing right next to you ain't here tonight! Look around you! Somebody's lover has passed on! Look around you! Somebody's brother, somebody's sister, somebody's cousin, somebody's uncle done gone on to the Maker. Sister Mary, has passed on tonight! Brother Joe, has gone

on to his resting place! But Grace, woke you up this morning! Grace started you on your way! Grace put food on your table! How many of you know what I'm talking about? If He's been good to you, let me see you wave your hands."

Kevin and I, along with others, dance on to the beat of the music, waving our hands, crying, kissing, and shouting, "Yes!" A drag queen appears from nowhere and begins to walk around the side of the dance floor beating a tambourine to the beat of the rhythm. The DJ's preaching along with the repetitive beat of the music, works us into a frenzy. Intermittently dispersed throughout the music, are sound bites from gospel singer Shirley Caesar's song, "Hold My Mule."

*(Slide #76 of the word "Spirit." PERFORMER dances with tambourine in front of scrim and encourages audience to clap; PERFORMER leaves the stage. Slide #77 of the words "Black Is, Black Ain't"; Tape of "Black Is, Black Ain't" chant begins. As the tape fades, PERFORMER returns wearing robe and carrying a podium.)*

PERFORMER: God is good. For those of you who are not familiar with the protocol of the black church, our worship services are based on a dynamic called antiphony or, as we say in the black vernacular: call and response. So if I call, you are supposed to respond. So if I say, "God is good" you should respond with "All the time." God is good! *(Waits for response)* Thank you.

Now, this morning, I'm going to take my text from four books out of the black nationalist version of the Bible. I'll read from the book of Cleaver, Baraka, Madhubuti, and King (Alveda, that is)—not to be confused with the prophet.

The title of my sermon is "Yet Do I Marvel at this Queer Thing!"

First, I go to the book of Cleaver [1968].

*(Slide #78 of Eldridge Cleaver)*

PERFORMER: In this book we find a man, suffering from primeval mitosis; we see a man, trying to obtain law and order while writing letters from prison to all black women from all black men; a man, on becoming a black eunuch, prays for



11. "Spirit." UC-Berkeley performance (2002). (Courtesy of E. Patrick Johnson)

Lazarus to come forth; this man's—this *black* man's—soul is on ice, as he takes notes on a native son—a black son, a queer son, Harlem's son, Emma's boy. Cleaver says of this son in chapter 2, page 100, paragraph 12, says he: "It seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm" [1968:100].

A little further down in paragraph 13 he continues: "He becomes a white man in a black body. A self-willed, automated slave, he becomes the white man's most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks.

"The black homosexual, when his twist has a racial nexus, is an extreme embodiment of this contradiction. The white man has deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on 'whiteness' all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against 'blackness' himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of night" [101].

Yet do I marvel at this queer thing. Can I get a Amen! The next passage is taken from the book of Baraka—

*(Slide #79 of Imamu Baraka)*

PERFORMER: —(or "Jones" in the Old Testament). As you may recall, Jaraka was a troubled soul—oh the pressures of beautiful black women in the system of Dante's hell—it was like Babylon revisited. Poor prophet Bones was troubled in mind—the young soul wrote a "preface to a twenty volume suicide note." Oh brother Leraka—we look for you yesterday and here you come today. But though a troubled prophet, he is author to some of the most important words of the black nationalist version of the Bible. Most insightful, for instance, is his analysis of then president of the NAACP Roy Wilkins. In chapter "Selected Poetry" verse "Civil Rights Poem," says prophet a mammal, says he: "Roywilkins is an eternal faggot/ His spirit is a faggot/ his projection/ and image, this is/ to say, that if I ever see roylwilkins/ on the sidewalks/ imonna/ stick half my sandal/ up his/ ass" [Baraka 1979:115]. Yet do I marvel at this queer, queer thing, Amen!

Moving right along. We move to the book of Madhubuti—

*(Slide #80 of Haki Madhubuti)*

PERFORMER: —(also found in the Old Testament as "Lee"). Isyouboti was a righteous man. A man for change. But he was cool. Change. He preached of a black Christ—change, change. In the book of "Don't Cry, Scream," verses 75 to 80, Haiku, recounts an event that challenged his walk with God. Don L. Get-out-of-my-booty says, says he: "(swung on a faggot who politely/ scratched his ass in my presence./ he smiled broken teeth stained from/ his over-used tongue. fisted-face./ teeth dropped in tune with ray/ charles singing 'yesterday')" [Madhubuti 1969:27–31]. Oh, yet, yet do I marvel at this queer, queer, queer thing! But let us move on to the last book—the book of King.

In the Black Nationalist version, you might remember that prophetess Alveda was the niece of the great prophet, Martin. Her uncle's followers, however, scourged Velveeta, and this made her very resentful. And pretty soon along came old Reagan. And Alveda and Reagan got friendly. Then Alveda got to walking on shaky ground! Don't ever get friendly with Reagan. But my God is a forgiving God.

My God is a wonderful God. Amen! And he forgave old Velveeta and gave her the gift of speaking in tongues.

*(Slide #81 of newspaper clipping from The Daily Tarheel)*

PERFORMER: If you have your slide projectors with you, advance with me, will you, to one of Alveda King's most quoted books, the book of Bigotry. And turn with me to chapter 3,

*(Slide #82 of King's quote)*

PERFORMER: paragraphs 1–5. Read with me: “King spent a significant amount of the speech explaining why homosexuals should not be included in the civil rights movement. ‘God hates racism; God hates homosexuality,’ King said. ‘God loves people who have been victims of racism and homosexuals. Homosexuality is a binding lifestyle,’ she said. Many people she knows are former lesbians or former gay men—but she says she knows of no former blacks, King said. ‘If you were born that way, you can be born again’” [King 1998:1]. Amen! Amen! Yet do I marvel. Yet do I marvel at this queer, queer, queer, queer, queer, queer, queer thing!

*(Slide #83 of empty slide)*

PERFORMER: But I submit to you this morning. That long before there was a Cleaver. Long before there was a LeRoi Jones. And way back there before we heard of a Don L. Madhubuti. And way on back before Alveda. There was God. A God who said suffer unto me queer children. Mother/Father/Spirit who said, it's yours, for the asking. Yours! It's your blessing. Whatever you need. It's yours. So how can it be that you question my authenticity?

How can it be that you question my authenticity?

How can it be that you question my authenticity when I am the Queen?

*(Slide #84 of Little Richard)*

PERFORMER: So I ask again  
How can it be that you question my authenticity?

How can it/how can it be?

For you see  
I am the Queen  
you know

the Queen who hits those high E flats on Sunday morning,  
eeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEheheheheheheh  
gets the sistahs to shoutin'  
the brothahs to squirming in their seats  
before ol' preach takes his text from  
Leviticus/how/can/it/be?

*(Slide #85 of empty slide)*

PERFORMER: the Queen  
who stands like a tea cup  
hand on hip and dressed to kill  
in retail  
stores all over the country



long the train's been gone  
 gone/gone/gone/going to meet the man  
 in giovanni's room to have a rap on race  
 so the Queen sits  
 with nikki giovanni and has a dialogue about  
 whether a nigger can kill  
 is that a rhetorical question?  
 the Queen wants to know  
 is that a rhetorical question?  
 mr. don l. lee/excuse me/mr. haki madhubuti  
 but  
 excuse me  
 but/excuse me  
 can the Queen speak?  
 can the Queen speak of  
 black authenticity  
 can the faggot tell of His goodness  
 alongside rev. leroi (jones that is)  
 who proselytizes black art  
 as the black/as/the/black  
 as/the  
 blackass under his dick?  
 can the faggot Queen celebrate her  
 nubian hue like the pearls she clutches  
 ever so gently  
 can the faggot sissy Queen  
 serve you up a big heapin'  
 of blue/black  
 blurple?  
 can her high Queerness speak in  
 authentic afrocentric field hollers/scream/shout  
 we wear the mask that grins and lies  
 and lies on the Queen  
 when her voice is  
 anthropomorphized  
 theorized  
 televised  
 ventriloquized  
 more lies  
 colonized like herstory  
 in manifest destiny  
 in manifest faggotry  
 because negro faggotry

*(Slide #86 of "Men on Film" from TV show, In Living Color)*

PERFORMER: because negro faggotry

*(Slide #87 "Men on Film" from TV show, In Living Color)*

PERFORMER: because negro faggotry

*(Slide #88 "Men on Film" from TV show, In Living Color)*

PERFORMER: is in vogue  
 is in vogue  
 as in damon wayans

as in david alan grier  
talkin' 'bout they  
"hated it"  
as when  
black face becomes queer face  
as when  
black race denies queer space  
as when  
black macho kills black homo  
as when  
black masculinity reads black heterosexuality

*(Slide #89 of scene from Spike Lee's film, School Days)*

PERFORMER: as when  
I say gamma, you say fag. Gamma. Fag. Gamma. Fag.  
but I don't want to be like spike or mike  
or even the other mike

*(Slide #90 of Michael Jordan)*

PERFORMER: but I'll step up to the mike  
to say  
that you owe me  
respect for my blood and sweat  
on your fist

*(Slide #91 empty slide)*

PERFORMER: and  
you/owe/me  
black poems that  
call black people  
that call black people  
that call all people  
that call queer love  
black love  
and  
you owe me  
hi-fives and soul brothah shakes  
and  
you owe me  
what's up my niggah  
what's up on the down low  
and  
you owe me  
a space on the team  
a right in the fight  
a ride on the bus  
cause we gotta have trust/and  
you owe me  
my card/my/x/my/check  
in the blank/and  
you owe me  
something other than other  
cause other didn't save your  
black ass

it was the Queen  
 so how can it be  
 that you question my authenticity?  
 how can it be when  
 how/how/how/how  
 how long before we bleed brother  
 blood/how/long  
 before we get it together  
 how/long  
 before we get it together  
 how/long  
 before we get it together  
 how long/not/long/how/long/not/long  
 or Lord  
 I long  
 for the day that I  
 STOP  
 counting the t-  
 cells that keep us gridlocked

*(Fade in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Montgomery" speech on tape)*

PERFORMER: from brotherhood  
 how can it be?  
 brothah? [Johnson 1998b]

*(PERFORMER walks offstage and lights dim. Two slides #92 and 93 of MLK. PERFORMER sings "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child" offstage. Thirteen slides #94 through 106 of deceased black gays and lesbians, including Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Sylvester, and Bayard Rustin while, PERFORMER sings song. Slide #107 of the word "Home." Tape of song "Shooz" by Herbie Hancock. PERFORMER comes out dressed in white African attire and sits on steps on far stage right. Slide #108 of the word "Africa.")*

PERFORMER: Unlike many African Americans, I didn't have any romantic notions about Africa before I went there. I didn't think the people there would run up to me after I got off the plane and say, "Welcome, My Brother." No, I knew that they would see me as a rich American before they saw me as anything else. But as they say, you have to go there, to know there. And so, I went on this journey to the motherland.

*(Slide #109 of La Bodi Beach in Ghana, West Africa)*

PERFORMER: I never understood Duboisian twoness until I stood on the banks of Accra staring out into the distance—into blackness where screams bombarded my head, the ocean's ebb drew my ear to the wind [see DuBois 1994:1–7]. Listen. Can't you hear the cries for home? But where is home? The fixed melancholy settles and the voice is mute. Listen. Can't you hear the drums? Can't you hear the muted blood-curdling screams? Listen. Speak to me, Wind. Tell me I am your child, twice removed. Listen.

*(Slide #110 of little girl carrying an American flag)*

PERFORMER: And she appears. Wrapped in the contradictions of double consciousness and colonization. Her dress, white as my master's skin, falls just so over her posed body. I'm on the other end of the gaze objectifying her to speak against her objectification. It's a cruel irony. She carries the flag like a handkerchief to wipe away the tears that will come because of my rude invasion. Where is my



blackness in all of this? I don't belong here. Her tears have told me, but she holds my flag. Where is my Americanness in all of this? I hate that symbol draped over her precious little body. This twoness is killing me.

*(Slide #111 of DuBois's grave)*

PERFORMER: I went to DuBois for answers. I tried to dig him up to make him answer me. Listen. Can't you hear the cries for home? But where is home? Can't you hear the drums? Listen. "Go," he said, "and listen."

*(Slide #112 of little girl with flag)*

PERFORMER: I give her 500 cedis and she stops crying. She drops the flag on the ground and picks it up again and looks at me. She knows. Listen.

*(Slide #113 picture of Edison)*

PERFORMER: And he appears. Edison. He has been at the camp since 1990. Lisa and Soyini asked him to be our guide on the camp, but to me he was much more.

He took us to a club called LIPS. Now, I thought it strange that there would be a liquor bar on a Liberian Refugee Camp, but hey, poverty does not mean you can't have a social life. So we went to LIPS. Once inside, the twoness came to me again. Ghana, Durham? Durham, Ghana? Near the back wall sat a woman with a weave halfway down her back, jeans that she had to have painted on, and a brother rapping hard to her in his native tongue of Twi. At the bar sat three brothers telling lies, like characters out of some Zora Neale Hurston story or like the men that congregate at the barbershop in my hometown. They don't go there to get their hair cut, but to tell lies, drink liquor, and hit on unsuspecting women.

*(Slide #114 of owner of LIPS)*

PERFORMER: The owner of LIPS was familiar, too. He looked like my Uncle Boot, who used to frequent the barbershop in my hometown. He showed us to a table, when I couldn't help but notice the sign behind the counter.

*(Slide #115 of sign up close)*

PERFORMER: "No unauthorized persons are allowed behind the counter. Please take notice and govern yourselves accordingly to avoid embarrassment." Ok? And this all too familiar sign found in black establishments around the country:

*(Slide #116 of "No Credit")*

PERFORMER: "No Credit. Pay as you call, pls."

*(Slide #117 of bartender)*

PERFORMER: It's hot. We need something cool to drink. We sit down at a table and Edison orders two mineral waters for Soyini and Lisa, a bitter lemon for me, and a coke for himself. When the drinks come, Lisa quizzes Edison about his life on the camp as Soyini listens intently. I begin to think about the night before when we got lost trying to find our way from the airport. Lisa would ask in her New Orleans accent dipped in Twi, "Good Evening, can you tell me how to get to Osu?" "Straight. Go straight," they would always say and "straight" never meant straight. It inevitably meant take a left, drive two miles, then turn right and follow the curve—but never simply, unequivocally, "straight." We spent half the night going "straight" and it got us nowhere. "Straight," indeed.

*(Tape of Mariah Carey's "Dreamlover")*

PERFORMER: I begin to doze off when, over the fuzzy stereo speakers I hear...Mariah Carey?

*(Slide #118 of Mariah Carey)*

PERFORMER: “Dreamlover” no less. Why would they be listening to Mariah Carey at a Liberian Refugee Camp? Dumbfounded, I turn to Edison and ask him, “Edison, do you like Mariah Carey?” “Yes,” he answers as if to say, “What’s so odd about that?” “Why?” I ask in an accusatory tone. “Because she sounds like a black woman,” he says. I cannot speak. My voice is muted by the instability of my own identity—of my own conventions of reading race. The African teaches the African American to listen. Can’t you hear the drums?

*(“Dreamlover” fades)*

PERFORMER: I liked Edison. There was something sexy about him. But I had a difficult time negotiating sexuality in Ghana—the natives’ and my own. I had seen men in town holding hands, hugging, and even kiss each other, but it had nothing to do with their sexuality. In fact, I met no self-identified gay men while I was there. There, Western notions of gender performance flew out the door. Example: Edison asked me earlier that day about my girlfriend—about my fiancée. “I don’t have a girlfriend, Edison. I don’t have a fiancée.” He had no clue I was gay, nor that I was flirting with him. I haven’t been mistaken for a heterosexual in years—I must be down on my job.

*(Slide #119 of Mrs. Powell outside her house/restaurant)*

PERFORMER: We rise to leave to go to Mrs. Powell’s. Mrs. Powell works with one of the non-governmental organizations and runs a small restaurant on the camp. On our way out, some LIPS patrons, four men, surround me—each holding a fifth of liquor. “Eh! EH! My American brother! EH! You buy us a drink? Eh! My friend, do you know your history? Do you know that in 17...55, the white man, he come and take you, he steal you from your homeland, my brother. Do you know that we are brothers? We are brothers, my friend. You buy us drink?” “I’ll buy you a drink if you tell me how to get to Mrs. Powell’s place,” I say, lying. Yep. That’s right. You know what they told me. “Go straight.”

As we continue to walk away from LIPS, the jeers of the men fading into the distance, out of the blue, Edison takes my hand.

*(Slide #120 of PERFORMER and Edison)*

PERFORMER: We walk like that, hand-in-hand “straight” down the road.

*(Tape of drumming begins. Slide #121 of male slave dungeon. Slide #122 of slave dungeon entrance)*

PERFORMER: Have I been down this road before? Shhhhhh. Listen. Can’t you hear the blood-curdling screams? Shhhhhh. Listen.

*(Slide #123 of dungeon interior)*

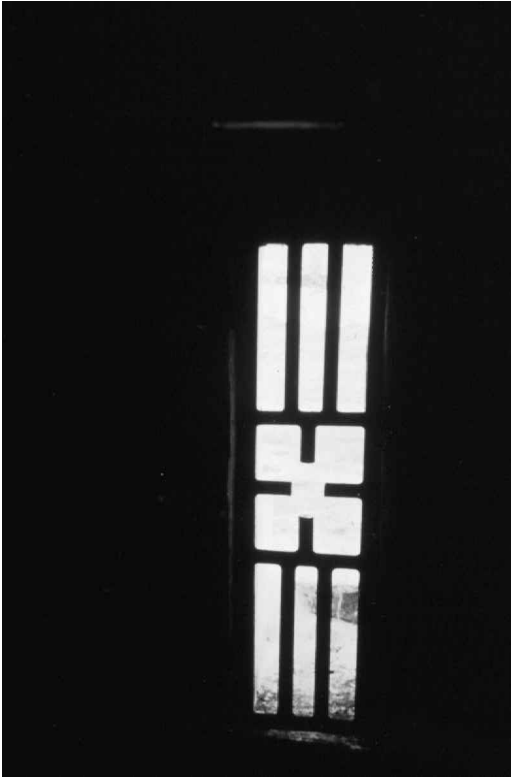
PERFORMER: Where am I? What is this blackness? Shhhhhh, listen. The drum will tell you.

*(Slide #124 of “Door of No Return”)*

PERFORMER: Behind that door lies the answer. Behind the door of no return? Yes. Go. Shhhh.



12. Johnson and Edison on Liberian refugee camp in 1999. (Photo by D. Soyini Madison)



13. "Door of No Return,"  
Elmina Castle, Cape  
Coast, Ghana, 1999.  
(Photo by E. Patrick Johnson)

(Slide #125 of empty slide. The drumming gets louder and PERFORMER takes off his hat and top and goes behind the scrim; drumming ends and the back of the scrim is lit to cast PERFORMER's silhouette. Tape of instrumental of Nina Simone's "Four Women."<sup>6</sup> PERFORMER dances behind the scrim while singing.)

My skin is black  
My arms are long  
My hair is woolly  
My back is strong  
Strong enough to take the pain  
Inflicted again and again  
What do they call me?  
My name is Aunt Sarah  
My name is Aunt Sarah, Aunt Sarah

My skin is yellow  
My hair is long  
Between two worlds  
I do belong  
My father was rich and white  
He forced my mother late one night  
What do they call me?  
My name is Saphronia  
My name is Saphronia

My skin is burned  
My hair is charred  
My eyes bleed red

My mouth ajar  
Whose little boy am I?  
The one to the fence you would tie  
What do they call me?  
My name is Matthew  
My name is Matthew Shepard

My skin is brown  
My manner is tough  
I'll kill the first bigot I see  
My life has been rough  
I'm awfully bitter these days  
The senseless killing of gays

What do they call me?  
My name is Faggot!

(Lights fade. Slide #126 of multiple lynchings. Slide #127 of "Membership Has Its Privileges.")

THE END

### Notes

1. This use of "interpellate" is taken from language philosopher Louis Althusser who refigures the word to mean "to call into being" or "to make someone a subject" by "hailing" them by calling them a name. His reconfiguration of the word can be found in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 173–183.

2. I borrow this term from Diana Fuss in her discussion of essentialism: "Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (1989:xi).
3. 1640: blacks were denied the right to bear arms in Virginia; 1776: the United States won independence from Britain; 1865: southerners created Black Codes to control and inhibit the freedom of ex-slaves; 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; 1970: Angela Davis was tried, convicted, and subsequently released on kidnapping, conspiracy, and murder charges.
4. In the spring of 1995, Staples gave a public reading of his book at Amherst College where I was on faculty and a member of the audience. The proceeding excerpts are among those that Staples read. Our exchange occurred during the question and answer session of that talk.
5. The "Door of No Return" is so called because it is the last door through which enslaved Africans passed before being boarded onto slave ships.
6. I altered the last two stanzas of this song. In the original, the last two stanzas are: "My skin is tan/ my hair is fine/ My hips invite you/ My mouth like wine/ Whose little girl am I?/ The one with money to buy/ What do they call me?/ My name is sweet thing/ My name is sweet thing. My skin is brown/ My manner is tough/ I'll kill the first mother I see/ My life has been rough/ I'm awfully bitter these days/ Cause my parents were slaves/ What do they call me?/ My name is Peaches!"

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**E. Patrick Johnson** is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. He has written and directed a number of performances at UNC-Chapel Hill, Louisiana State University, and Amherst College, and has performed for national and international audiences. He has also published essays in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *OBSIDIAN II*, and *Callaloo*. His book, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, and anthology (with Mae Henderson), *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* will be published in fall 2003 by Duke University Press.