

Reframing Black Male Homosociality as Critical Spaces to Explore Black Masculinity

Anthony R. Keith, Jr.

The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

Black masculinity was examined within the context of sites where public platonic practices of affection amongst Black men are evident. An overview of the limited scholarship and research on Black male homosocial experiences within sports, hip-hop culture, the Black church, Black barbershops, and Black fraternities were explored. An argument for using art as an abstract space to further the study of homosocial relationships amongst Black men was provided; the author referenced his own creative writing throughout the article as an example. The conclusion suggests scholars and researchers interested in studying Black masculinity can serve as agents of change on this issue by framing their analysis around positive and public practices of love for and amongst Black men.

NOTE: An original poem composed by the author is woven throughout the article. The full poem is provided in the Appendix section.

“words have power / letters are electrically charged / and when
bounded together /
they can create enough energy / to cause a massive explosion /
words can turn tiny mountain tops / in to mighty metaphorical

erosions / and it will be I / who stands atop one of those mounds
/ with words / vowels / syllables / phrases / and sounds/ and I'll
be screaming / THIS IS FOR ALL OF YA'LL STILL
DREAMING! /"

bell hooks provides an unequivocally strong argument for men to critique patriarchy and involve themselves in shaping feminist movement and addressing male liberation in her 2004 book, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. She expresses a hope that "Black men who care about the plight of Black males and who are themselves advocates of feminist thinking would do more to reach out to Black males as a group" (p. xvi). So far, as she continues to state, "that work has not been forthcoming." Similar to Neal's (2005) reflection on his feminist identity development, I too acknowledge my inability to critically examine and write about Black gender ideologies until challenged by a Black woman. I felt like she was directly challenging me to take action, or continue to be a Black man who contributes to the widening gap in scholarship about Black masculinity. Therefore, as both a Black man and a feminist, I feel compelled to probe the critical spaces that shape Black masculinity and seek to help close the gap.

Roberts's (1994) analysis of Black male relationships indicates there is very little scholarly research that explores healthy and constructive relationships among African American boys and men. In particular, Roberts argues that there is a need for a more Afrocentric approach to studying Black masculinity that would examine how males relate to each other. The European models often used by researchers and theorists place men in opposition with each other; the African model, on the other hand, stresses the importance of communal needs and interconnectedness. Most scholarly works on the topic of Black masculinity often examine the Black male experience within larger social context like hip hop, media, politics, and education. Rarely, however, are the experiences amongst Black men within those social contexts explored. Therefore, an examination of the physical and emotional practice of authentic love for and amongst Black men is not only a scholarship inquiry, but a pragmatic necessity. Black men need to understand, feel, and practice an ethic of love for each other that

fosters a healthy masculinity. However, this becomes a challenge when Black masculinity is confined to White, American patriarchal structures that are rooted in homophobia. Black men must negotiate their love for each other in a society that not only demonizes and hates them, but stigmatizes Black gay and bisexual men. hooks (2005) states “Black men are not loved by White men, White women, Black women, or girls and boys. And that especially most black men do not love themselves” (p. xi). Scholars and researchers interested in studying Black masculinity can serve as agents of change on this issue by framing their analysis around positive and public practices of love amongst Black men.

The status of Black men in America is a publicly discussed phenomenon that often limits its discourse to statics on high incarceration rates, low educational attainment, and family abandonment. As Neal explains in his (2005) book, *The New Black Man*, the “Black Man in Crisis” is the theme of hundreds of newspaper, magazine, and journal articles and conferences over the last twenty years. According to Neal, the influx of public messages about Black men has perhaps made it easy to "isolate the Tupac Shakurs, Allen Iversons, 'Pookies,' and Nushawn Williamses of the world and make them the reason why the black man has failed (p.3)." I question the ability of Black men to express legitimate public acts of love amongst each other, while simultaneously internalizing public attacks on their race and gender identities. This double consciousness, according to Collins (2005), has ascribed a new identity for Black men as the “Endangered Black Male,” or a Black man with untapped potential who will never reach his dreams due to internalized oppression fostered by these statics. In 2008, CNN presented the plight of Black men as a segmented topic in one of their “Black in America” special reports. I imagine that Black men are significantly underrepresented in the CNN viewer demographic and thus, question the targeted audience for these special reports. Publicly acknowledging Black men as a species worth investigation is not only pejorative, malicious, and dehumanizing, but it further perpetuates a philosophy that Black men are unlovable.

“those of you / whose hue / starts of as black / until you’ve been
beaten down to blue /
don’t know who the fuck you are / because you’re letting
society define it for you/
aint got a pot to piss in / or a window to throw it out of / and no
food to chew /
and so you’re starving / starving for knowledge/ not because
you don’t grasp the language / but because no one took the time
to teach it to you /”

I became interested in this topic after several accounts of both observing and participating in public practices of platonic affection amongst men in Tanzania. I participated in a cultural immersion program in Tanzania as a graduate student in 2006 and two additional experiences as a cultural practitioner in higher education from 2009 to 2010. Each visit lasted between three to five weeks and included field studies that focused on gender development and artistic culture in dominant and indigenous communities. Although the studies were primarily exploring the experiences of women, I could not help but to observe the relationships amongst Tanzanian men. I observed them holding hands together while strolling through villages and cities, sleeping up to five men in the same bed, leaning on each other during moments of rest, and dancing and singing with each other in night clubs and during cultural celebrations. I soon learned that being in close proximity with and showing love for other men in Tanzania was a performance of masculinity. Perhaps there is no visible threat to masculinity within this context because homosexuality is illegal in the country. Therefore, any public identification or practice that the law constitutes as homosexual would be met with significantly negative repercussions.

Each time I returned back to the United States, I had to adjust my gender performance to adhere to socially accepted patterns of Black masculinity. In other words, public displays of platonic affection are confined to half-handshake-half-hugs and maintaining a spatial territory between myself and other Black men. Certainly, the historical constructs of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that shape Black

masculinity in the United States are a flawed comparison to that of Tanzanian men. However, I am interested in examining practices of love amongst Black men in the United States with regard to segregated gender spaces. Like Neal (2005) advocates, I want to serve as a champion of a movement where Black men are not homophobes. I seek to not only challenge social barriers that frame Black masculinity, but foster an authentic love amongst Black men regardless of their intersecting identities.

“but brothers / I have something more empowering to
tell you/ even if the world doesn’t / please know that I
LOVE YOU /
and I love you / with all of the African ancestry that
exist within me/ from my forehead /
to my collar bone / from my bloodstream / to my skin
tone / from my strong back /
to my humble knees / from my shinbone / to my
callused feet /
and brothers / I DECLARE YOU FREE! /”

Therefore, this article will explore Black male homosocial spaces and public practices of love, as well as present an argument that art, as an abstract space, can be used as an additional lens for exploring Black masculinity.

I acknowledge that Black men are not a homogenous group, and their identities and experiences vary greatly. Therefore, my discussion of love amongst Black men is not intended for generalist applications. It is my hope, however, to encourage critical dialogue on Black male gender performances and develop strategies that challenge controlled images of Black masculinity. In an effort to distinguish homosocial from homosexual within this article, I will intermittently refer to platonic practices of love and affection amongst Black men. Also, the terms African-American and Black will be used interchangeably to reflect terminology used within scholarship and research on this topic.

Sports: A Homosocial Space Controlled by Violence and Competition

“they just told you that you’re too stubborn to listen to /
that your head’s too thick to get a brick through / that you’re
nothing / but a no-good /
pants-sagging / baby-making / law-breaking / violent / juvenile
delinquent / that all you’re capable to do / is simply eat / sleep /
shit / and screw / “

It is usually within the context of athletic competition and braggadocio that Black men are permitted to show any forms of affection towards each other that is void of eroticism. Unfortunately, these acts of affection are rooted in a history of violence and Black male domination by White American patriarchy. Ferber (2007) argues that key elements of White supremacy and the new racism are reinforced by popular representations of Black male athletes. Ferber explored contemporary illustrations of Black males as violent and hypersexual. Using recent examples of violence by African American professional sports players such as Kobe Bryant, O.J. Simpson, and Mike Tyson, Ferber pivots themes of Black masculinity around White patriarchal gender ideologies. Missing from Ferber’s analysis however, is an examination of the relationships that exist within Black male athlete groups.

Boxing, for example, is a sport that permits Black men to fight, then kiss and make up. In May 2010, after twelve rounds of brutally beating each other, professional boxers, Floyd Mayweather and Shane Mosley, embraced each other and exchanged words of endearment. Publicly admitting that they loved each other was not only a sign of good sportsmanship, it was also an example Black men reinforcing a controlled masculinity. Prior to the boxing match, the two verbally attacked each other in an artful display of words and gestures aimed at

de-masculinization. Pounding their fists and calling each other “sissies”, “soft,” and “punks,” were undoubtedly attempts to confirm to traditionally masculine ideals. However, after the match, they were able to negotiate a homosocial space where platonic love is controlled by violence and competition.

As Hill (2005) suggests in his article on subverting traditional masculinity, Black men are permitted to express love on the basketball court by giving high-fives, chest bumps, and ass smacks. He identifies the basketball court as a space for “offering the type of caring touches, kind words, and genuine regard for other brothers that most of us possess but aren't permitted to share except under very limited and heavily surveyed conditions” (para. 1). Tucker's (2003) analysis of representations of Black male athletes suggests that given the images of an emotional, loving community of Black men does not accord with hegemonic images of aggressive Black men whose sole purposes in life are to destroy self and community. “The most frightening symbol, for White people, is Black men in love. The moment Black men love each other, the United States is done for” (Tucker, 2003, p. 313).

Hall (2001), on the other hand, critiqued the overrepresentation of Black men in a professional sports industry that is both controlled and admired by White Americans. Hall provides a critical analysis of Black masculinity within the historical context of White voyeurism on Black male bodies. In particular, Hall posits White American's fascination of Black male athletic talent is rooted in longstanding beliefs that Black men's bodies are biologically suited for superior athleticism, yet they are intellectually inferior to their White counterparts. Missing from Hall's critique, however, is an exploration of the interpersonal relationships amongst Black male athletes that mutually shape Black masculinity. If Black men are overrepresented in sports, then how do they negotiate their relationships with each other?

Hip Hop: A Homosocial Space Controlled by Hypermasculinity

“so fuck / being afraid to use slang / because I’m granting you the right / to use the language of your people / to move the masses /”

Black male homosocial experiences are also present in hip hop culture. After a lyrical analysis of 478 songs by top record selling Black rap artists, Oware (2010) concluded that most homosocial content is confined within three major themes: 1) rappers defining their male friends as family members; 2) rappers utilizing their personal achievements for the benefit of their male friends; and 3) lamenting the incarceration or death of a companion. As an example, Oware provides an excerpt from Jay-Z’s “Do You Wanna Ride” from his album *Kingdom Come* (2007):

I said ‘we’ cause I’m here, you here!/
Yeah, ride with me, your spot is reserved family/
cigarette boats, yachts, ain’t nowhere we can’t go/
We in South Beach and the Hamptons too baby/

Complimenting these lyrical themes are music videos that portray groups of Black men engaging in platonic, yet affectionate masculine performances. I am still fascinated when I see rapper Ron Browz spraying and pouring champagne on some his Black male comrades in his “Pop Champagne” video; this is justified, however, through extremely misogynistic lyrics. Neal (2005) states that Black men in hip hop videos are performing their notions of how American masculinity embodies power through force, violence, and exploitation. Hill (2009) suggests, despite Hip Hop’s explicitly homophobic message

dissemination, there are strong attempts by rap artist to justify the contradictory homoerotic behaviors. According to Hill (2009), "rap artist have even deployed homophobic slang like 'pause' and 'no homo' after uttering words that could be (mis)construed as homoerotic in order to preemptively defend themselves against allegations of homosexuality" (p. 32).

Black Church: A Homosocial Space Controlled by Emotional Vulnerability

"I'm holding ya'll up on my shoulders / giving ya'll a higher
view /
I'm breaking ya'll through mountain tops / and wading through
muddy waters /
and don't worry / because historically / I've been know to split
that shit in two"

My father is a minister and an evangelist for a predominately Black church in Washington, D.C. He is responsible for meeting the faith-based needs of his church community and also providing service and support for the church's Bishop, a Black male. Recently, my father told me that he "loves" his Bishop and that he embraces that man as not only his spiritual leader but as a father, friend, and confidant. His use of the word "love" sparked my inquisition of Black churches as safely controlled spaces that foster platonic love for and amongst Black men.

Ward (2005) explores the relationship between theologically driven homophobia and anti-homosexual rhetoric of Black Nationalism in Black churches. Framing homophobia as a pillar of hegemonic masculinity, Ward argues homophobia is used as a strategy of domination to define not only who is homosexual, but who is not a man. Additionally, he posits church-related homophobia influences conceptions of what is to be a Black man, thereby influencing the

behavior and lives of Black males. While Ward's (2005) article provides a rich analysis of the significance of the Black church on shaping heterosexual hypermasculinity, it fails to address the platonic relationships amongst men in the Black church. I have personally participated and observed Black men in church crying, physically embracing, praying, and affectionately worshipping with each other—all forms of a vulnerable masculinity. Although confined to the walls of churches and other places of faith, Black men negotiate these spaces as safe locations to express their love for God and for each other.

Black Barbershops: A Homosocial Space Controlled by Cultural Exchanges

“but brothers / I have something more empowering to tell you/ even
if the world doesn’t please know that I LOVE YOU /

Black barbershops are cultural spaces that thrive on homosocial experiences amongst Black men. This is one of the few spaces where the physical presence of women is virtually non-existent. One of my female friends maintains a short haircut and asked if I would accompany her to a Black barbershop in her neighborhood. When I asked why she needed me, she indicated that it was a place where Black men go to be with each other and, unless accompanied by a man, women are not welcomed. I wondered what she thought took place in such a segregated gender space. I informed her that there is no secret code of behavior, but there is an underlying message that permits platonic practices of affection amongst Black men.

Alexander’s (2003) interpretive indigenous ethnographic study of black barbershops as cultural spaces included accounts of unacknowledged yet sanctioned intimate contact amongst other men.

Luke leans his body against mine when he is
trimming my facial hair. I am not sexualizing
Luke or the experience, for he is a father figure.

We understand the meaningfulness of the engagement, not only the functionality of the action but in the knowing. The knowing—that a Black man who knows and understands the growth pattern of Black hair and the sensitivity of Black skin—is caring for another Black man.
(p. 120)

I too experience similar acts of love when I visit my barbershop back home. Even in a space dominated by Black men, it is acceptable for my barber to publicly announce how much he has missed me since my last visit and tell me he loves me when I leave. We give each other full embraces, smiles, and engage in playful banter with other Black men in the shop. Sometimes we converse about sports and pop culture; other times we have more intimate dialogue about family troubles and romantic relationships. According to Alexander (2003), unlike stoic images of Black masculinity expressed in media and pop culture, barbershops are cultural sites where Black men engage in friendly exchanges, all-the-while, negotiating space and intention.

Fraternities: A Homosocial Space Controlled by Brotherhood

“so brothers / if I have to fight your battles/ and brothers / if I
have to take your blows /
don’t you worry / because I will do it for you / I will do it /”

African American fraternities serve as another site for examining homosocial experiences of Black men. I come across countless photos on Facebook of Black fraternity men joined together to form a “line;” they are positioned chest-to-back with their arms folded underneath one another, and they are basically holding each other as close as possible. These photos are public and often have captions like “I love my LB (line brother).”

However, I have also witnessed some of the same fraternity men refusing to sleep in the same bed at a leadership conference.

Harper and Harris (2006) analysis on the role of Black fraternities conclude racial identity, leadership development, cognitive development and practical competence are positive outcomes on African American college males. There is very little discussion, however, in their study on the positive relationships amongst fraternity members. The researchers did provide some indication that fraternity members in their study mentioned “having a life long expectation of service to the organization and unconditional support to each other” (p. 133).

Similarly, results from McClure’s (2006) study of twenty members of a historically Black fraternity at a large predominately White institution concluded that cooperation and community building was a common thematic construct of masculinity. McClure suggests a cooperative feeling also sets up the possibility for more honest and authentic relationships among men. “They are no longer in competition with one another and the fraternity often provided the members with their first opportunity to experience ‘real,’ emotionally honest relationships with men” (p. 66). Kiesling's (2005) study concluded homosociality is performed “indirectly” or with “disclaimers,” amongst fraternity men, but it is nevertheless central to the men’s social identities, especially as fraternity members. However, Kiesling's participants were members of a predominately White fraternity, which leaves little to the cultural discourse on Black male fraternity members. An in-depth exploration of the positive outcomes of brotherhood on Black masculinity and its relationship to fraternity membership is sorely needed.

Art: An Unrestricted Homosocial Space

“I will do it / and I will smile / I will do it/ with a heart as pure
as the metaphors / in the poems of Langston Hughes / and as
cool / as the vibrato in B.B. King’s blues /”

It is clear that research on the topic of public platonic practices of love amongst Black men is missing within research and scholarship on the topic of Black masculinity. Art is an additional homosocial space lacking attention, yet worthy of exploration. Art can function as an abstract, inclusive, homosocial space that promotes authentic love for and amongst Black men. Most creative art forms do not have to conform to social institutions, rubrics, and standards. Spoken word poetry, for example, is an artistic performance in which individualism is encouraged and words and messages can vary in style, tone, and texture. I think it would behoove Black men to embrace masculinity like art; one that is void of social restrictions, but guided by introspection and most importantly, with love.

While researching information to frame the concepts of this article, I came across a Wikipedia entry on the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement (2010). This social movement began around the early 1980’s and consists of a body of organized work that seeks to foster healthy psychosocial development amongst men. One of the tenets of this movement includes a focus on engaging men’s exegesis through personal narratives, story telling, poetry, and other literary and performance arts as tools for introspection. In other words, help men understand themselves as men in artistic ways that promote emotional and psychological development.

As a feminist, I am critical of how a movement to foster male identity development can be utilized as an advocacy tool for women’s rights all over the world. However, as a spoken word artist and poet, I

can identify with the importance of using the power of words and language in artistic spaces that promote social justice.

According to Collins (2005), loving Black people (as distinguished from dating/or having sex with Black people) in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act. Therefore, I referenced pieces of my own literary work throughout this article not only as an act of rebellion, but also as a public declaration of authentic love for myself and for all of the other Black men.

Discussion

It is my hope that other Black male feminists, scholars, educators, artist and writers who love Black men continue to contribute to a new framework for examining Black masculinity. Researchers and scholars, I implore you to dedicate time and effort to examine the positive relationships amongst Black men that foster a healthy masculinity. By focusing on gender constructs that contradict cultural norms and values on the Black male experience, we can shape a new framework that positively examines Black masculinity. Artists, I am advocating that you create pieces dedicated to Black male platonic practices of love. Utilizing an abstract space that lacks boundaries and constrictions can not only be creatively liberating, but socially liberating for those Black men in bondage. Educators, I am asking that you use the artwork and the research as pedagogical tools to foster global learning and engagement with issues of Black masculinity. Challenge your students to engage in critical and reflective dialogue on the content put forth by artist, researchers, and scholars.

“we fight with one fist in the air / but with me beside you / we
now fight / with the power of two / and until / you have gained
the wisdom / and until / you have learned how to work the
system / and until / you can walk / with your footsteps / next to

mine / don't you worry brothers / I will continue to carry you /
as long as you remember / to pick up /
and carry those that are left behind /"

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Biography

Anthony R. Keith, Jr. served as the Interim Director of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center and an Instructor in African American Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, where he earned his master's degree in College Student Affairs. He is currently the Coordinator for Cultural Competency & Diversity for the Fall 2010 Voyage of Semester at Sea. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anthony R. Keith, Jr., 3100 Metronome Turn, Clinton MD 20735
Email: arkeithjr@gmail.com

Appendix

A Poem for Black Men by Anthony Keith

1. words have power / letters are electrically charged / and when bounded together / they can create enough energy / to cause a massive explosion /
2. words can turn tiny mountain tops / in to mighty metaphorical erosions / and it will be I / who stands atop one of those mounds / with words / vowels / syllables / phrases / and sounds/ and I'll be screaming /
3. THIS IS FOR ALL OF YA'LL STILL DREAMING! /
4. those of you / whose hue / starts of as black / until you've been beaten down to blue /
5. don't know who the fuck you are / because you're letting society define it for you/
6. aint got a pot to piss in / or a window to throw it out of / and no food to chew /
7. and so you're starving / starving for knowledge/ not because you don't grasp the language /
8. but because no one took the time to teach it to you /
9. they just told you that you're too stubborn to listen to /
10. that your head's too thick to get a brick through / that you're nothing / but a no-good /
11. pants-sagging / baby-making / law-breaking /juvenile delinquent / that all you're capable to do / is simply eat / sleep / shit / and screw /
12. but brothers / I have something more empowering to tell you/ even if the world doesn't
13. please know that I LOVE YOU /

14. and I love you / with all of the African ancestry that exist within
me/ from my forehead /
15. to my collar bone / from my bloodstream / to my skin tone /
from my strong back /
16. to my humble knees / from my shinbone / to my callused feet /
17. and brothers / I DECLARE YOU FREE! /
18. no longer / property/ no longer / a weapon for society / to
continue to arm you /
19. with massive missiles / of misguide perceptions / of manhood /
in to your looking glasses
20. so fuck / sitting in the back / writing “R.I.P” to your friends on
that dirty desk/ you’re now in the front / teaching classes /
21. so fuck / being afraid to use slang / because I’m granting you
the right / to use the language of your people / to move the
masses /
22. and fuck / waiting in the back of the line / just to get to the front
/ I’m giving you a lifetime supply of free V.I.P. backstage
passes/
23. and if someone said you didn’t pay your way / tell them fuck
you / cause its already being deducted from your taxes / and if
they say they need proof /
24. tell them they can find it / printed on paychecks / made from
trees / that were once used / to whip the back of slave’s asses /
25. and if they still have questions / tell them / I can call up the
Black men’s headquarters /
26. and have them send that shit out through smoke signals / or
morse code dashes /
27. and if they still have questions / tell them / they can take a pin /
and prick your skin /
28. and check your deoxyribonucleic acid / better known as your
D.N.A. /
29. they Don’t Need Answers / they Don’t Need Anything / and if
they claim they do /
30. you can tell them to come and see me / because I GOT YOU /
31. I’m holding ya’ll up on my shoulders / giving ya’ll a higher
view /

32. I'm breaking ya'll through mountain tops / and wading through muddy waters /
33. and don't worry / because historically / I've been know to split that shit in two/
34. so brothers / if I have to fight your battles/ and brothers / if I have to take your blows /
35. don't you worry / because I will do it for you /
36. I will do it / and I will smile /
37. I will do it/ with a heart as pure as the metaphors / in the poems of Langston Hughes /
38. and as cool / as the vibrato in B.B. King's blues /
39. and I'll do it / while wearing a black hat / black shirt / black tie / black pants / black draws / black socks / and a cool ass pair of motherfucking of black suede shoes /
40. I might even do it / as an interruption / of the morning news /
41. but instead / I'll be screaming / NEWS FLASH! / NEWS FLASH! /
42. Black men America is trying to take your freedom / but they can't take the rest of you /
43. they claim / they got you by the balls / but lets face it / you're a Black man / and they have small hands /
44. so stereotypically they can barely / grip one of your testicles /
45. tell them / they need to step their game up /
46. take some vitamin B / or eat some more vegetables /
47. but no matter / what they try to do / they will never / ever / be stronger / than you /
48. we fight with one fist in the air / but with me beside you / we now fight / with the power of two /
49. and until / you have gained the wisdom /
50. and until / you have learned how to work the system /
51. and until / you can walk / with your footsteps / next to mine /
52. don't you worry brothers /
53. I will continue to carry you /
54. as long as you remember / to pick up /and carry those that are left behind