# It's My House and I Live Here

## Using Autoethnography to Investigate the Spaces Available for Black Male Sexual Exploration

Patrick Grant, *La Salle University*

ABSTRACT—Black men in America have historically lacked ownership of their bodies, sexual identities, and sexual expressions. This autoethnographic account highlights the scarcity of spaces in which black men can participate in acts of erotic freedom without having to subscribe to negative sexual stereotypes. In this essay, the historical restriction of black men from sexually liberating environments is investigated and compared to the treatment of black men during the colonization of metropolitan centers in the 1960s. The personal account of a black man in an erotic, yet white-dominated, space is then provided to highlight the negotiation that occurs when black bodies are included in sexual environments dominated by white gaze. Finally, this article advocates for black men to create their own spaces of sexual liberation in an attempt to be free from the oppressive sexual scripts they have been assigned throughout history.

KEY TERMS—Masculinity, Queer, Black, Identity, Colonization, Liberation

CONTACT—Patrick Grant, MPH, La Salle University, 2 Caprice Ct.Elkton, MD 21921 or by email at grantp4@student.lasalle.edu

It's my house and I live here. I really do. Despite those who have tried to gentrify my dwelling place, remodel my structure and furniture, or completely pretend that my house does not stand, I am—it is—here. Every day I traverse the world, I realize that my house is not welcomed in its surrounding neighborhood: it's not man enough; it's not queer enough; it's not sturdy enough; it's not out enough. It does not have the appeal of other homes and, therefore, does not attract social gaze and majority acceptance. For as long as I could identify my sexuality, I could also identify that my sexuality did not have a proper place; it did not fit. As I moved into one environment, others moved out. Yet it took me a while to realize this narrative was not solely my own. This narrative was shared with other black men who somehow did not make it on a 'social favorites' list. So I decided to expand our narrative with this article.

To do so, I address the historical lack of space available for black men—queer, gay, bisexual and other—to thrive in major cities. Then, I present my queer-identified black male experience with the sexual taboo to align black queer scholarship with autoethnography. Connecting the two facilitates an acknowledgement of black queer men's varied sexual experiences, and recognizes black queer disadvantage in society to investigate how spaces can be created to empower all black men to reach maximum levels of sexual liberation. Finally, I advocate for the acceptance of the black man's fluid sexual identities as an endorsement of his right to humanity and self-constructed, rather and socially-constructed, presentation. Readers are welcome to view my experience as a striving toward black male empowerment that transcends literary or artistic efforts. The black community's failure to accept black manhood outside of cis-heterocentrism has, in my opinion, stifled the black man's growth. It is my hope that my experience and metaphoric connection further leads black men—black society—to embrace varied expressions of black male sexuality; and to recognize and seek spaces that allow black men to explore and expand their sexual feelings.

To the black men seeking the space to explore their sexuality without feeling confined by the perceived rules of masculinity, I salute you and encourage you to use your stories to create the change you want to see. This body of work is dedicated to the men who thrive within the code-switch culture, expressing sexuality in hidden and underground spaces, while enduring oppression in open spheres (Boykin, 2012; Johnson, 2008; Lemelle, 2010; Slatton, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelley, 2013). I write for the men who feel like they cannot address oppressive sexual norms without limiting themselves, their positions, or their resources (Lemelle, 2010; Ross, 2013). I write for the men whose bodies—whose homes—are not their own, and who find themselves unknowingly falling into the historical sexual narratives they fight against on the civil level (Bowleg et al., 2013; Dines, 2006; Duneier, 1992; Slatton, 2014; Summers, 2004). I write because this undertaking is not an easy one. Many have highlighted the intersecting struggles of race and sexuality, and have been silenced by those who might perceive sexuality—read, *deviant* sexuality—as both unrelated to the black struggle and counter to the ideal of black masculinity (McBride, 2005). Yet while this silence serves as a way to preserve the masculinity black men were once stripped of when colonialism erased their humanity, Hemphill reminds us that "men emasculated in the complexity of speaking out [are] . . . rendered mute by the . . . aspirations of a people trying hard to forget [historical] . . . shame and cruelty" (Hemphill, 1992). Many works comment that the pursuit of black respectability has incentivized black men to separate themselves from any notions of queer sexuality, and consequently, queer sexual expression (Jackson, 2006; Johnson, 2003; McCune, 2014; Stone, 2011). Yet, endeavors toward respectability have not made us free, as exemplified by the mass murdering of black men by law enforcement (Craven, 2016). So is it wise to believe that the policing of black male bodies and sexual expressions will create acceptance from the majority? And if we must play into sexual politics to acquire progression, do we truly have ownership of ourselves?

From a historical standpoint, the policing of black male bodies and sexualities is not a characteristic of native black culture. In the era of pre-colonial Africa, same-sex and gender variant persons were viewed as spiritual leaders and were highly respected in their communities (Boisevert & Johnson, 2012; Machacek & Wilcox, 2003). These individuals—focus shifted toward men for the sake of this essay—were regarded as beings who held special communication with the deities of the culture. Nevertheless, they engaged in same-sex and gender nonconforming expressions and interactions. In *Queer Religions*, Donald L. Boisvert (2012) mentions the study of sexologist Randy Connor, whose research into the queering of African culture gave further insight into the culture of gatekeepers.

> The gay person is looked at primarily as a "gatekeeper." The Earth is looked from my tribal perspective, as a very, very delicate machine or consciousness, with high vibrational points, which certain people must be guardians of in order for the tribe to keep its continuity with the gods and with the spirits that dwell there: spirits of this world and spirits of

> the other worlds. Any person who is at this link between this world and the other world experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different, from the one that a normal person would experience (Connor & Sparks, 2004).

It nevertheless seems that while Conner begins to unravel the idea of what it meant to be gay in pre-(and in some parts, post-) colonial Africa, he simultaneously presents core black male sexuality as fluid, a narrative that has not been endorsed by Western society (Boisvert, 2012; Cook, Sandfort, Nel, & Rich, 2013). His emphasis on what it means to express sexual variance challenges current notions of sexual diversity, as Conner presents the case of a spiritual healer who expressed his same-sex attraction freely yet "had a wife and children . . . [with] no problem" (Connor & Sparks, 2004). Conner highlights a "queer diaspora," similar to that of the black diaspora, where the monolith of sexual expression is torn down and black male bodies are presented as similarly fluid in sexuality as their white counterparts (Connor & Sparks, 2004; Kinsey, Pomery, & Martin, 1948). Ergo, one could argue that if there did not exist a monolith of black male sexuality in pre-colonial Africa, there must not exist such a monolith in current Western society, despite historical efforts to create this narrative (Collins, 2004; Summers, 2004). Black male sexuality should be afforded a space to thrive in its varied forms. Yet similar to the the black queer/gay/bisexual man's journey of living in major cities, there does not seem to exist a space in which the black man, regardless of orientation, can explore his sexuality as freely as his white counterpart without having to endure oppressive, historically established, stigmas and stereotypes.

I intend to use my experience as a bridge that connects the housing struggle of the black queer man to the struggle black male bodies experience in traversing their sexual wants and desires. Through this paper, I serve as one of the mystical gatekeepers of old. I carry on the legacies of writers, poets, activists and other black men who used their experiences to highlight the hardships many black men face when dealing with their sexual feelings, in light of the feelings society and respectability dictate they should possess (Collins, 2004; Ross, 2013; Summers, 2004). While all black men are not sexually identical, we experience a similar fight for humanity—a casting off of our historical stereotypes, accompanied by the hope to experience our sexual heights without sacrificing our dignity (Collins 2004; Duneier, 1992; Jackson 2006; Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Ross 2013). We seek to reclaim our bodies—our homes—and live in communities where freedom is embraced, and our lives are not measured by our genitals or sexual prowess (Duneier, 1992).

## No Home in the Wild

Since we have been brought to this country, African Americans homes—on literal and metaphoric levels—have not been their own. Bodies and sexual expressions were controlled by the masters, the leaders, of society (Calabrese, Rosenberger, Schick, & Novak, 2015; Dines, 2006; Stoler, 1989; Summers, 2004). This lack of ownership has produced representations such as the Black Buck, Mandingo, and Sambo—identities that have shaped the sexualities of black men to this very day (Calabrese, Rosenberger, Schick, & Novak, 2015; Dines, 2006; Grov, Saleh, Lassiter, & Parsons, 2015). And as slavery marked the lack of ownership black persons had over their bodies, times of post slavery signified the lack of ownership black bodies had over the communities deemed their own, once these communities sparked the valued interest of the majority.

Over the years, the word "ghetto," has been associated with black culture, as ghetto neighborhoods have been historically associated with black life (Hogan & Hudson, 1998; Johnson, 2003). Yet when one bypasses generalities and surveys black *queer* life, or the livelihoods of those who fall outside the spectrum of black heterocentrism, the association of "black" and "ghetto" becomes muddled. When it comes to queer culture, the ghetto is a hotspot, a place where whites have historically taken residence through colonization, leaving blacks both displaced and typically unable to find alternative residence (Nero, 2005; Omi & Winant, 1986). The emergence of queer/LGBT economic progression, modelled in decades such as the 1960s, excluded black bodies and laid the foundation for racial disparities in health, socioeconomic status, and other areas, which can be seen even in the twenty-first century (Omi & Winant, 1986).

By observing the formation of queer/LGBT communities in areas such as New Orleans, LA, insight is given into the underlying prejudices, and the majority-benefitting consequences of these prejudices, within queer culture. Lawrence Knopp (1997) sets the stage for this narrative as he reflects upon the 1960s migration of queer/LGBT folk into the Faubourg Marigny neighborhoods of New Orleans. What Charles I. Nero (2005) brings to light in Knopp's historical recount is that the settling of queer bodies in 1960s New

Orleans relates directly to the metropolitan advancement of white, middle class, queer men during that period. Nero comments that this colonization could not occur without the simultaneous, sometimes violent, exclusion of black bodies from the real estate acquisition process. Through legal and illegal methods, black queer, sexually non-conforming, homosexual, and bisexual men were barred from having the opportunity to reside in the Marigny communities, which made additional room for the insertion their white counterparts, who sometimes did not have the means to sustain life in this area (Knopp, 1997).

And while the housing disadvantage for blacks was perpetuated in gay and straight circles alike, Nero posits that when one group is able to control the living situation—the literal home—of another group, this cohort is also able to control the image and expression—the metaphoric home—of the oppressed group (Nero, 2005; Sayles, 1983). At the time of queer black men being barred from the housing opportunities reserved for their white counterparts, they also struggled to fight against being placed in spheres that distorted their personal identity and visibility (Johnson, 2003; Ross, 2013; Sayles, 1983). Works such as John Sayle's 1983 film, *Lianna*, imply there is no space in the queer sphere for the black man, as he is innately hyper-masculine, virile, a means of reproduction for the black woman, and an object of pleasure for the white master. Sayle's and others' portrayals communicate the message that the black queer man does not exist; and if he does exist, he is an imposter—an antithesis to the image of the hyper-masculine black man, and a threat to black masculinity (Johnson, 2003; Ross, 2013; Slatton, 2014). And if the black queer man is a threat to black manhood, based on his preferences or expressions, one could suggest that any black man who steps outside his stereotypical role might be a threat to the overall perception of black manhood. The metaphoric home of the black man stands on the foundation of being accepted by his own people and the majority, only if he fulfills the image of himself that has been constructed by the majority.

## Our Bodies: The Conditions of Our Temples

From a public health perspective, it is the rigid, masculinity-focused, image of the black man (and minority acceptance of this image) that has impacted the sexual health outcomes currently experienced by black men (Bowleg et al. 2013). While factors such as poverty, lack of access to health resources, and miseducation contribute to high rates of STI and HIV experienced by black men, studies communicate that these outcomes are also heavily influenced by the black man's propensity to idealize masculinity, or to have others perceive that he is masculine or socially dominant (Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2015; Quinn et al., 2015; Shoptaw et al., 2009; Slatton, 2014). This desired presentation may reduce the likelihood of open communication or safe sex practices with partners, which contributes to statistics that posit black men as experiencing chlamydia nine times as much as their white counterparts, contracting gonorrhea 10.7 times as much as white men, and dealing with syphilis 8.5 times as much as white men in the same age category (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2015).

A final striking depiction of black male health surrounds that of the human-immunodeficiency virus (HIV). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), black men accounted for 42% of the cases of HIV found in men across the United States. Of this 42%, 79% of African American men with HIV contracted the virus from same-sex interaction, while 19% contracted the virus through heterosexual contact. Yet these statistics make one wonder whether all of the men who contracted HIV via same-sex interaction identified as straight or heterosexual.

E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea* (2008) and Keith Boykin's *For Colored Boys* (2012) present depictions of men who have had same-sex interactions, yet did not associate with a same-gender loving label. And as identity—or non-acceptance of identity—has been shown to affect rates of poor sexual health outcomes, a call must be made for black men to have spaces in which they are able to express their sexualities freely, without having to identify in ways in which they may not feel comfortable. Although not highly publicized, there exists places across the United States where men have traditionally been able to explore their sexualities—places that include bath houses and private masturbation clubs. Yet my investigatory research has highlighted that these places—where the black man must fight for his manhood while in the presence of white gaze—are not safe spheres for black male sexual exploration. These environments perpetuate negative historical sexual stereotypes of black men; and they do not afford black men the opportunity to seek sexual liberation without having to simultaneously engage in stereotypical performance.

# I Can Understand Why It Might Be a Little Hard to Touch a Boy Like Me

I don't know what brought me to a self-described masturbation group. Maybe it was the curiosity of not having had an expansive sexual experience in 25 years. Perhaps I was curious about types of men I would interact with. Maybe I saw this two hour, strictly masturbation, session as a way to experience sexual freedom in a form that did not come with perceived risk of contracting an STI, or facing post-ejaculation regret. Whatever my reason, I one day found myself amidst a group of men who had come to the same place to indulge in voyeurism and solo and mutual masturbation.

On the surface, the experience was phenomenal. As one who had always struggled with body image, I was pleasantly surprised to see my body celebrated and affirmed. It was empowering to enjoy a freeing experience with men of varying ages, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. By casting off inhibition and diving into sexual exploration, I found myself more open to my sexuality, and more understanding of my physical, sexual, and spiritual selves.

Yet as my sexual third eye began to open, I could not help but notice the dynamic of the masturbation group. On the day I attended, the racial breakdown of men who were present, listed from greatest to least racial representation, included White, Black/African-American, and Asian. And while I was grateful to see some sort of diverse presence, I could not help but notice that everyone played a race-based, stereotypical, role. The white men were the masters of the space—sifting through each attendee with the privilege of knowing that they could have or reject any individual they wanted in the room. They dominated the space in number and in spirit.

Upon further observation, the black men served as objects for the fetishistic white gaze. Despite their anatomical measuring, the black men in the space were praised and characterized with descriptions that confined them to the Mandingo characterization. Whereas the white men were given the chance to pleasure themselves alone or with others, the black bodies seemed purposed for spectacle, and their journey to ejaculation seemed less sacred and more for the fetishistic pleasure of others looking on. "Masters" had attended this group to see bodies, historically stripped of humanity, serve the objectifying purpose that had been historically forced upon them; and it was as if these black bodies—these black objects—were expected to enjoy their role. Contrastingly, there were white men who rejected the black bodies—those who huddled in groups that tightened whenever a black man's presence was noticed. Despite the seemingly positive aspects of this erotic space, I was interested to know how much a black man—myself included—could enjoy his experience when dealing with these unspoken social transactions.

A final dynamic I noticed was that many of the black men in the space refused to interact with each other. At first, it seemed as if they felt and accepted that a part of their presence was to serve as entertainment for some of the white attendees. There was also a sense of shame that emanated from one black body to another—a shame that highlighted the stigma around black men enjoying a sexual experience with other black men. I could sense the dissonance in many of the black attendees, which communicated, "This is where I want to be but . . . I'm not gay" or "I am avoiding you in this space, my brother, because I cannot bear to interact with you in this environment and in the outside world." How powerful, I thought, it would be if all of the black attendees weren't afraid to interact with each other? How healing would be to see black men unite and encourage each other through sexual exploration and freedom, without the fear of being labelled gay or outed in the public sphere? How would each of our lives change for the better if our manhood was not influenced by the white male gaze, but if it was supported on the foundation of our own, ancestrally endowed, power?

## Discussion

The following autoethnography sought to present personal experience as a foundation to discuss how non-oppressive spaces are needed for black men to explore their sexualities. While society is slowly coming to accept male sexuality as more fluid, it seems as if black male sexuality is still trapped within the limits of rigidity (Kinsey, Pomery & Martin 1948; Lemelle & Battle 2004; Lemelle 2010). And although there are places where men in general can explore their sexuality with other men, black men are burdened as, even in these areas of freedom, they are objectified and overtly and covertly forced to subscribe to the historically demeaning scripts that have been bestowed upon them.

Across the United States, there are a limited number of spheres in which black men are able to be sexually explorative with other black men (Ross 2013). Yet the above narrative suggests that these spaces are needed to improve the overall quality of life for the black man. If black men were afforded the opportunity and space to freely express themselves without influential factors such as white gaze, stigma, or stereotype, one might assume that the black male cohort might experience mental and physical improvement. The erasure of black male stereotyping that has been historically constructed by white influence would produce a reduction in internalized hate experienced by some black men—an internalized hate that leads to the performance of sexually risky behaviors. As internalized hate and the performance of risky behaviors decreases, a reduction in the rate of sexually transmitted infections experienced by black men will be observed. By addressing the lack of freedom black men possess when it comes to their own sexual expressions, the consequences of stigma that surrounds black male sexual expression outside of hegemonic masculine performance will also be addressed.

Limitations of this work's suggestions surround whether or not black men would actually seek to explore their sexualities if spaces for this occurrence were provided. There is a historical stigma surrounding black men having same-gender sexual experiences (Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2015; Quinn et al., 2015; Ross, 2013; Shoptaw et al., 2009; Slatton, 2014; Tettenborn, 2003). Outside of fitting into the script of being a Mandingo or insatiable breeder, the black man is not commonly afforded sexual freedoms. Additionally, messages that stem from institutions such as the black church and mainstream media (influential entities in the black community) perpetuate the negative perception toward any behavior that may link the black man to homosexuality—behavior that consequently includes sexual exploration with other men.

Another limit in advocating for black men to find spaces in which they are able to explore their sexuality with other black men without having to identify as same gender loving relates to the idea of oppression. Solely having black men in one area does not mean the space will be eradicated of oppression. There might still arise moments in which some men may exude power over other men, regardless of their color being the same (Johnson 2003; Lemelle & Battle 2004; Lemelle 2010). Additionally, some might view affording men the opportunity to sexually engage with other men without having to identify as same-gender loving as an oppressive act. Many individuals spend a lifetime trying to live life beyond the proverbial closet; and this journey seems especially difficult for those who belong to the black community (McCune 2014; Stone 2011). Would advocating for black men to explore sexuality and still keep their preferred self-identification hinder the progression of those who contrastingly identify as a part of the black LGBT community? Similarly, what emotional or social conflicts might arise from a space where black men are able to interact sexually with other black men, yet can differ on a level of sexual identity? Does such an environment perpetuate closet culture, or would this be a positive shift toward sexual freedom?

I hope the following autoethnography aids in helping black men seek higher levels of sexual freedom without feeling burdened by the stigma that comes with such a pursuit. I pray this body of work serves as a call to action for black men to fight against the sexual roles they have been assigned throughout history, and create their own sexual identities that surround the performance of behaviors not solely shaped by their external environments. I do not expect the sexual ideals I wish for black men to appear overnight; but I believe we will see gradual change once broad spaces that shape black male behavior normalize and encourage black male sexual exploration. Hopefully this autoethnography creates the opportunity for further discussion regarding the breaking of sexual barriers that surround black men and their sexualities.

**Patrick Grant**, MPH is a health educator and sexual health program coordinator in Philadelphia, PA. He is currently in his second year at La Salle University, pursuing a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. His research interests include improving mental health and advocating for the sexual freedoms of minority communities.

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