BLACK QUEER TV:
REPARATIVE VIEWING AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL QUESTIONS OF OUR NOW

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is rooted in the general question: How do contemporary TV series featuring Black queer and trans representation highlight and address sociopolitical questions often found circulating within queer and cultural studies? Employing three programs, *The Prancing Elites Project* (2015), *Empire* (2015), and *Pose* (2018), this study argues that recent upticks in Black queer characters on TV provide room to move beyond traditional analyses often predicated on critical suspicion to instead engender readings revealing themes related to Black futurity, worldmaking, and coalition building, prominent topics within the fields of queer and cultural studies. Building from both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation of reparative reading and prior scholarship often critical of Black queer televisual representation, this dissertation's interventions are both theoretical and methodological, presenting a recalibrated approach to gleaning the richness in Black queer media. *Black Queer TV: Reparative Viewing and the Sociopolitical Questions of Our Now* invigorates and broadens critical scholarship on media through nuancing programs depicting a range of Black queer people's represented experiences.

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Grandma, who started her doctoral journey but never got to finish.

Mom, better known as Sis, who is my seamstress extraordinaire and forever champion.

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INTRODUCTION: (RE)VIEWING BLACK QUEER TELEVISION

An *Out.com* feature story from March of 2015 highlighting Black gay characters on television notes: "the revolution is now being televised and streamed" (Brathwaite). The article describes a nascent transformation happening as a result of series like LOGO's *Noah's Arc* (2005), which has carved out an entry point for newer programs like OWN's *The Have and the Have Nots* (2013), Fox's *Empire* (2015), and Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015). The story goes on to detail how these and other popular programs mark a watershed moment for Black queer media representation. Like the *Out.com* feature, in March of 2015 *New York Daily News* writer Karu F. Daniels asserts: "Black, gay men are coming out — all over television" (NP). Responding to this same "revolution," Daniels suggests that although Black gay characters have a history of being part of televisual programming, many of these more recent portrayals "are essential to [the] main storylines of each show, and depicted in non-stereotypical roles with their own eyebrow-raising story arcs" (NP). Communication and sexuality studies scholars Gust A.Yep and John P. Elia describe a shift in what scholars do with these series, arguing that:

> The dramatic shift from virtual invisibility to spectacular visibility of GLQ [gay, lesbian, queer] characters in mainstream media in general, and television programs in particular, has prompted academic researchers and activists to move beyond concerns over increasing visibility and improving fairness and accuracy of gay and lesbian representations to focus on 'tracing the complex processes, meanings, and politics' that are associated with the newfound visibility. (893)

These dual ideas: *one*, that there is a surge in representations of Black queer people in televisual media; and *two*, that scholars are increasingly tending to the politics, tensions, ideologies, and meanings, found within GLQ media content, compel and push forward this dissertation.

Above, I employ the words "compel" and "push forward" intentionally to describe how both popular press and recent scholarship prompt my work, because while I interpret this increase in gay, lesbian, and queer content as allowing for media studies to be more robust, I also utilize these emerging conversations to *push forward* our accounting of representations of gender-non-conforming and trans characters. Since the airing of *Big Freedia Bounces Back* (2013), *The Prancing Elites Project* (2015) and the groundbreaking series *Pose* (2018), Black gender diversity has similarly been illuminated onscreen in nuanced and profound ways. Scholars exploring social identities within contemporary media and television would be remiss not to reckon with the "T" in our oft-cited LGBTQ initialism. This work is rooted in such a gender inclusive approach.

In this dissertation I focus on three television programs, *Empire* (2015), *The Prancing Elites Project* (2015), and *Pose* (2018), to consider the general question: How do contemporary series featuring Black queer and trans characters and subjects highlight and address sociopolitical questions within queer and cultural studies? To gauge these questions, I concentrate on each of the programs and their narrative preoccupations, for instance, *Prancing Elites* is enamored with inclusion, *Empire* with competition, and *Pose* with collective worldmaking. I argue that these television programs offer insights into questions and concerns often found circulating within queer and cultural studies related to debates about futurity, neoliberalism, and coalition building.

My intervention unfolds in a few major ways. This dissertation broadens the scholarship on Black queer representation by moving away from analytical approaches that inquire simply about whether a subject or character is a "good" or "bad" depiction (Yep and Elia). In this same realm, my literature survey evidences the ways scholarship focused on Black queer people and television has tended to prioritize men and be based in a standardized critical studies approach

consumed by suspicion and paranoia. Outlined memorably by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, these "paranoid readings" are consumed by exposure and as demonstrated in my survey, this kind of critical approach often works from a goal of (re)revealing antagonisms like racism and/or homophobia. Scholars have even noted the ways television programs may downplay racism to emphasize homophobia or vice-versa, particularly when scripting Black queer subjects who, in real-world contexts, cannot tease apart their identities. While this scholarship is sophisticated, it can be limited in the insights it engenders.

The second intervention of my work relates to the politics of my interpretative practice. Here, I am calling attention to my own social location as a Black queer person who is a scholar and how I deploy that lens to analyze media and what this ultimately brings to scholarship. Increasing representations of Black queer and trans people create space for researchers to ask new questions. I utilize a reparative approach to reading television to extend and enrich conversations about characters who are, like me, also Black and queer. Much of what is offered via a suspicious or paranoid approach tends to foreclose possibility or stymy important questions about what media might do beyond, other than, or in addition to, the reproduction of social ills. This kind of fatalism is often why fields like that of Afro-pessimism receive scholarly skepticism, as it tends to, as a body of knowledge, preclude notions of hope, leaving a void in its theoretical wake (Pinn).

By reparative, I am gesturing toward a particular way of seeing Black queer media, one informed by Sedgwick's articulation of reparative reading but also a perspective propelled by what Fred Moten calls "Black optimism" (1). Moten suggests about Black studies, "In that field, I'm trying to hoe the hard row of beautiful things. I try to study them and I also try to make them. Elizabeth Alexander says 'look for color everywhere.' For me, color + beauty = blackness

which is not but nothing other than who, and deeper still, where I am" (1). To that end, this dissertation intervenes through my own Black queer politics that refuse to reduce representation to problematics. Instead, my readings of Black queer media in this study strive to always see worth, to leave somewhere to go, something to glean, something to embrace that is not simply a cautionary tale related to how media ultimately come up short.

Reparative readings are no less critical or relevant. In fact, deploying such an approach does not mean I skirt over racism or homophobia. It means I privilege what I see as productive about these programs and specifically what these representations highlight about Black queer worldmaking beyond the perils of antiblackness. This intervention enacts a Black queer way of thinking. What is being repaired is a scholarly tendency to see Black queer media as reducible to its most egregious parts or as wholly deficient when it fails to display particular kinds of representation. At stake is a more generative way of reading Black queer media, a way of opening television to different critical approaches and not just a politics of negative exposure.

From Critical Paranoia to Reparative Reading

Within this study I move beyond what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called a "hermeneutics of suspicion," a phrasing she borrows from philosopher Paul Ricoeur. The term gestures toward a methodological imperative to undertake critical research always and already with distrust or desire to expose, uncover, or report what might be "wrong," hidden, or problematic. This has become a popular and somewhat standard angle in doing critical studies/theory (Sedgwick 2003). According to Sedgwick, "Ricoeur introduced the category of the hermeneutics of suspicion to describe the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual off-spring in a context that also included…alternative disciplinary hermeneutics [such] as the 'hermeneutics of recovery of meaning'' (124-125). Sedgwick offers that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion was originally

conceptualized as one of many ways to describe interpretive strategies theorists employed to interrogate and read cultural and social phenomenon. However, the suspicious approach has had a particular type of staying power, dominating U.S. post-structuralism, becoming "widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities" for doing critical inquiry (125).

Sedgwick then moves to detail her use of suspicion and what she calls its "concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia" (125). According to the scholar, suspicion and paranoia are coterminous and have consumed nearly all the methodological space in anti-homophobic discourse, or what later becomes known as queer theory. Paranoid reading, argues Sedgwick, has become queer theory's "uniquely sanctioned methodology" (126). Conscious, of course, of its life as a mental pathology, Sedgwick is careful to outline what she implies when she designates U.S. critical theory as being contoured via paranoid practices. So, what does this look like when executed? Sedgwick suggests that paranoia reveals itself via five "differentials of practice" (130). Paranoia is largely "anticipatory," in that scholars are consumed with predicting bad things before they happen (130). Suspicious practitioners look to the past to already forecast grim futures. In this sense, the researcher seems only interested in knowledge production for the purposes of telling us to "watch out."

Critical paranoia is largely "reflexive and mimetic," spreading through imitation and via creating what Sedgwick calls "symmetrical epistemologies," or others who also come to believe the same things the paranoid researcher believes, by virtue of reading their paranoid accounts (131). That is, as we engage with paranoid scholarship, we too become insecure, and in many cases interpellated into roles in which we try to out-paranoia each other. In this vein, for example, I would come to understand my scholarship as centered on revealing the hidden truth

about homophobia in Black queer representation on television before scholar X gets to it first, because she is *obviously* thinking about representation too.

Paranoia within critical studies comes in the form of "strong theory," creating totalizing and sweeping explanations of phenomena, like Judith Butler sagaciously (yet opaquely) arguing that gender is performative! (Sedgwick 133). After such a declaration, anyone who dares to construct a scholarship on gender and performance must reckon with Butler's thesis or be cast aside as piously naive. Paranoia is a theory of "negative affects," as it is concerned with avoiding the pain of homophobia, transphobia, and perhaps racism, rather than seeking pleasure through positive affects (136). And lastly, Sedgwick's conception of critical paranoia places an extraordinary "faith in exposure," as researchers work from a premise that, once their story (article, essay) is consumed, no one will be duped again (138).[1] That is, for example, once you know the truth about these Black queer depictions (e.g. they are largely racist, homophobic…etc.), you will never watch again, or you will never be the same while watching again.

Sedgwick's perspicacious read of paranoia in critical studies reflects a culture that still exists today. In fact, I highlight later in my literature survey the ways research centering Black gay men on TV works from this default of suspicion and exposure as well. However, the arc of the project focuses on opening additional possibilities within queer studies, a move beyond suspicion and paranoia, something Sedgwick calls *reparative reading* (147). While not meticulously outlined by the theorist, reparative reading is a mode of critical inquiry that is "no less acute than a paranoid [or suspicious] position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project

[1] Scholars Rita Felski and Stefan Collini have argued that cultural studies risks becoming grievance studies when it fails to allow for "the making and remaking of culture in daily life" (Felski 513). For these critics, suspicion stifles cultural studies when it morphs into a "self-righteous rhetoric of unmasking" (Felski 513).

of survival…the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" (Sedgwick 150). Reparative reading has been taken up as a position that "reads texts…in terms of their empowering, productive as well as renewing potential to promote semantic innovation, personal healing and social change. Through its use of the 'skill of imaginative close reading', it can complement the practices of reading, which are dominated by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'" (Röder 58-59). Unlike paranoid and suspicious analyses of media texts, which frequently begin and end with a goal of exposing a problem, my use of reparative reading seeks to figuratively open new places to go. This does not make my analytical approach correct and suspicion wrong, but it does highlight another way of critically interpreting media.

I use reparative reading to (1) ultimately broaden conceptions of how scholars can interpret Black queer worlds within televisual media and to (2) focus in on the sociocultural tensions illuminated within these broadcasts, a type of close reading that, in part, allows me to theorize how subjects/characters make and envision nourishing worlds for themselves. And I reveal how these representations shed light on tensions within the field of cultural studies, particularly contentions related to neoliberalism, futurity, and worldmaking. Though my role as TV scholar has what Ien Ang calls a more semiological preference, in that my goal is to "put forward the conception of media products as [decipherable] texts," I am in no way under the impression that media are free-floating orbs existing apart from the contours of producers (Eng 16). All media is created. My perspective is that too heavy a focus on production can leave little room for what Stuart Hall calls "decoding," particularly with my goal of illuminating what televisual products can suggest about contemporary culture and my aim of emblemizing a politic that gestures toward optimism (Hall, "Encoding").[2]

[2] In its most basic sense, Stuart Hall used the idea of decoding to suggest that seldom do television viewers linearly decipher media in ways that producers encode that same media. The process of decoding (or, understanding texts), is

The reparative approach resonates in this moment because it allows me to intellectually give to Black people rather than strip away. I espouse a politics that refuses to tell people who deal daily with the corrosive effects of racism that the television programming in which they find solace is somehow duping them or bad for their psyche. My scholarship will not contribute to the long list of things Black people cannot or should not do for the sake of their corporeal and mental wellbeing, especially when there are ways to think otherwise. In this project I focus on the potential for dynamism in Black queer representation, particularly since previous scholarship focused on these depictions has largely and consistently argued and concluded that these programs caricature or de-race their characters. I am interested in discovering what we learn if we ask what these newer series might be understood to be doing. How can a reparative analysis aid us in thinking otherwise, in asking new questions, discovering new ideas, particularly during this uptick in representations?

Sedgwick argues that "what we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture–even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (150-151). In line with this, Ellis Hanson argues that there has been a rise in reparative practices in critical studies. For instance, the author asserts that queer crip theory explores the possibility "for a sustainable life, indeed a future, even in the face of disability and unjust discrimination" (Hanson abstract). The work of José Esteban Muñoz, once a student of Sedgwick, provides a guidepost for this project as well. Muñoz is known for his reparative conceptualizations of queerness—a perspective that contrasts with the pragmatism of contemporary LGBTQ politics.

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contingent upon several subject-specific factors that influence how viewers interpret programming. In this way, all (critical) analysis of a text is subjective, including mine. It is my training which allows me to argue sophisticated claims about media.

Muñoz offers that the present is not enough, and in one of his most famous quips he exclaims, "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality…We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz, *Utopia* 1). Both Hanson and Muñoz speak of a critical scholarship that centers possibility and futurity in ways thought to transcend the murkiness of oppression and oppressive systems. It is in this tradition that I analyze these series.

My aim is not an attempt to disavow scholarly suspicion or dismiss explorations of "hidden ideology" (neither was Sedgwick's) as these sophisticated approaches have helped expose hegemony and media bias. But too, they have dominated critical inquiry. So alternatively, I offer a critical study investigating the ways televisual representation can give us insight about both minoritized culture and the possibilities inherent within cultural studies work—possibilities not simply reliant on critical suspicion or conclusions revealing "bad ideology." In fact, this proposed study takes as a given that representations can be "exposed" as problematic, but beyond this truism, what else can they teach us? In what follows I review what scholars have gleaned from Black queer representation on television while just as importantly touching on how scholars have approached analyzing these media texts.

Black Queer Television: A Survey of Scholarly Conversations

> Gay people did not, however, ascend from the pariah status of criminal, sinner, and pervert to the respectable categories of voting bloc and market niche without playing the familiar American game of assimilation. The rules of this game require the muting of a group's distinctive coloring in order that they might blend into the fabric of the mainstream. (Gross 510)

In the above quote Larry Gross argues that the parallel of queer visibility is often homogenization. His words offer an answer to why practitioners often conflate critical inquiry with hermeneutics of suspicion. That is, queer subjects did not on one morning fall out of the sky *en vogue*, there is and has always been something else at play. That "something else" has provided the impetus for a host of scholars interested in investigating queer studies more broadly. In fact, it is within this paranoid fashion that most scholarship on Black queer televisual representation has occurred. This hermeneutic has played a central role in media studies both because of LGBTQ people's long history of being culturally marginalized and because of Black queers doubly oppressed social position (invisible in queer worlds, anomalistic in Black worlds). The latter predicament has perhaps resulted in scholars approaching televisual depictions of Black queer men with cautious eyes as the group has, until more recently I argue, seldom been afforded nuanced representation.

As an example of this wariness, below I begin my literature survey reviewing two theoretical studies that call into question the racial politics often associated with Black gay media representation. The authors of both "Racialized Masculinities" and "Desire and the Big Black Sex Cop" illuminate the ways media portrayals elide or reduce discussions of race (Blackness) to prop up sexuality as the most relevant characteristic of contemporary diversity. In other words, these essays ask some form of the question: why are Black gay men on television so often presented as just gay? I hope to show that even while these discussions have been relevant in cultural and media studies, uncloaking how Blackness continues to systematically be made invisible, the two works espouse a suspicion that in many ways is only part of a critical studies story and when interpreting media representation as simply a problematic we can miss other things programming can and is doing. That is, there are many ways to engage in critical studies.

Gay is the New Black

Yep and Elia's article "Racialized Masculinities and the New Homonormativity in LOGOs *Noah's Arc*" argues that sexuality gets privileged over race in televisual media. *Arc* is particularly revolutionary in that it is the first television series to chronicle the friendship of a group of Black gay men: Noah, Ricky, Wade, Alex, and Chance. Yep and Elia posit that even as *Noah's Arc* surfaced as an intervention in a sea of mostly white gay male representation on television, the show exhibits various troubling aspects, like reducing the characters to depoliticized, race-neutral consumers who enjoy the perks of a non-ideological gayness with occasional relationship tensions (Yep and Elia). In one example, Yep and Elia illustrate a phenomenon called "the new racism," which they contend "is based, in part, on media images and representations that sustain the hegemonic ideology claiming that racism is over" (897).

The new racism emerges on one episode in which lead character Noah is gay bashed by a group of mostly white men. During and after the incident, there is little focus on Noah's race. Yep and Elia argue that "by characterizing the beating as strictly homophobic violence and ignoring its racial and gender dimensions, the viewer is directed to focus on a single vector of oppression –sexuality– rather than the intersections of sexuality, race, and gender performance" (Yep and Elia 898). Here, the scholars assert the idea that the new racism is enacted when race and racism are evacuated from an event, leaving sexuality left alone in its place. This omission is a designation Yep and Elia claim is more representative of white queer people who, through racial privilege, can be less concerned with interactions between their racial and sexual identities (899). Constructing contemporary homophobia as a "new" racism situates racial antagonism as something of the past. In this way, the Black gay men represented on *Arc* are positioned as post-

race or race neutral and hence all that is worth representing and taking seriously is their sexuality.

Guy Mark Foster's "Desire and the 'Big Black Sex Cop': Race and the Politics of Sexual Intimacy in HBO's *Six Feet Under*" is an additional example of a reading which sets out to trouble the elision of race in representations of Black gay men in media. The essay is largely suspicious of (and rightfully so) the motives of the show's interracial coupling. More specifically, Foster notes a tension in the relationship between the two gay characters within the series: Keith Charles, who is African American, and his white partner, David Fisher. Arguing overall that this pairing is marked by the show's adherence to a colorblind ideology, the scholar asserts that the series misses crucial moments to aid in "resolving [a] crisis of difference that has long plagued our collective national life" (111). What Foster is getting at is *Six's* tendency to skirt around issues of racial difference in the interest of placating a mostly white viewership seduced by what I would argue is similar to Yep and Elia's new racism— or the belief that racism is a thing of the past, coupled with the centering of homophobia as a single problem that falls equally on all gay people.

Foster notes that the audience is "told repeatedly during the first season…that Keith is a 'proud gay man,' but if Keith is a 'proud gay man,' is he also a 'proud black man'" asks the scholar (109)? One illustrative example happens when Keith and David are accosted in a parking lot by a white male motorist who yells out "fucking fags" when the pair fails to leave their parking spot expeditiously. When David shrugs off the homophobic expletive, Keith asserts, "you hate yourself that much?" (104). Later in the episode Keith clarifies for David why the motorist's comments left him triggered.

For Keith, the assault conjures up the overt hostility he experiences as an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department. Keith advances "do you have any idea what I put up with on my job every day? How many times the word fag has been written on my locker?" (Foster 105). In this way, Keith is made to center himself as singly oppressed because of his sexual identity, which fits in line with the show's larger narrative downplaying of Keith's race. Foster posits that the show's focus on sexuality misses the ways homophobia oftentimes works in conjunction with racial dynamics when targeted at people of color. In many ways Yep and Elia (2012) and Foster (2006) provide analyses that support Gross's assertion about the pitfalls of gay visibility, as the scholars conclude that Black gay men are depicted on television in ways that attempt to privilege their gay sexuality while simultaneously muting their racial identity.

These two essays by Foster and Yep & Elia critique media for focusing on single-issue oppression and for advancing notions that the Black characters featured in these series are deracinated. These essays are adept at teasing out how gay sexuality gets magnified to connect with (white) gay audiences and the ways Blackness gets neutralized to position racism as having no pertinent bearing on sexuality. Like Gross suggests, these readings force scholars to ponder the cost of media representation, particularly for Black gay men or queer of color characters in general. While these essays hinge on relevant points, equally important questions remain. Can we, while knowing there may be a potential undercurrent attempting to depoliticize race, still offer critical readings of these series that do not take Blackness as an overarching problematic on which to focus and resolve? Is this undercurrent ubiquitous in Black queer representation? Can we discuss race and its subsequent representation without holding racism as the cynosure of the analysis?

To be clear, I am not invested in a scholarship that calls out these previous studies as misreads. In fact, I seek to build from and onto earlier research. I work from the premise that upticks in representations of Black queer people provide room to broaden and establish new conversations that consider other phenomenon to be explored, which can include frictions around race and other questions related to how Blackness exists in multitude. The dissertation involves seeing race as a social construct to be examined, *however* not solely as a problematic. The reparative reading I envision does not shy away from the notion of calling a problem a problem, or from naming antagonisms, it does however refuse to reduce contemporary series featuring Black queer characters to amalgams of suspect representations. I see these newer series as especially ripe for analyses— analyses that position their characters as, in many ways, multifarious. In continuing my review, I move into how scholars have interrogated Black queer representation on television via the use of what Patricia Hill Collins first called controlling images. The below essays are useful in that they offer glimpses into how Black gay men on television are often depicted as homogenous or as stock characters premised on larger cultural beliefs—beliefs which already position the group as monolithic. These next essays, work from the popular standpoint of exposure, meaning they uncover what is wrong and/or hidden, and in so doing conclude that representations of Black gay men in televisual media are overwhelmingly problematic.

Controlling Images

Although not strictly focused on TV, Charles I. Nero's "Why Are Gay Ghettoes White?" argues that recurring representations of Black gay men within American film and media "shape the racial consciousness and racial dynamics…of gay community formation." That is, who counts as gay, and what racial groups are understood to be parts of gay communities, is produced

in part by media representations of Black gay men (230). The scholar borrows Patricia Hill Collins's term *controlling images*, which she uses to show the ways American discourses proliferate depictions of Black women that make "racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be normal, and an inevitable part of [their] everyday life" (Nero 235). Nero deploys Collins's notion to show how perennial images of Black gay men circulate to make their exclusion from mainstream gay worlds seem natural. Examples of these controlling images are the "big Black buck" and "impostor" tropes. The buck stereotype tends to frame Black men as too masculine to be gay and therefore as "queer invisible" and not part of gay circuits. The impostor trope frames Black gay men as temporarily gay or as deceivers. Nero's notable example is *Six Degrees of Separation,* a film in which actor Will Smith pretends to be the gay son of Sidney Poitier to gain access to an upper-class white family.

In the article "Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Black Gay Men on Television" scholars Jasmine Cobb and Robin R. Means Coleman begin by citing Dwight McBride in a 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article where he asks, "where in the popular or cultural imagination is the bourgeois, well educated, fairly cosmopolitan Black gay man?" (82). In attempting to address McBride's question the duo investigates Black gay male representation on both network and cable TV. When discussing network programming the scholars cite the variety show *In Living Color* and its "Men on…" skit in which comedians David Allen Grier and Damon Wayans play effeminate and misogynist film critics. The authors draw the conclusion that even as the "Men on…" segment functioned through deploying what is supposed to be laughable stereotypical behavior "television, with its series/serial structure…offers a continuous relationship with characters not seen elsewhere…the level of engagement moves the character, even the stereotypical one, into a more familiar relationship

with the viewer" (Cobb and Coleman 88). Cobb and Coleman's assertion is that *In Living Color*'s weekly format trivializes Black gay male identity through repeatedly caricaturing the group as "inadequately masculine and incorrectly feminine" (88).

According to Cobb and Coleman cable functions differently in that it allows for the viewing of gay and lesbian love relationships, which they contend provides a more nuanced picture of Black queer people (89). The scholars argue that the HBO series *The Wire,* which features Black gay drug dealer Omar Little, depicts him as being caring and possessing traditional masculinity, something that network television had yet to do for a Black gay man. In many ways Omar's traditional masculinity, race, and "outness" pushes against the highly popularized "DL" narrative, which the authors argue both cable and network television has located as a particular feature of Black gay men. The DL became mainstream in the early 2000s when self-proclaimed expert JL King penned a monograph in which he argued that there was a secret society of Black men who were publicly straight and privately intimate with men (91). The DL, according to Cobb and Coleman, has been used to frame Black gay characters as duplicitous and dangerous to Black women who are unaware of their sexual proclivities. Cobb and Coleman conclude their research advancing that "we revealed that images of gay Black men on television further circulate many of the sociocultural problems believed to pre-exist in Black communities by mediating violence, deceit and infectious taint as inherent aspects of Black homosexuality" (94).

Nero, and Cobb & Coleman offer insights that television and film often deploy caricatures of Black gay men, having the effect of mapping the group as culturally monolithic, inauthentic, and/or as interpersonally deceitful. These essays suggest that portrayals of the group are overwhelming problematic because they do not allow for nuanced representations of

Blackness. We can see this argued by theorists Yep & Elia and Foster who contend that media represent gay identity as the sole marker of contemporary diversity, relegating race to be something that has already been "taken care of," or needing less attention when situated next to sexuality.

While the authors I discuss here suggest that representations of Black gay men circulate conservative politics and/or banal conceptions of identity, the conclusions they advance might stem largely from the dearth of televisual material previously available for analysis. That previous research lacked source material speaks particularly to the urgency of this dissertation. I argue that we are experiencing a media moment in which myriad Black queer characters exists on TV simultaneously, allowing for a recalibrating of the kinds of questions that can be posed. In fact, when it comes to the increase in content in particular, public press intellectuals argue similarly that we are experiencing a cultural moment in which Black queer characters exist in leading roles across cable, network, and streamed TV (Johnson). This moment stands in contrast to when, for example, author Keith Boykin described *Noah's Arc* as suffering "a burden because it's the first Black gay TV show, and it's carrying all the weight" (Cunningham 176). Not only can we now ask what an increase in Black queer representations allows us to investigate (beyond covert racism and caricaturing), but too we can explore how these series also help us gauge queer and cultural studies phenomenon.

What I have reviewed so far are theoretical studies that largely challenge representations of Black queers in televisual media. Each essayist aims to highlight how particular ideas about sexuality are made palatable to white audiences through intentional plot/narrative omissions, or how stereotypes about Black LGBTQ people are exacerbated to further present one-dimensional readings. Overall, what I want to suggest is that research on Black queer characters and subjects

in media has largely followed a particular politics of exposure— what one could describe as an incessant need on the part of theorists to reveal the inner workings of racism. This method is illuminating and elucidates the insidious nature of oppression in what is assumed to be progressive content on television. However, while each study attempts to offer a different read of representation, there is a standardized trajectory each theorist tends to follow, which falls in line with Sedgwick's claim that critical studies have become synonymous with a type of paranoid mimesis (Sedgwick 210). These studies strike a similar beat: "racism and caricaturing is present, here's how…" This dissertation ventures from this perceived "critical" prescription to argue that reparative critical approaches can, just as insightfully, glean sustenance from contemporary media representations. This reparative critical approach allows my study to investigate what I argue are expanded conceptions of Blackness and sexuality in this televisual moment, rather than interpreting these programs via a series of -isms that critical studies forecasts all too well.

Reconsidering Noah's Arc

To be sure, not all scholars have followed what seems to be the format of largely problematizing Black queer representation in televisual media. I offer Mark D. Cunningham's (2012) controversially titled "Nigger, Coon, Boy, Punk, Homo, Faggot, Black Man: Reconsidering Established Interpretations of Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality Through *Noah's Arc*" as an example of a text that finds room for various kinds of critiques. Cunningham addresses the cable program's historical significance to Black gay men's media representation, its troubling aspects around race, and *Arc's* surprise cancellation. The scholar begins by connecting *Arc* to a cultural trajectory set in motion by Marlon Riggs, producer of the famed documentary Tongues Untied (1989). Cunningham notes:

> In the spirit of the African and African American tradition of call and response, writer/director Patrik Ian-Polk answered [Marlon] Riggs's appeal to revolutionize how we think about love and affection among Black gay men with the creation of his television series *Noah's Arc.* (172)

By tying Polk to the likes of Riggs, Cunningham is highlighting one of the ways *Arc* can be considered representative not of a problematic failure to represent gay Blackness, but of a powerful lineage of Black queer culture, a genealogy made visible through *Tongues Untied*.

Cunningham's essay rests in a precarious place—a place that can be described as more romantic than suspicious, but not so sentimental as to be uncritical. His essay hinges upon both calling out the pitfalls of *Arc* while he lauds the series for its representation of Black gay men. What I mean is, a running theme of the chapter sees Cunningham coming to terms with *Arc's* dearth of narrative sophistication, an issue he asserts is systemic in TV media, while we also see him extol the series for being a first to feature storylines centering the experiences of a group of Black gay men. The author's self-described objective is to outline how *Arc's* "subject matter provides for a more diverse and inclusive depiction of the Black community while also bringing attention to how culture and race continue to be relegated to the backseat within the industrial and narrative logics of television programming as a whole" (174). In this way, Cunningham avoids limiting his analysis of *Arc* to any singular grand narrative, allowing readers to walk away with an understanding that studies about Black queer people on television oftentimes have to be both/and projects that negotiate not only where series go wrong, but also where they succeed.

Cunningham sees *Arc's* shallowness around depictions of Blackness as similar to surface-level representations of race and sexuality appearing on network television. This is an intriguing observation since scholars, including Cobb and Coleman, have often praised cable television for

its enriched representations of race. However, Cunningham advances that Logo Networks featured Black queer characters who were "shrouded within the easier-to-take confines of comedy…If [viewers] can laugh at the acid-tongued quips, humorous observations, and exaggerated behaviors, the characters' sexuality becomes less threatening and it becomes easier to accept them as "leading men"" (177). What this means is that even as *Noah's Arc* represents a departure from all-white gay casts, Cunningham's opinion is that the series still traffics in a TV-industry norm to not take race too seriously.[3] *Arc*, then, is hailed for what it does visually but not so much for the depth of its content.

Where Cunningham's essay does most of its critical intervening is in its troubling of network TV and the industry. The author is especially interested in the surprising cancellation of *Arc* after two highly rated seasons and the rather ambiguous reasoning offered to make sense of Logo's decision. The termination of *Arc* was highly contested by Black queer people in particular—the loyal fans who helped propel Logo in its infant years (181). Comparing *Arc* to other Black led series that eventually found themselves on the chopping blocks of bourgeoning networks, e.g. Fox's *In Living Color* and *New York Undercover*, Cunningham suggests that newer television channels may have exploited Black audiences for their allegiances and later discarded their tastes for more mainstream flare (181). Those who took to this theory saw Logo's decision as a "move that was less about business and more about the further polarization of Black members of the gay community and racism" (181). Others, according to Cunningham, still saw Logo's decision as about business. Speculation about *Arcs* cancellation still lingers today,

[3] Since the publication of Cunningham's essay in 2012, people of color and women's representation on TV remains inequitable, particularly when comparing how often these groups appear onscreen with their percentage within the U.S. population. There has been an uptick in Black people represented on television as networks and content creators reckon with structural racism and movements to take seriously Black lives. A debate can still be had about how intentionally networks consider diverse representation, see: Deggans, and Littleton.

since Logo answered queries about why the series was cut with an eventual announcement that the program would be made into a feature-length film. Cunningham suggests that many saw the TV to now film announcement as odd and as a way to quell growing discontent among Black audiences. Nonetheless, Logo kept to its promise releasing *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* in the fall of 2008. And despite being considered a cinematic success (*Broom* earned $532,878 in a nine theater release), new *Noah's Arc* episodes would no longer gather together members of Black queer communities each week, as the film's release became for the series a figurative curtain call (183).

Noah's Arc surfaced to much fanfare both because it featured an array of Black gay men engaging everyday lives and due to the series being announced as part of Logo's inaugural lineup, a channel dedicated to queer audiences launching in 2005. Like public intellectual Keith Boykin notes, *Arc* took a plethora of criticisms by nature of its place in a Black gay televisual genealogy in which the series sits out front (Cunningham 176). *Arc's* historical positioning is an important consideration when analyzing what the series may get "right" or "wrong." Yet, there is also something to be said about how *Arc's* representations may be used to engage with other scholarly fronts, including not only audience reception, but also how the series speaks generatively about the cultural moment in which it was produced and aired. This latter assertion speaks to a question about how media texts articulate with other facets of culture to shed light on a particular moment or concern, a line of querying I find compelling and useful in this dissertation.

This study is not about determining the extent to which televisual representation is problematic. I am interested in exploring what we can glimpse by engaging Black queer representations. These series provide the material for thinking about neoliberalism, futurity, and

Black queer worldmaking. I rest on the side that sees these texts as having something to tell us about our current moment, something that may go unnoticed if we continue to interpret Black queer representations through only suspicion and paranoia. This dissertation enlivens rather than strips away. While my literature survey is by no means exhaustive in terms of who has written about Black queer subjects on TV, it is representative of the kinds of suspicion that permeates this scholarship. My survey suggests that what gets overrepresented in terms of scholarly attention is where portrayals go wrong or where one can find traces of antagonism directed at Black queer people. This is but one way to do critical studies. I find this previous research especially helpful but limited. I use contemporary Black queer representation to generate scholarly conversations that focus on opening the possibilities of what televisual programming can show us, what it can make more clear, and what it can reveal about sociopolitical concerns within cultural studies. I turn next to the primary sources used in this study outlining their particular significance.

Primary Sources

The goal of this study is not to make sweeping generalizations about newer kinds of Black gay media, but instead to recognize that TV is experiencing a moment in which Black queer representation is increasing and this fact suggests that we can ask different questions about what these depictions might be doing. This overarching aim means that this study needs to have both a managed scope and consistency across series. To meet these goals, I limited this research to the inaugural seasons of three television shows: *Empire, Pose,* and *The Prancing Elites Project*. Additionally, focusing on one season allows a literal sense of beginning and end, particularly since, at the time of writing, all these series were renewed by networks. I chose programs where the Black queer characters were central to the storyline in particular kinds of ways, that is, the subjects were featured/scripted as trying to create and sustain worlds for

themselves and this striving did not align with hegemonic culture or other more powerful characters within the series, ultimately creating tension within the plotline. Below is a brief overview of this dissertation's primary sources and their cultural significance.

Empire

With the 2015 launch of the network TV drama *Empire*, Black gay representation took center stage, in fact Jamal Lyon, a lead character on the series, emerged as a gay cultural juggernaut during the program's inaugural season. *Empire* itself had revived Fox network's Wednesday night ratings slump by garnering its largest viewing audience in three years (Hibberd). Additionally, queer character Jamal Lyon was similarly lauded, described as refreshing, nuanced, and non-stereotypical (Skinner, Brathwaite, Alexander). It is those facts combined with how the series puts familial love and economics into such close conversation that led me to selecting the program. Similarly important, those cultural critics assessing Jamal's depiction read his storyline as breaking with rehearsed tropes and were themselves able to move beyond concerns of good or bad representation, seeing his character instead as pivotal to the storyline and noteworthy in the ways he articulated negotiations around everyday queer sexuality. *Empire* is about building and sustaining a Black family-run record company focused on Hip-Hop, Pop, and R&B music. The series follows the Lyon family as they partake in lavish lifestyles by creating chart-topping music, embracing celebrity, and feverishly engaging each other in competition to gauge who is best at whatever endeavor will ultimately bring notoriety.

The Prancing Elites Project

The Prancing Elites Project was not a ratings smash. The Oxygen Network reality series is part of this study because it is one of the earliest programs to make visible, in substantive ways, the lives of Black gay and trans subjects. Season one of the series illuminates both the everyday lives of Black queer and trans people and the world of J-Setting, a style of dance

invented by Black women at Jackson State University in Mississippi. *Prancing* chronicles the lives of five Black Southern gender non-conforming men and women as they intervene as a team in the world of J-Sette with a goal of transforming the space to be inclusive of more than cis women. *The Prancing Elites* is rooted within a landscape not often found within representations of queer and trans people and reckons with the idea that the U.S. South is home to vibrant queer worldmaking, despite social antagonism—a term I use to name the collective effects of racism, homophobia, and classism on Black queer subjects—and speculation about the South's "unique" homophobia (Stuever). What is profound about the Prancing Elites surfaces in the ways the team grapples with the antagonistic world in which they find themselves by imagining and creating a reality they wish to see.

Pose

Pose is a groundbreaking scripted series that employs trans performers of color to portray trans characters, in some ways bolstering those who critique the idea of casting non-trans actors to play trans people (Fasanella, Rosa). I selected the first season of the series because of its focus in bringing to life the richness of the 1980s when poor Black and brown queer and trans subjects persisted despite the realities of HIV and Ronald Reagan's devastating austerity measures. *Pose* is innovative because its stories are inspired by a series of collaborators who are themselves members of Black and Latino/a/x gay houses. With both its commitment to casting trans women of color and its culturally specific influencers, the series moved trans representation into a new realm, notably with its twenty-one Emmy awards and nominations (*Pose*). *Pose* is heralded by cultural critics for addressing trans representation, Black gay love, and injecting nuance into the stories of those who experienced the devastation caused by HIV and AIDS in the 1980s.

Notable Mentions

There are two other television programs I considered for this project: *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Cheer*, both appearing recently on Netflix. *Cheer* is a documentary-style production following Navarro College's esteemed cheerleading squad as they prepare for their national championship in Florida. While most of those featured on *Cheer* are white, two of the athletes showcased sit within this dissertation's goal of exploring representations of Black queer people as they seek tools to survive and even thrive within a sometimes-contentious backdrop. Both Jerry Harris and La'Darius Marshall engage a fascinating friendship that traverses weight issues, family problems, and their desire to be understood as comrades to their larger cheer community. The two young men showcase what Foucault would advance is "friendship as a way of life" (136). Ultimately, *Cheer* became marred in controversy when Harris and several other men within the series admitted to soliciting sex from minors, revealing a kind of cheer underworld within which sexual abuse abounds. The series was then so consumed by its strife that any other reading would seem irresponsible. I chose not to highlight *Cheer*.

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt is a comedy series that, like *Pose* and *Empire*, is traditionally scripted and performed by actors. The series is about Kimmy Schmidt, a quiet and introverted woman who, after escaping the captivity in which she was held by a cult leader, makes her way to NYC where she befriends Titus Adromedon, a quirky, eccentric, Black queer man who eventually becomes her roommate. Adromedon is unashamed of his femininity and ostentatious presence, showcasing an unapologetic worldmaking in comedic fashion. I ultimately chose not to include the series because it played too strong with a narrative in which the Black gay best friend comes to represent all of the supposed progressive attributes Schmidt lacks, creating a kind of magical negro typology that was hard to ignore.

My hesitations with *Cheer* and *Kimmy Schmidt* illustrate how the increase in Black queer representation on TV has not simply been utopic, this uptick, in fact, often (further) reveals problematics. *Cheer* and *Kimmy Schmidt* might have led, in a more immediate sense, to the same kinds of paranoid readings crafted before. While the suspicious approach would prove beneficial for these two Netflix programs, it would not be useful in seeing the possibilities that exist within Black queer representation, which is the aim of this study. The series and seasons that have been chosen for this dissertation are not representative of a nascent televisual ethos in which Black queer representation is ultimately neat, but rather these select programs are interesting and promising examples of works that offer something new to glean from representation. Finally, the trajectories of *Empire*, *Prancing*, and *Pose* are not static, as these series progressed into future seasons their featured content too invited more suspicious approaches in ways their inaugural seasons did not.

Methodology

The methodology used in this dissertation is rooted in a close reading practice known as Theories of Articulation. Introduced by Ernesto Laclau in the 1970s and elaborated on later by Rita Felski, "articulation is a hookup, a temporary linkage, a forged connection between two or more elements. It is a contingent link between phenomena that do not share a unifying or essential identity and one that is unmade and remade over time" (Felski 511). Larry Grossberg notes that articulation "links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures (Grossberg 54). I think of articulation as a praxis of correlates, a way of seeing "this" in "that" and vice-versa. The guiding question of this study suggests linkages between televisual programming featuring Black queer representation and sociopolitical questions within

the field of cultural studies. Or, how one part of culture illuminates and highlights another disparate part. The practice of reading these texts, then, is not about revealing a kind of TV holism in which I insulate representation to simply entertainment or ideology. I understand *Empire*, *Pose*, and *The Prancing Elites Project* as artifacts shaped and produced by myriad conditions, which in turn depicts worlds reflecting both current and past Black queer realities. And for the purposes of this dissertation, I connect the realities highlighted within these programs to a range of academic questions and insights regarding neoliberalism, futurity, and worldmaking. My aim here is to ponder the ways academic questions can have everyday lives and how Black queer representation illuminates scholarly realms, particularly within serial format TV series, which unlike feature-length films require sustained engagement.[4]

While other close reading strategies aim "to show how textual details can open up onto social wholes…," my contention is, what can studying *several* television programs featuring Black queer subjects show us within a moment of heightened media visibility? (Felski 511). As scholars have noted, "Rather than reading *into* texts, cultural studies seeks to read *across* texts" (Felski 512). While each of the series studied in this dissertation are perused, it is their collective Black queer representation that speaks to the "now" designation within this study's title. My argument is that reading through these texts offers clarity on social and political questions gauged within cultural studies. Further, what is apropos about articulation as a cultural studies method within this study is its reluctance to engender what Stefan Collini notoriously names "Grievance Studies" in his critique of the field (NP). Since there is always relevance in revealing power's hidden cultural components, I will not go where Collini has, but I will endorse and add

[4] As a cultural studies scholar I aim to bridge the gap between what I ask in the academy and the everyday lives of Black people. As such, I find relevance in thinking about how the sometimes-dense phenomena I encounter within the academy can be illuminated by looking and thinking more locally.

to Felski's position that cultural studies is not *just* "a self-righteous rhetoric of unmasking or a hypervigilant hermeneutics of suspicion" (513). With that, the data I glean from reading these series is presented not as a culmination of what Sedgwick would call negative affects, but something generative, something more, something reparative.

Researcher Position

In his work on identity and cinematic representation, Stuart Hall pens, "The 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, 'enunciated'. We all write and speak from a specific place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*" (68). I rehearse Hall to intimate how the series, questions, and topics engaged in this dissertation are not simply fortuitous. I would be remiss in not mentioning that part of the impetus for this research rests in recent cultural developments in the United States. As mostly young Black people have again re-centered race as their pressing political concern with, for instance, #BlackLivesMatter, there have been increased conversations about the meanings of Blackness. These renewed dialogues have compelled me to create scholarship that takes a different approach to Black representation, one that focuses on possibility rather than primarily tracing the punitive logic circulating in many depictions of Black people on television.

While *Empire* generated a huge audience and was one of the highest rated shows on TV all of the series I explore have provided focal points for Black queer people, like me, to now see our likeness being broadcast on television. There were weeks when bloggers and public intellectuals would discuss the latest updates on *The Prancing Elites* or what will happen next on *Pose.* With that, my role as researcher is to extract meaning from these programs in ways that keep in mind more than what they lack, and also to think about how representations, like Blackness, can be vast, filled with productive tension, illuminating, and worth expanded

analyses. This work aims not to cover a broad genealogy or make overarching claims about programming. I use this moment of increased representation to give an in-depth analysis about how Black gay representation addresses contentions related to neoliberalism, futurity, and coalition building.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: "An Escape from Theory, or How the Elites Prance to Their Own Beat" focuses on the television series, *The Prancing Elites Project.* The Prancing Elites are a five member, all Black, dance troupe based out of Mobile, Alabama. The troupe performs a style of dance known as J-Setting. The world of J-Sette is traditionally reserved for Black cis women, but Black gay men and gender non-conforming subjects have taken up the style of dance as a kind of queer world making. The series has two seasons and began airing in 2015. By exploring the ways canonical ideas related to queer world making and futurity get taken up by the troupe, I intervene in longstanding debates within queer theory.

Employing Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* as formative texts, I suggest that both scholars undertheorize the ways subjects like the Elites conceive of and imagine time. These scholarly lacunas have everything to do with the ubiquity of antiblackness and its compounding factor, social antagonism directed at Black queer Southern subjects. I see these canonical queer theories as in part totalizing and in their grandness they, perhaps, inadvertently, skirt over subjects who have complicated identity intersections—subjects like the Elites.

Early in the chapter I introduce a concept called confounded readability, which I argue is the social designation of the Elites. Because while the troupe fits within some ideas articulated

under critical theory, the teammates also confound these conceptions, which is a result of their multiple identities and lived conditions. Confounded readability stands in for how subjects get misread when scholars fail to center their material conditions in their analyses. I demonstrate how antiblackness places the troupe outside of Edelman's popular conception of social orders—asking how can they disrupt something from which they are already excised—and I show how members of the team embrace their radical queerness as a way to mitigate the challenges of the everyday, and in doing this, the teammates see queerness as a "here and now" rather than a "then and there." In addition, the everyday social antagonism experienced by the team means some members seldom see the future as a slate waiting to be filled by their hopes; in fact, some troupe members see the future as an extension of the present.

The last section of the chapter expands on confounded readability via utilizing one of the series' subplots involving Elites member Adrian, and his mother, Arletha. I show how both their minoritized identities can complicate their story arc. The section concludes with the suggestion that the series spectacularizes their mother/son relationship and in doing this risks a simplistic representation that relies on and propagates problematic ideas about Black homophobia.

Chapter Two: "Entrepreneurial Subjecthood: *Empire's* Jamal Lyon and What We Can Mean When We Say Neoliberal" centers the TV series *Empire.* Originally airing in January of 2015, *Empire* focuses on The Lyon family and their multimillion-dollar enterprise, Empire Records. *Empire* was the highest rated series on the Fox Network when it aired and was lauded for featuring the openly gay lead character, Jamal Lyon, who is played by actor Jussie Smollett. Jamal is an aspiring singer on the series. In this chapter I turn my attention from the canonical queer theories troubled in my first chapter to exploring the cultural residue of neoliberal

economics. Neoliberalism is ubiquitous within cultural studies and serves as an academic catchall for naming the pitfalls of late capitalism.

What I do in this chapter is contemplate the ways neoliberalism surfaces within the life of Jamal Lyon. I focus not on revealing neoliberalism as an economic travesty, which it is, but in thinking about the ways neoliberal ideology intertwines with "family," and modes of Black authenticity, which does not always appear onscreen as pernicious. Of the three body chapters in this study, this one employs a more suspicious stance with a reparative analysis. Here I take a critical approach rooted in a kind of uncovering or teasing out, since I spend time decoding neoliberalism as it appears in the series. I do this uncovering to ultimately show how Jamal Lyon negotiates what in some ways is a tumultuous life.

I begin the chapter by highlighting the real-life case involving actor Jussie Smollett who reported to Chicago police that he suffered through an anti-gay hate crime in the city in early 2019. The Smollett attack generated national attention and was rebuffed as a hoax by Chicago's then police chief after a few short weeks. I point out that in his harsh comments about Smollett's alleged attack, the chief shows that he is channeling a similar impassioned "brand-value" argument that he accuses Smollett of manufacturing, revealing ultimately how neoliberalism infiltrates all aspects of contemporary life. I move through a genealogy to describe how cultural studies scholars have pointed out the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism in addition to the ways the condition surfaces as a homonormative sexual politics among gay men.

The crux of the chapter contains two contentions. One is that within Jamal's relationships with his parents Cookie and Lucious Lyon, neoliberal ideology reveals itself in the two-part nature that seems to characterize their familial connections. These relations are at once loving and transactional and therefore a kind of hybrid kinship that can be fractured if little use-value

exists. The second argument explores how Jamal's self-imposed exile into inner city Brooklyn acts as a non-profiting neoliberal model where the singer garners social and cultural capital because of his proximity to poverty and struggle. This cultural capital, or credibility, puts a damper on how effective Lucious can be in lodging homophobic attacks toward Jamal since the singer garners a type of realness from the inner city where he relocates. These two contentions collide during the conclusion of the chapter when Jamal finally uses his newfound "street cred" as buy in with his father, Lucious.

Chapter Three: "Live! Work! *Pose*! The Radical Articulation of Black Queer Life" explores the series *Pose* (2018). In 2019 *GLQ* devoted a special issue to Cathy Cohen's groundbreaking essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." In revisiting her essay, originally penned in 1997, Cohen reveals that part of her motivation for writing was to highlight the ways prior Black feminists, gays, and lesbians coalesced around racialized otherness, resulting in radical community building during the 1980s. But in 2019, as Cohen reflected on the 1980s, she worried that most articulations of the decade tend to locate Black subjects in the specific capacity of fighting against HIV/AIDS. In this way, much of how Black queer people created worlds gets erased under the idea that these subjects were only addressing disease. I intervene by asserting that one way we can remember the dimensionality of 1980s Black queer life is through the series *Pose,* which is lauded for being intentionally grounded in the history of Black and brown folks. For instance, the series is written, produced, and performed by Black and brown people who are part of "gay houses" and who belong to the communities the series depicts. Further, communication studies scholarship has noted the ways mediated cultural products can inform public memory, which is especially salient

for people who do not find their stories or histories preserved within built environments like gay enclaves.

To address how *Pose* helps us remember a fuller 1980s, the chapter unfolds in three ways. First, I discuss the program's depiction of gay houses, which illuminates how many of these communal spaces were built around identity and social positionality. Second, the series shows us how Black and brown trans women engaged each other rhetorically to exchange life lessons about transphobia and community. And finally, *Pose* offers a look at Black men loving Black men, a phenomenon not often seen on TV and something the late Black gay cultural critic and icon, Joseph Beam, calls revolutionary. *Pose* offers a mediated version of Black queer life that allows us to see communities addressing HIV/AIDS while not reducing Black queer life to pathology. And while this is not a study about audience reception, *Pose* surfaced to much fanfare because of its rich depiction of Black queer life and the nuance with which it presented its subjects. In conclusion, the chapter points to how televisual representation can give us insight into the past even while being scripted in the present.

Conclusion

Black Queer TV: Reparative Viewing and the Sociopolitical Questions of Our Now is a critical study that works to broaden the questions we can ask and insights we can glean from Black queer representation. Research about Black LGBTQ people in media has been both robust and limited, exposing pitfalls within representation, like how series undermine Blackness to prop up sexuality as the defining characteristic of social difference. But also, previous scholarship has tended to privilege an interpretive strategy focused on revealing the limits of televisual programming via uncovering racism and other social antagonisms. In this moment, when visibility of Black queer subjects on TV has increased, scholars are similarly pondering new

ways to discuss media outside of good or bad binaries and moving beyond centering text around suspicious motives. This dissertation is part of this avantgarde by addressing the challenge of seeing Black queer representation as not only generative but also reparative. Within this study I engage three televisual series in a variety of ways ultimately highlighting the dimensionality of Black representation and the connections between what is seen on TV and the academic contentions circulating within cultural studies.

CHAPTER 1: AN ESCAPE FROM THEORY, OR HOW THE ELITES PRANCE TO THEIR OWN BEAT

> What is more dramatic is that—in spite of every promise to the contrary— every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of deligitimating our space for asking and thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other.
>
> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Axiom 1, *Epistemology of the Closet*

Established theories illuminating queer worldmaking have at best provided space to consider how those minoritized via sexuality and gender create sustainable, manageable, and at times worthwhile lives while living in a world structured via homoantagonism and trans antagonism. These theories have tended to universalize a white queer experience or suture together discrete perspectives of queer people of color to address the dearth of polyvocality within queer theory (Allen, Reed). This chapter focuses on queer worldmaking, but goes against this tendency to create totalizing and holistic theories of social reality by instead spotlighting the nuance and specificity of a group of Black, queer, gender nonconforming, U.S. Southern dancers on the Oxygen Network Series *The Prancing Elites Project*.

Using television as a medium of analysis, I explore the ways Prancing Elites members move in and out of queer theories focused on worldmaking and into what I term confounded readability (CR). Confounded readability is (1) a kind of lived incoherence stemming from the race, sexuality, gender, and geography nexus within which the dancers live and (2) the potential misreading of this social reality by others, and by queer theory itself. This idea of CR is not a rejection of theory, but a privileging of how Black queer subjects create and experience material worlds in complicated, granular, and oftentimes disjointed ways. That is, I use reality TV as a site to explore how Black sexual and gender minorities create worlds that, at times, move beyond neat theoretical capture and its homogenizing effect. My overarching aim is to highlight

subjective truths that must be analyzed and understood on their own terms and therefore provide a way to do theory locally. In this chapter, I champion a reparative framework that, rather than using theory to analyze the social, uses the social life of the Prancing Elites to rework our queer theories.

Scholars who focus on social identities have skillfully theorized how racialized queer people manage living day to day, despite the deleterious effects of oppression. This chapter does not question the latter. Rather, I take issue with the blanketing effects theory can sometimes have, which results in a flattening of dynamic subjects for the purpose of broader political representation. Here I am suggesting that theories about identity are attempts to make subjects knowable, but these frameworks can have the (unintended) effect of skirting over distinct material realities from which constituents create worlds. While I am not the first scholar to raise concerns related to theory's elisions, there are few studies using Black gay and queer televisual representation to advance such cultural studies arguments.[5] The Prancing Elites team is comprised of Black, queer, gender non-conforming, Southern subjects whose lives, I argue, are simultaneously knowable and unknowable within current frameworks available via queer theory. In this way, the subjects confound readability, which calls for more directed strategies to illuminate the lives of the oppressed—strategies that look like more nuanced close readings making visible what is ultimately particular and subject-specific.

My reading of *The Prancing Elites Project* reignites debates within queer theory which have formulaically and historically put into opposing corners two notable schools of thought

[5] Addressing the limitations of theory has long been the purview of the Black Studies project. For instance, one only has to look to WEB DuBois's intervention into American historiography with *Black Reconstruction*; Cedric Robinson's intervention into Marxist theory with *Black Marxism*; Patricia Hill-Collin's intervention into feminism with *Black Feminist Thought*; and E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson's intervention into queer theory with *Black Queer Studies*.

made popular via Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* For instance, Alexis Pauline Gumbs notes how, "Muñoz argues (against Lee Edelman) that queer politics must be radically futurist" (131). While in the introduction to her Muñoz-inspired anthology *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopia,* Angela Jones offers "this book rejects the notion that social and political organization cannot lead to emancipatory possibilities in the future, as found in Lee Edelman's *No Future*" (2). Intervening into this charged debate, I argue that *The Prancing Elites Project* broadcasts a type of lived uncertainty that in many ways extracts from the sentiments expressed by both Edelman and Muñoz in order, perhaps, to formulate something altogether new. More specifically, this chapter demonstrates how troupe members are continuously reminded of the precariousness of futures, particularly because they experience subjectivities that exist outside of heteronormative phantasms. Further, even as futures appear faint, select troupe members may still encounter solace in embracing a coming queer horizon, or approaching time in which they believe they will no longer occupy social and cultural peripheries. As such, I use this chapter to interrogate the representation of a Black queer lived experience that is made livable and legible via seizing on a "here and now" a "then and there," and the temporal spaces in between.

My objectives in this chapter are not to wholly rehash the anti-relational/queer futurist deliberations that have, in years past, animated the field of inquiry that is queer theory. Rather, I contend that harkening back to such debates can shed light on the tensions represented in *The Prancing Elites Project* and also demonstrate the importance of giving attention to the highly specific ways that individual people live their lives and make their worlds. In line with Muñoz's own celebrated critical intervention, this chapter "disidentifies" with the polemical *No Futures*

and the more hopeful *Cruising Utopia*.[6] I attempt to give voice to subjects who cannot singularly remain inspired by a decidedly queer (collective) futurity or have the luxury of upending and dismissing heteronormative iterations of the social order. And by disidentify I do not mean to suggest *No Future* or *Cruising Utopia* as problematic texts laid upon us from what Muñoz might call the majoritarian sphere (though this critique does exist of Edelman's work).

This chapter disidentifies as a way to "transform a cultural logic from within" it works on, with, and against canonical queer theory to insert into the discourse how a group of Black, queer, Southern dancers create worlds (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 11-12). Even with my critiques, there are distinguishable insights, which can be gleaned from both *No Future* and *Cruising Utopia* that help us understand the *Prancing Elites* series and this signals for a new kind of engagement with the contentions of queer theory's past. This engagement moves beyond general theories of lived experience to center a Black gay subjectivity that refuses any binary between a "here and now" and a "yet to come" existence. With that, this chapter reads for the ways the Elites are instructed by social locations that find solace and productivity in a gray area informed by "here" and "there" temporalities.

The Prancing Elites and Reality TV

The Prancing Elites Project is reality television. The program is billed as a series that follows the lives of actual people living every day. The troupe consists of five members: Kentrell Collins, who is team captain, Adrian Clemons, Kareem Davis, Simone Jae (Jerel Maddox within the series), and Tim Smith. Though all the dancers upend hegemonic modes of masculine gender expression, during season one Tim specifically experiences herself as a woman. To be clear, the "reality" designation does not negate the ways in which the series is mediated by producers,

[6] See *Disidentifications.*

production, and the mandates of ratings. The focus of this chapter deals primarily with how the troupe is represented in the series, even as that depiction is contoured through an amalgam of human filters. I explore the specifics of minoritized identities as represented within the series. I conduct my close reading from the vantage point that understanding the richness of the Elites is accomplished when nuancing and factoring in the material worlds from which the subjects live and perform their subjectivity. In this way, studying the Prancing Elites both exposes gaps within what I call "big theory" and more importantly, shows how the troupe and its members create worlds, not in grandiose or generalizable ways, but via negotiating and shifting the proximal cultural spaces within which they live. The team's televised and "localized" worldmaking offers rich material for my aim of illuminating smaller pieces of a larger cultural whole.

The Prancing Elites participate in a style of dance known as J-Sette. J-Sette was catapulted into the mainstream after singer Beyoncé Knowles incorporated the style of dance into her popular 2008 music video "Single Ladies." J-Sette choreography can be best summarized as movements of repetition, as typically a point person or captain uses their body to initiate motions that get subsequently mimicked by the larger troupe. Originally a Southern staple, the dance aesthetic has its roots in Mississippi with Jackson State University's Prancing J-Settes, which is an all-Black-woman ensemble.

Lamont Loyd-Sims and J-Setter LaKendrick Davis note the style of dance was appropriated from the Jackson State women, inflected with a "twist," and brought into Black gay clubs and public spaces throughout the South (Davis 0:32, Loyd-Sims). Both academic treatments (even as there are only a few), and public critics laud J-Sette as a specific kind of resistance art that emblemizes how Black gay men (re)produce cultural forms outside of the popular mainstream (Alvarez). However, an entry/article in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and*

Politics suggests that Black queer male J-Setting is not always understood as political. Within the compendium, Thomas DeFrantz notes that "in the first decade of the 2000s, the public spectacle of Black queer J-Setting became more noteworthy than the form's original dancing by women of color; queer titillation beat out heteronormative fantasy" (483). DeFrantz offers an important point about the mainstream's uptake of J-Sette, which is that "male participation proves to be more important to a profitable racialized and sexualized narrative than of the female invention" (483). In this way, the scholar might be signaling a critique of a televisual industry that inflates the cultural contributions of Black queers, particularly when spectacle and profit are concerned. What is arguably most notable of J-Sette's visual culture is that those who partake in the dance aesthetic, regardless of gender experience, are hyper-feminized via the standard leotard uniform and face makeup and in their curated, often sultry, gestures.

Queer Worldmaking

In an effort to highlight queer culture, scholars have focused on the ways LGBTQ+ people create social worlds in spite of their experience with antagonism directed at their personhood. One can find the roots of this academic exploration in Berlant and Warner's "Sex in Public," where the scholars describe "queer culture building," as "not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture" (548). Queer worlds exist as spaces where sexuality is not a separate facet of life embedded exclusively within the domain of the private. Here, sexuality is deployed as basis for political projects and hence extends beyond modes of intimacy. In this way, queer culture building acts as a counter to the heteronormative mandate to keep sexuality private and at a

distance. In many ways, queer worldmaking is spawned by the lived experiences of queer and trans people as they publicly negotiate every day.

Lee Edelman proposes that queer people can inherently be a kind of counter force to current iterations of the social world. To do this, queers must refuse the pull of heteronormativity and instead embrace and champion the very debasement and social disdain often lodged at and mapped on to our bodies. This celebrating of what some call "queer negativity" is at the very heart of Edelman's monograph, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Grounded in psychoanalysis, *No Future* argues for queer people to subvert the hegemonic social order— the ubiquitous and heteronormative script underwriting contemporary life—by defying its calls for social normalization. Edelman contends that this order props up a fantasy of protecting an image he terms "the Child" as its required political ends. In elaborating this political vision, the scholar notes, "The fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought… That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (2-3). It is here where Edelman introduces reproductive futurism, a catchall term describing the "ideological limits [placed] on political discourse" when the figure of the Child remains its prized pot of gold (2). In this way, if the future must always be constructed through the lens of saving children, then reproduction (heteronormativity) becomes naturalized as that which brings about futures and queerness is made into the opposite of reproduction "since queerness… is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" (Edelman 19). But what does it mean to stand outside of this organized politics, to in large part practice an ethics of subversion and not be interested in futures, to, dare I say it, not be concerned with the Child? For Edelman, this is queerness.

According to Edelman, queerness is an outlying force waiting in the dark to take down a symbolic order rooted in reproductive futurism (4, 6). Queerness, then, is not identity embodiment, it is an enacted refusal of contemporary sociality. As the queer subject engages this defiance Edelman's queer world begins to take shape. What exactly comes from this queer world built upon refusal if the idea of futurity remains so tightly wedded to reproduction and is subsequently anti-queer? Edelman would staunchly inject, something "better" than what we have (5). Or he might claim, "We get truth" (5-6). "Such queerness proposes, in place of the good, something I want to call 'better,' though it promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing" (Edelman 5). Here, Edelman's thesis comes into fuller view, as one can deduce that queerness is a nothing-is-promised-ness, it is in many ways a deliverance from a social order that assures good but for the queer never delivers. A disavowal of this social order is in effect a "letting go," resulting in the revelation of who we as queer people really are or who we might be, sans heteronormalization. Rejecting the social order allows access to a certain kind of truth, or what the scholar describes as jouissance, a term Edelman borrows from his progenitor, Jacques Lacan. Jouissance is "sometimes translated as 'enjoyment,'" and as a kind of "movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" (5-6, 25). In this way, queerness is a kind of ontology, freeing the subject from heteronormative mandates around being.

There are cultural critics who take issue with designating futurity as always and already a temporal project steeped in heteronormativity. In fact, some would argue; "the future is queerness's domain" (Muñoz 1, Jones). Most notable of these skeptics is José Esteban Muñoz, a theorist who stakes his scholarship largely on making visible the ways queer people of color have produced forward dawning cultural artifacts throughout the 20th century. More so than

being reduced to a sophisticated response to Edelman, Muñoz's text *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* aims to partly evidence the ways queers of color often rely on a "not yet here" as reason for resistance and, more importantly, as a driver of daily survival. In other words, Muñoz considers the ways everyday racialized queer antagonism evidences a stagnancy and hostility found in the present giving rise to his theory that the future, for so many, represents a welcomed site of reprieve, critical imagination actualized, and hope. To evidence this, the scholar suggests there is an implicit desire for a freer (queerer) world underlying the artistic expressions of select queer cultural workers of the urban gay past. Muñoz opines, "some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures…and ultimately new worlds" (1). Queerness, in this sense, represents an escape from what is inherently not enough, the everyday.

Similar to Edelman's assertions, Muñoz's conception of queerness transcends identity. That is, queerness is a journey or praxis working toward what the scholar calls "concrete utopias," "utopias that are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential" (3). The key takeaway here is that queerness is an imbuing of hope, a perpetual driving force inching us toward a newer fresher world—a queer futurity. Since queerness is seldom the thing one is and is always the thing one seeks, any kind of queer world (which is not yet here) is made via imagining, yearning for, and embracing something new, similar to an enacted hope for some other possibility for living. With this in mind, Muñoz might argue that participating in a forward-dawning (radically progressive) world is nearest to manifesting a queer world. The yearning for this other world is a belief in queer futurity, made possible by a kind of shared consciousness that sees beyond the "prison house" of the present (1). It is a world where "multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in

collectivity" (Muñoz 20). This world diverges from Edelman's vision of a delimited political space; Muñoz's conception of queer worldmaking is rooted in a radically inclusive shared politics.

Carving out a Southern Space

Much that is produced within the field of queer theory affords legitimacy only to sexualities tied to U.S. urban cultural logics (Stone). This has resulted in a few major cities (NYC, San Francisco, Los Angeles) being understood as the spaces within which queer subjects actualize into true selves and the places from which other municipalities should draw queer inspiration (G. Brown, Halberstam). Muñoz himself extrapolates most of what he theorizes about queer people of color from aesthetics historically rooted in New York City. Countering this tendency, I employ *The Prancing Elites* series to recalibrate this narrative that queer worldmaking and its structuring subcultures are automatically products of the U.S. West and East coasts. When situating his groundbreaking work centering southern Black gay men, E. Patrick Johnson proposes that focusing on the South "complicates gay histories that suggest that gay subcultures flourished best in northern, secular, urban spaces. Not only does the history of southern black gay men demand a reconsideration of what constitutes a 'vital' subculture; it also necessitates a reconsideration of the south as 'backward' and 'repressive'…" (Johnson 3). Yet, more recently I would argue that it is not the entire South which is interpreted as inhospitable or backward, particularly among Black queer and trans people. My own ethnographic work in 2010 revealed the ways Black gay men flock to Atlanta, Georgia understanding it as a Black queer refuge, while others have located Washington D.C. and Houston, Texas as southern locales understood to be progressive spaces within Black queer imaginaries (Spears). The Elites, however, are products of Alabama and practice a style of dance invented by Black women in

Mississippi, two spaces that perhaps sit at the periphery of what queer theory scholars and Black queer subjects imagine as perceptible.

Being queer while living firmly in a space understood as outside of (legible) queerness is a particular reality for members of the Elites. This is worked into the narrative of the series starting in episode one when Elites members contextualize their journey to fame after a 2013 Tweet in which basketball star Shaquille O'Neal found and praised one of their performances uploaded to YouTube. The team members describe their rise to stardom with Adrian expressing "It's been great. But when we returned back home we realized that while the rest of the United States accepted us, our neck of the woods had a long way to go" ("We Came to Dance 0:53"). In this way, two things emerge as true, the Elites team experiences their time at home in Alabama as not always hospitable, and Alabama is home to queer subjects who create worlds despite its perceived cultural antagonism. The Elites inhabit a peculiar social world where one cannot learn about their queerness without attaching to it their regional identity, a lesser-known southern landscape within which team members embrace a world of J-Setting. If queer theories have historically placed credence in coastal urbanity and Black queer subjects (particularly men) associate only particular southern spaces with suitable worldmaking, then indeed the elites sit in a kind of queer/ not queer intersection where their experiences exist below and confound theory's "gay radar."

The Saraland Parade

When the current world surfaces as not enough, members of the Elites team curate social alternatives out of, and despite the seeming antagonism and ostracism they experience because of their converging race, gender, sexual, and regional identities. I explore these social alternatives– or what I term worldmaking–using a pivotal moment early in the series when the team is publicly

admonished while unofficially marching alongside an Alabama parade as my starting point. In the first episode of the season the team is told by Suzanne, their manager, that their request to dance in Saraland, Alabama's Christmas Parade has been denied. The Elites take this rejection especially hard since their collective visions of success largely amount to marching in as many Southern parades as possible. The rejection letter and its logic cast the team as exotic dancers of an adult-like nature; a designation parade organizers fear will not bode well for the mostly family audience that attends Saraland's Christmas parade. Suzanne encourages the group to strive on and interpret this rejection as only a small bump along a long road. But this letter comes after a series of other denials and it is in this moment that the team refuses to accept rejection as standard course of action.

After hearing the parade organizers' decision, Kentrell, the group's captain, attempts to assuage his almost-in-tears team asking, "so what if we go dance at the parade in Saraland anyway?" ("We Came to Dance" 12:00). In this moment Kentrell seems out of patience with waiting on procedural acceptances that never seem to materialize and gestures that the troupe takes matters into their own hands. After hearing the captain's rhetorical query about just showing up at the parade, Suzanne expresses that it's a bad idea. Responding to Suzanne, Jerel, who is another member adds, "going about trying to get in the right way doesn't work, we still want to do it." (12:07) The production then cuts to a solo shot in which Kentrell is shown reacting to the quagmire asserting, "Suzanne hears a no, that's just it for her, we hear a no, but we keep fighting." (12:11)

The manager offers her consoling words about the city's rejection "I think that we should just keep plugging along as the Prancing Elites, showing everybody your talent and not that you're going to go behind their backs" ("We Came to Dance" 12:18). Troupe member Adrian

responds to Suzanne arguing, “we were born here so we’re gonna fight for what we believe while we are here. It is our hearts that we are trying to put out there when we dance” (12:30). Jerel then closes the scene suggesting to Suzanne, “you do what you need to do, we’re going to do what we have to do” in many ways both Adrian and Jerel are insisting that the troupe cannot endure another waiting game (12:42). While some may assume these pronouncements by the Elites are simply the work of reality TV generating drama, I see the troupe employing this moment to respond to a long history of rejection and perhaps using the camera to illuminate frustrations that are unique to the team.

The Elites arrive at the Saraland Christmas Parade, and in my reading, the series frames this moment as if a showdown is imminent. The troupe is in full performance garb: form-fitting bodysuits, high boots, mesh stockings, and face makeup. They exit their vehicle. Walking in a single-line formation the group approaches the mostly white parade onlookers who are now staring at them, while at the same time the police are strategically scattering to monitor the dancers’ every move. Appearing worried and cautious, Adrian notices the law enforcement officers while Kentrell expresses concern the team may be arrested. Jerel describes the officials as a “gang of police officers,” yet the team continues toward the parade route (“We Came to Dance” 14:47). Once on site, a white woman officer immediately tells Kentrell that the group has been denied a parade permit. Responding to the officer’s refusal, Kentrell poses a rhetorical question; essentially asking how she would know the group is denied access when neither he nor any of the other members have expressed a word about who they are or why they are there. In doing this, Kentrell highlights how the group’s intersecting racial and gender expressions are really what is being policed and refused access, since the officer seemingly relies on what she

sees to make her declaration and not any information she receives from the dancers. Nonetheless, the group refuses to let the officer's admonishments stop them.

When production cuts to Kentrell's "confessional" he exclaims, "We just want to dance and at the end of the day we are going to dance anyway, whether you like it or not" ("We Came to Dance" 15:33).[7] The Elites are tired of rejection and make the decision not to leave the parade. Here, the troupe realizes that their power lies less in marching with approved groups and more so in their presence as Black, queer, and gender non-conforming subjects. That is, the team expresses a desire to just dance and decides that their mere existence, J-Setting on the sidelines, is more important than a slot among the marchers. In refusing to be turned away, the group is subjected to a cacophony of hateful utterances from parade goers and, not surprisingly, attention shifts from the procession to the Elites as they move along the sidelines proudly strutting.

While the homophobia and transphobia expressed by those viewing the Saraland parade creates a sense of sadness for the Elites, in the backdrop of the scene exists a spirit of camaraderie among the dancers. Their bonds are represented in the ways they look to one another for nods of support, the manner in which they stand together, which gives the impression "they have each other's backs," and in how they hold hands forming a series of human stanchions connected by each other's arms. These ties of what the team terms their sisterhood allow the troupe to compartmentalize the hostility expressed by onlookers. Kareem rationalizes the troupe's apparent resilience using a method like First Lady Michelle Obama in her 2016 Democratic National Convention speech, in which she quips, "When they go low, we go high." (Obama). Kareem contends "This is what it takes to be a Prancing Elite, you have to deal with all that [the hateful comments] and deal with it in an elite manner" ("We Came to Dance" 16:11).

[7] When I refer to confessional, I am describing the one-on-one conversations that happens when the camera cuts from the action of the series and separately focuses on the opinion or reaction of one Elites member.

Rather than a move to center respectability, Kareem's quip suggests that while the Elites understand the ways they challenge normativity, he sees relevance in responding to antagonism with dignity. In this way, the antagonists (parade organizers) are read as unreasonable and out of touch rather than a focus on the how the troupe responds. Further, the act of dancing serves as a figurative shield from all that is distracting, allowing the team to fiercely J-Sette even as they are fully conscious of the hostility being lodged at them. I explore this idea in more depth later in the chapter.

The final moments of the segment read as an editing room's attempt to provide a salve for the outright racialized homophobia to which the team was just subjected. In the closing scene, a white woman and white young girl named Bella are seen encouraging and pleading with the dancers to ignore the crowd's hate. Adrian cries as the woman expresses to the team that they deserve to be in the parade more than anyone else. The consoling woman also weeps, this time as she hugs Tim. Tim expresses in confessional that she feels a connection to the woman saying, "She stopped me and told me that I was doing an amazing job and the way she laid her head on my shoulder, I'm like, she really means this" ("We Came to Dance" 18:03). Tim seems moved by the positive feedback from the spectator. In the succeeding shot, Kentrell kneels to meet Bella at eye level, as the young girl asserts that parade onlookers should not have treated the group so badly. Bella's concurrent words and tears send the troupe members further into emotional upheaval. Now the troupe must grapple with not only the ways homophobia dehumanizes them but also how that antagonism gets perceived by the very children they should be purportedly kept away from. Kentrell asks Bella if she knows about civil rights figures Martin L. King and Rosa Parks, to which she nods yes. He proceeds to tell Bella that like those Black icons the dance

troupe is also trying to educate people about acceptance and difference. I focus more on this dialogue in the next section.

Queer There and Queer Here

Focusing on the Christmas Parade debacle helps illuminate and move beyond the theoretical playbooks of queer theory scholars. Kentrell's conversation with Bella hints at what we can call the limitations of the present and in effect captures both the hopeful and forward-dawning spirit that characterizes Muñoz's deployment of queer futurity. Yet aligning with Edelman's call for something more immediate, in other instances within the series, queerness is linked to a "now," as any prospective horizon is darkened by the reality of racialized queer antagonism. What this means specifically for the Elites is that futures are not always spaces of some new world to come, they are also realms imagined as fragments of a deleterious present. In what follows I offer additional discussion of what I call Kentrell and Bella's "forward glancing" exchange, then conversely I turn to an instance within the series when Jerel's home is vandalized, which I read as highlighting queerness as an articulation of the here and now.

One of the maxims that Muñoz introduces into the queer rhetorical canon is the notion that "queerness is not yet here" (1). In short, the theorist opines that queerness is an ideality that one is always striving for— queerness is the light at the end of the present's dark tunnel and those minoritized via sexuality and gender live for what that light may one day bring—they hope. Embedded in Muñoz's thesis is the notion that select cultural workers of the "queer" past offer implicit blueprints of "better" futures via a kind of forward dawning aesthetic discerned from their art. Similarly, Kentrell invokes past civil rights icons to make legible the possibility of a queer futurity to Bella.

When Kentrell conjures the names of icons King and Parks, he is attempting to channel a tangible hope that Bella can recall as a white young girl, which comes from commonly taught stories about U.S. civil rights designating the future as comprising "brighter days" when freedom abounds. Here, Kentrell is connecting a popular declaration that everyone should have a right to freedom with the Elite's quest for freedom of expression. But this is a libertarian fantasy functioning as a privileging of individuality even as little attention is paid to the overlapping systems of discrimination which prevent and unevenly articulate the very idea of freedom in the first place. Further, undergirding this quest for valorization is that while the Elites have a right to be at the parade, onlookers retain their right to express disgust—a kind of circular logic if you will. Still, this rhetorical (and historical) promulgation that everyone can be and should be who they desire works as an imbuing of hope because it foregrounds a futurity when nice people like Bella and the older woman become the norm and clap for the troupe rather than shun the team.

With U.S. racism as a reference point, Kentrell instructs Bella to remain hopeful for a day when parade spectators will no longer see the Elites as aliens, a day when the present (here and now) will be enough. This is a futurity carved out via the hopes of the civil rights past and it resembles contemporary understandings of white and Black integration and solidarity, part of what the closing scene appears to symbolize. The show's analogizing of race and racism with homophobia and trans antagonism is not anomalistic, as "like race" arguments have often structured the messaging of both pro-gay and anti-gay activism (Stone & Ward). In many ways this scene relies "on Blackness as the dominant metaphor for difference, victimization, and resistance" even as parade onlookers clearly express homophobic and trans antagonistic language toward the group (Stone & Ward 606). Part of why I advance that Blackness becomes a kind of chief barometer of difference is because the people in Saraland who are shown to be

disapproving of the Elites appear to be largely white. Kentrell, however, discerns the ways in which the crowd's queer antagonistic messages are buttressed by racism. The dancer is then able to reinterpret the hostility for Bella through a race lens, something the young girl may be better at recognizing. In this way, Kentrell is adept at decoding messages about his Blackness even when race is not explicitly named.

Contrary to the nature of Kentrell and Bella's discussion, which anticipates a coming ethos of queer inclusion, there are instances across the series when the material reality of queerness is not simply forward dawning. In these instances, futurity gets represented as always and already a continuation of an ominous present and not the domain of a coming hope, complicating Muñoz's thesis. One example of the latter begins to unfold in episode three on the troupe's return drive from a trip to New Orleans. Jerel learns that he has become victim of an arson attack. To make matters worse it is suspected that the blaze started in the dancer's bedroom. Once the team is home in Alabama, Jerel, along with Adrian and Tim, show up to survey the fire damage. Upon reaching his home, Jerel is shown approaching the front porch, slowly taking deep breaths with each step; he is prepared for the worst. Jerel opens the front door and sees the charred remains of what was once his living room. With his right hand resting atop his chest the quivering dancer surveys the damage. His mouth is agape. Jerel is speechless except for the audible deep breathing that seems to be keeping the dancer from complete emotional meltdown. Adrian and Tim follow closely behind. At one point the trio reaches the hallway where the sightlines to Jerel's bedroom become visible. Production shows Jerel standing at the end of the hallway being supported by his team members, and then the shot cuts to the melted paint outlining his bedroom's doorway. Jerel cries frantically, repeatedly murmuring, "Who hurt me?" ("Buckin' in the Bayou" 17:54).

The trio moves to check out the rear of the home where it appears the arsonist has torched Jerel's Prancing-Elites paraphernalia and tossed these items out of the bedroom window. Upon finding the wad of burned uniforms and shoes Adrian and Tim begin to suspect that Jerel's affiliation with the Elites might be why his home was targeted. As Jerel sifts through the remains of his uniforms he utters to Adrian and Tim "I can't believe I lost it all…It just seems like the more we try to come up the more people try to knock us down" ("Buckin' in the Bayou" 19:10). When production cuts to Tim's confessional she importantly asserts, "For Jerel to just lose everything, even his uniforms to his makeup, and I know he loves his makeup and his uniforms, his world is just tore down. But that's where we come in as his sisters to help him try to get back on his feet, and that's what we're gonna do" (19:20). Here Tim demonstrates how Jerel's status as an Elite is central to the viability of his world, specifically by highlighting the distress caused by the loss of uniforms and makeup. Further, Tim's quote illuminates the team's sisterhood. It is a bond that persists and intensifies through calamities like the fire. It is a sisterhood imbued with a power to bring one back from the verge of collapse. It is a sisterhood of the here and now, and the emotional and material support offered by this bond seems essential to the viability of Jerel's world in a very immediate sense, making it possible to have a place to sleep, to have resources to continue existing in the world after a massive loss.[8]

In this moment, what if Jerel's leotards, makeup, and familial ties with his teammates represent his queerness? If we take seriously Muñoz's claim that "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,"

[8] I want to point out here connections between Jerel's predicament and Judith Butler's ruminations on precarity and solidarity, particularly since the series frames Jerel's sisterhood as what, in many ways, sustains them through the house fire. Precarity, according to Butler, focuses "on conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control" (i). For instance, we are all born precarious, as in dependent upon some other being who we may or may not know. Precarity, as a concept, can set the basis for collectivity since it is a position no one can escape for an entire life.

can we then see how Jerel's experiences as a person who J-Settes, wears makeup, and has both men and women as sisters is an instance of wanting and desiring beyond the (stagnant) present (1)? Does the torching of Jerel's belongings remind the trio of the ways their sisterhood and Elites network act as a buttress against the hostility of the present? What if, however, the dancer's makeup, leotards, and sisters move him beyond the quagmire of the present while still in the present? Here I am suggesting (1) that queerness is represented via Jerel's world as a J-Setter and sister and (2) that queerness can be understood as a type of material experience that sustains one in the here and now, not only in the service of some better world to come, but as a way to exist alongside the pressures of a world that is. One cannot exist in the future yet to come without being sustained and finding ways to live in the current here-and-now, and perhaps especially for subjects in precarious positions (because of structural inequities and the risks they bring), the work of sustaining in the here-and-now in order to still exist for the then-and-there is real, material work. In this way, Jerel's makeup, uniforms, and sisterhood allow him to flourish and re-flourish in a here and now, despite social antagonism.

My apprehension in articulating the future as the province of queer utopia and idealism arises from the notion that members of the Elites do not envision the future as devoid of the antagonistic present. For example, in the scene's closing sequence Jerel is in confessional rehearsing the arson experience, when he asserts, "With the team behind me like this, nothing can stop us. So, I'm gonna get me another apartment, and bitch if you burn that one down, I'm gonna get me another apartment, you burn that one down, I'm just gonna get me another one" ("Buckin' in the Bayou" 20:20). What can be concluded from Jerel's rumination is that the future is not simply a vacuum waiting to be filled by artifacts to come or even a space that is necessarily hopeful; in fact, the future ultimately holds the accumulated grievances of the present

(Dillon). As such, the future is only as promising as one who can exist -during any time- alongside the social hurdles life will, for a minoritized person, inevitably deliver. This existence is less a libertarian fantasy of productive individuality and more about how those impacted by queer and trans antagonism/racism must always reckon with a host of social ills as part of daily life both now and in the time to come.

In Stephen Dillon's reading of the film *Born in Flames*, he offers that within modernity "time does not erase what has happened, dissolving terror and violence into the progress of the future, nor is the past passively sedimented in the present" (41). Ironically, the point being expressed here is one hinted at by Muñoz himself when he opens his polemic problematizing "the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality" (1). But it is precisely this totalizing rendering that often becomes inescapable in the future worlds contemplated by the Elites. Utopic worlds are partly unattainable not because of a dearth of vision but because of the tangibility of material experience. What this means is that even as members of the troupe both desire and imagine worlds fueled by their diversity, and more importantly their inclusion, this perceptiveness is often hindered by their current social location. The point here is not simply to argue that futures are pasts sequentially repeated (even as Stephen Dillon offers this point) it is to loosen the tie between hope and futurity to make space for the cloudiness of lived experience. This is to say that what is to come is not always understood as better or different than what is.

Outsiders Theorized as Within

Similar to Lee Edelman's provocation that the Child has come to serve as a lynchpin for all that is socially and politically viable, Saraland's parade viewers experience the police and parade organizers employ a doctrine of family values to mark their queer antagonism as reasonable and even benevolent. In Saraland, the dance troupe purposefully disregards and

disrupts the parade's heteronormative posturing in the best ways they can, by not only refusing to leave the festival, but also by J-Setting proudly, in form-fitting tights, their heads held high, Black skin twinkling with glitter. While not all members of the troupe appear to embrace the crowd's negative comments like "you ain't a woman," "she's a man," and "go home," Edelman's embracing-negativity thesis shows how members of the team are certainly more energized by the hateful and negative spirit behind this rhetoric ("We Came to Dance" 16:00). And rather than cower to this hostility or reconfigure themselves to better fit into prescribed norms, the dancers seize the moment and march on, countering the insolence. In fact, we see Jerel offer up the quintessential Edelmanism, exclaiming, "fuck it" as part of his resistance to the officers' and parade organizers' denial of admission and request to respect the parade viewing families (15:17). Similarly, Jerel also exclaims, "We here now, shit" as a colloquial and affirmative (yes) response to whether the team should consider dancing on the sidelines (15:24). Jerel's retorts speak to a type of queer negativity made legible via Leo Bersani in which the dancer's resolution is to refuse to placate a world that wishes to see him as anything other than who he is, even if that means provisionally embracing the homophobia directed at the group (Bersani). In these moments Jerel is proud to be Black, queer, and feminine regardless of how that gets read socially.

Edelman's suggestion urging queers to subvert the hegemonic social order by embracing the negative yet normalized script that equates queerness with anti-reproduction is intriguing but also limited in applicability for those socialized as non-white. The theorist posits how queers possess the capacity to undermine the footing of our social fabric's organizing schema by refusing to privilege reproduction as the moral driver of society. This queer refusal signals an end to a political order built on what Edelman terms, reproductive futurism, which itself rests on

the symbolic power of the Child. However, Edelman's proposition that queerness's value "resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself" leaves much to be answered about which queers' refusal will actually manifest this undoing of symbolic relations (Edelman 6). In many ways Kara Keeling addresses this query, suggesting about Edelman's larger intervention that, "Calling for 'no future'… might inform a (non)politics only for those for whom a future is given, even if undesirably so," white gay men (89). I focus on this question of who can ultimately be subversive and what that revolution might engender because of what strikes me as apparent in both the Saraland Christmas parade scenes and in other moments across the series: the dance troupe lives an everyday reality that conflicts with normativity. The Elites simultaneously challenge and help sustain the social phenomenon. Here, I am defining normativity as those morally endorsed ideals undergirding social orders.

I argue that the Black and fem-presenting dancers are always and already pariahs when it comes to majoritarian social worlds, regardless of a purposeful subversion on their part.[9] In *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson makes a similar calculation when using the Black drag-queen prostitute to materialize what it means to offer queer of color critique. Ferguson elaborates, "African American culture indexes a social heterogeneity that oversteps the boundaries of gender propriety and social normativity," which indicates the ways Black subjects already sit outside established social orders (Ferguson 2). In line with Ferguson's assertion, the

[9] I would be remiss to not highlight here the growing body of scholarship under the critical rubric, Afro-pessimism. Within Afro-pessimism, scholars focus on the ways Black people are instrumental to modern society while at the same time recognizing the ways Blacks are always and already excluded from full participation as human subjects. In this way, Blackness and Black people exist as "socially dead" and this is largely because of the enduring legacies of chattel slavery and colonialism. For a brief summation of Afro-pessimism, which outlines scholar Frank B. Wilderson III's text, *Afropessimism*, please see Vinson Cunningham's contribution in *The New Yorker*: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism

image of the Elites marching alongside (and not in) the Saraland Christmas parade visualizes precisely how the troupe gets literally situated outside of majoritarian conceptions of "society."

The Prancing Elites are at once normativity's visual kryptonite and its structural adhesive. While the group challenges what is socially legible through their material and visual existence, this same presence helps to fashion what is deemed appropriate and therefore normalized within social orders. That is, the social order relies on their othering. We see this in episode three when the troupe creates quite a stir while refueling and gathering snacks at a small-town gas station during their trip to New Orleans. The team has already expressed anxiety about stopping for fuel, particularly because they are navigating through the rural south—a place often imagined and experienced as anti-Black. Their hunches prove correct when passersby and other customers shout, "hey you," "get lost," and "wrong jurisdiction," signaling for the dancers the violent out-of-place-ness they are trying to avoid ("Buckin' in the Bayou" 6:52). Jerel advances, "Right now being at this particular gas station where we have hunters everywhere and rednecks everywhere looking at you. I just want to leave in peace" (7:00). The dancer's comments suggest that he wants to be somewhere else just as much as the antagonists want him to leave. What is more, the team is not adorned in their traditional garb; in fact, they are sporting tracksuits and other nonformal clothing; the hostility they experience is not simply a matter of gender performance and presentation.

The social policing the team undergoes in what Tim calls "the small country town" reifies the same anti-Black, anti-gay, and anti-fem social order the troupe's presence disrupts ("Buckin' in the Bayou" 6:30). What I am stressing here is that the Prancing Elites, as subjects, sit on the other side of Edelman's conception of social orders and this has everything to do with their *Black* queerness. I offer this not to argue that the troupe has no "real" subversive potential because of

the limitations imposed by racism, but to suggest that their capacity to destabilize worlds (or decimate-to-create new worlds, as championed by Edelman) is curbed by their precarious social position within this world. Scholar James Bliss further supports my assessment of Blackness as constitutive of social otherness when he calls attention to Edelman's omissions related to race. Bliss contends, "This structural position that Edelman attempts to theorize from is not the unraced queerness he imagines it to be…while the experience, the archive, and the politics of Edelman's queer are white, the position of Edelman's queer is Black" (86). Here Bliss is taking Edelman to task regarding his mapping of a specific kind of lived precarity on to the queer, which the scholar argues is always and already the condition of Blackness. To redress Edelman, Bliss offers a lesson in the ways Black women's reproduction has been largely imagined as outside of normal, engendering a U.S. Blackness that sits as a site of familial and social dysfunction.

Using the heterogeneous body of work that exists within Black feminism, Bliss takes his cue from Hortense Spillers, asserting that Black women's reproduction is historically constructed outside of normativity, as "the 'whole network of symbolic relations' that Edelman rejects in the name of the queer are foreclosed a priori for the Black" (85). Bliss supports this claim using the flawed, yet culturally significant report *The Negro Family*, penned by Daniel Moynihan, the late New York Senator and academic. In the report the senator claims that Black families suffer from a case of missing fathers and as a matter of course become sites of social dysfunction (85). Going further, Bliss references scholar Orlando Patterson's position that slavery and its legacy forced Black people into "natal alienation," since bondage privileges the relationship between the enslaved person and his master, effectually making the Black family seem inconsequential (85-86). This socially crafted understanding of the Black family, Black reproduction, and by default

Blackness as aberrant is why I suggest that the goal of intentionally subverting the social order surfaces as a fruitless endeavor for the Prancing Elites. Troupe member's access to what Edelman terms "the social" is always and already limited by their structural and material reality via Blackness (race). In other words, the social order is only undone by those subjects the social order exists to protect.

Curating Social Alternatives

For the troupe, an alternative to Edelman's call for what Jack Halberstam terms "epistemological self-destruction" is to, in their limited scope, build a world they want to see, even if that new world exists parallel to the one they are working to supplant (Dinshaw et al. 194).[10] An example of this subversive worldmaking begins to take shape in episode two, entitled "Prance to the Beat," which is the name of the troupe's groundbreaking co-ed dance competition. Prance to the Beat is a gender-inclusive battle designed to desegregate (at least locally) the world of J-Sette competition. Because the Elites are producing the event, they will not directly compete against any of the performers. In conversation with the team's booking agent, Suzanne, Kentrell reveals what is at stake for the Elites, asserting: "We aren't allowed to compete in these competitions against the females. We weren't allowed to be on dance teams in high school, so we decided why not put on our own dance competition" ("Prance to the Beat" 2:25). In subsequent conversation, Adrian asks the team if they recall the time when they were rejected at the entrance to a dance competition, even after fully prepping their makeup and paying the entry fee. Tim exclaims that the reason why she is reluctant to participate in competitions is because of potential rejection. Next, Jerel asserts that their collective memories of rejection are the reason

[10] Edelman writes that queerness marks a trouble that in effect does away with "the refuge of good." Halberstam critiques this, arguing that doing away with the refuge of the good is not the same for all social groups. In fact, positing that queerness is inherently negative implies a kind of rewiring/destruction of knowledge in general.

why it is important to establish Prance to the Beat, so that others who are like them will have space to cultivate their craft by competing against other teams, regardless of gender. In confessional, Kentrell makes a point to highlight that the dance competition is especially for men who J-Sette and feel they have no welcoming outlets in which to compete.

The troupe's conversation shows the longstanding effects of homophobia, particularly how the social disease infiltrates one's understanding of what is possible for their gender even as one currently experiences and expresses a gender non-conforming identity. The series highlights how proudly embodying and embracing one's queerness does not automatically mean that one has moved beyond feelings of deep trauma or internalized antagonism. Yet the Elites have chosen to deploy their traumas as motivation to create an inclusive dance world, a world that also works as a site for their own healing. And while the framing of the series does border on a kind of popular and conservative "overcomer narrative" in which the Elites are depicted as ultimately in charge of their own destiny and therefore responsible for triumphing systemic adversity, this kind of televisual curating is unavoidable within contemporary reality television.

My concern is less about what the series is overtly suggesting and more about what lies between the lines. What is less obvious is that troupe members are not just fostering this new world simply to defy normativity and hence persist through resistance; they are cultivating spaces where they are legible on their own terms even as social antagonisms remain a constant. Still, I am not asserting the Elites as strategic activists who are consciously upending the world, they are a group of complicated Black subjects from the South who find joy in dance. But I am arguing that members of the team draw upon their experiences with queer hostilities to engender spaces that work to mitigate a pernicious social world and in doing this, Elites members open up spaces for others who experience similar social locations.

On the day of the competition, Prance to the Beat, the Elites make a grand, choreographed entrance and the mostly Black audience, populated by adulating teenagers waiting to perform and their families, react with roaring applause. As the team marches toward the stage, spectators in the audience rise to their feet recording with their cell phones the troupe's every move. The Elites appear to be on a high, most likely from seeing so many people who look like them cheer and because they are in the midst of doing what they love to do, dance. These feelings of glee unfortunately are short-lived. After the team's entrance and performance, cameras race toward a coughing and feverish Kareem, who announces that his chest is burning as his team rushes toward him. Having just finished the opening number, Kareem disrobes the top portion of his leotard. He says that he feels hot and short of breath. Tim mentions in confessional that Kareem has the team worried. After a few moments of sitting, Kareem and the rest of the troupe walk out of the facility where it appears the audience cannot see them. It is daytime outside. The camera pans over Kareem. The lymph nodes in his neck look swollen, he vomits but he does not want medical treatment. Kentrell expresses in confessional that as a friend and a captain this is a moment when he must step in to tell Kareem to sit out.[11]

The troupe members become frantic as they try to reconfigure their routine to accommodate one less member. In the second performance each dancer steps out from behind a mega backdrop adorned with their image, making it even more apparent that Kareem is not on stage. Notwithstanding being down one member, the troupe pulls off their second routine gracefully. Despite not competing against anyone, the personalized backdrops give the impression that the team is a force to be reckoned with in the world of J-Sette. This force however is not one of exclusivity but one of change. This change is evident as the young

[11] In a later episode, members of the team find out that Kareem has been struggling with a recent HIV diagnosis.

performers watching in the audience express their excitement for the opportunity to compete against and learn from one another—something the series articulates as non-existent prior to the competition. Here the series frames Prance to the Beat as not just a competition but also a communal space and a kind of "coming out" for the Elites. I also contend that their large backdrops offer a semblance of possibility and this is made even more apparent as the young people in the crowd look at the Elites, a Black gender non-conforming group, in complete awe. Jada from Dancing Stars Elite contends, "I've never danced against men before. This is a really cool experience," while second-place winner Antonio from Illumny Dance Crew asserts that competing against women pushes him to be a better dancer ("Prance to the Beat" 17:52). Adrian expresses that the dance competition should go down in history while Kentrell opines that the team had never imagined successfully creating such a unique dance space.

This new gender-inclusive J-Sette world ushered in by the Elites reverberates beyond Mobile, Alabama's city limits. In the episode "Reignite the Spark," Shamiar, an Atlanta based promoter, visits the troupe with a proposition. The promoter offers the team an opportunity to be part of Stand-up Battle to the Finish, a nascent competition also designed to be inclusive of all genders. The dancers are encouraged when Shamiar explains that her showcase was inspired by Prance to the Beat. Kentrell again, hinting toward the exclusive nature of J-Sette, expresses to Shamiar that he has never heard of women promoters openly inviting men to their competitions. In confessional Kentrell suggests that the team's participation in the Atlanta showcase will officially solidify them as J-Setters, namely because they will be openly competing against women. Kentrell's thoughts highlight a contradiction since he is both critical of the ways the Elites are seen as a fringe troupe because they lack a "biological womanhood" while at the same time he centers women as J-Sette standard bearers.

I read Kentrell's apparent inconsistency as less of a logical flaw and more as evidence of why the Elites reject —really lack access to— an all-or-nothing approach to worldmaking, a formulation theorized under the rubric of anti-relational queer theory. This school of thought calls in part for a rejection of collective good and a destabilizing of the "social" to sever its constitutive relationship to reproducing heteronormativity (Jones 8). Here I rehearse anti-relational queer theory to illustrate how a call to undermine or dismantle the world of J-Sette competition in the name of its failure to adequately include the Elites would also work to disenfranchise the Black women who invented and practice the Southern style of dance. These same Black women have taught the Elites what it means to J-Sette, including their beloved coaches Ms. Neikei and Kiki, the latter a former captain of the Alabama State University Stingettes. Black women embraced and stood up for the troupe when others disregarded their talents or refused to accept them because of homophobia. Therefore, Shamiar becomes critical to helping the Elites formulate a more inclusive dance community, she and other Black women are imagined as gatekeepers within J-Sette. But, at the same time, Shamiar has journeyed from Atlanta to invite the Elites into her competition, an event the troupe inspired.

Shamiar's Stand up Battle to the Finish marks a transition in *The Prancing Elites Project.* The competition establishes the moment in the series when the inclusive J-Sette world created and sparked by the Elites in Mobile, Alabama officially meets its antagonistic and gender exclusive opposite, what I am terming "the other side of the everyday." The other side of the everyday is that oppressive social realm that queerness allows the Elites to exist alongside (like the arson incident that destroyed Jerel's home). That is, while the Elites have so far managed to find solace in their dancing, Shamiar's battle in Atlanta marks a point in the series when the Elites will compete against regionally recognized teams in front of an audience not completely

made up of adoring and inclusive fans. The troupe must now reckon with opposition to the J-Sette vision they materialized in Prance to the Beat. Here the Southern subculture from which the Elites emerge clashes with the more dominant ethos existing within Atlanta, GA. And even as Atlanta has, since the early 2000s, been celebrated as a kind of Black gay Mecca, the space is not automatically inclusive of the troupe (Aaron, Texeira). What the Atlanta battle helps reveal is not only the other, more antagonistic side of the everyday, but also how the unique and granular worlds crafted by the Elites within Mobile, AL, are mimicked by Shamiar, who is represented as being part of a much broader J-Sette community. And further, the ways in which the Elites appear to find comfort in their own Southern city of Mobile, AL, a space existing outside the popular Black queer imaginary as home.

In the lead-up to the competition, troupe members are ecstatic about the opportunity to finally compete against women. Jerel expresses in confessional, “I just honestly can’t believe that we are about to do this. Every competition, it’s either we are competing against boys or watching girls against girls. But this competition is coed. This can really legitimize the Prancing Elites as a whole. We have to kill it!” (“Reignite the Spark” 12:30). In similar elation, Adrian exclaims, “I’ve been waiting on this moment forever: to have a chance to battle against females. We have a chance right now to break down barriers. This is like a dream come true. This is like fucking huge” (13:00). Prior to their performance, the Elites restlessly wait in a dance rehearsal studio at the venue. Shamiar visits the antsy team members and reveals the name of the team they will battle against, a troupe called Platinum Princesses. Hearing the name Adrian rushes to his phone to search for and review YouTube videos of the Princesses. The team is impressed by what they find. After sizing up their competition via the Internet the team convenes for a group

prayer. As the team recites an abridged version of the Lord's Prayer production shows the troupe exiting the studio in slow motion heading toward the main stage.

Once the Platinum Princesses make their way on stage, the host of the competition introduces and invites up the Prancing Elites. Starting in the rear of the auditorium, one after the other and walking in unison, the Elites move toward the stage area by way of the theater's aisle. Kentrell is out front strutting with fervor, swinging his arms, and walking in rhythmic fashion. Each team member is mimicking the captain's every move and sharing his intensity of emotion. As they march in, sections of the audience erupt with boos. Their competitor, the Platinum Princesses, stand onstage witnessing the fracas as audience members gather their belongings and rush for the exits. Because of the camera shot, it is unclear if the audience departs at the same time the Elites strut in, although Jerel gives this very impression when he says, "we didn't even get on stage yet and they're storming out with their children, damn!" ("Reignite the Spark" 15:20). What is clear is that those departing the theater express great animosity toward the Elites—evidenced by comments like "go home" and "I have kids," which are heard in the background (15:15). Once the Elites reach the front of the auditorium, someone yells, "Get off the stage" (15:43). The overheard commentary is all too familiar for the troupe, particularly as hecklers rely on the heteronormative playbook that locates the Elites as inappropriate for families, the very phenomenon Lee Edelman draws attention to and critiques.

The vitriol continues when production focuses on what is happening outside of the theater. Producers particularly highlight a Black man who expresses his overall disapproval of the Elites and apparently his disdain for queer people in general. Talking at the camera, the subject proclaims "I don't like men with skirts on. That's bullshit. If I would have known that shit, I would have never came over" ("Reignite the Spark" 16:18). As he spews his hate another

man stands beside him awkwardly chuckling making light of the violent rhetoric. The antagonist goes further, “Where I came from men don’t sleep with men” (16:30). In a subsequent shot he adds, “You’re going to hell! Going to hell!” (16:36). Despite the team not wearing skirts, the frantic antagonist imagines parallels between the Elites and “women’s clothing” while also assuming each of the members is a man who sleeps with men and that the troupe will ultimately burn for these apparent transgressions.

The criticism lodged at the troupe highlights how the baggage of antagonists often gets laid at their feet because they emblemize a thing that should never intersect with one’s “Blackness,” which is gender-nonconformance. The team is perceived as not only being gay, but acting and looking like women, because of their attire and use of sultry gestures when performing. Because the Elites embody a femininity that showcases their sexuality, many in the audience react with unease and anxiousness. That the antagonistic man and others like him are the ones leaving is symbolic because unlike the Saraland Parade in which the Elites were forced to the sidelines, the troupe now stands center stage in a battle they have both been invited to and chosen. The future oriented Kentrell asserts in confessional, “I cannot wait for the day that people stop looking at my gender and start focusing on my talent,” but coincidentally, that day is today (“Reignite the Spark” 16:31). After all, the theater being half empty also means that it is half full, and those who’ve remained seated appear eager to watch the teams battle it out sans the homophobes and trans-antagonists. The series depicts those left in the audience as not only excited to see the Elites but also as champions of the troupe, proponents to them winning the competition.

In the end, what was once only considered a dream is the troupe’s reality: they have flexed their talents in a competition against cis women and this has resulted in their first coed

championship. When the Elites are announced as the competition's winners sounds of applause flood the theater while members of the second place Platinum Princesses troupe share in the audience's excitement by also congratulating the Elites. The competing J-Setters exchange hugs and pose together for pictures as the audience continues to clap in the background. The interactions between the teams onstage gives the appearance that there is no single winner, suggesting that the Elites have created a space in which participants share in on each other's victories. And further, this budding J-Sette world, this queer ethos, does not fall into the category of a "then and there" securely fastened to a future in which homophobia and transphobia are textures of a dark past. This small, yet intentional world is today.

The Elites have crafted a space in which their queerness acts as buffer from the social venom located on that other side of the everyday—the side in which half of the audience departs the theater. My point here is not to claim that the Prancing Elites enjoy a binary selection in which they get to choose what realm of the present to exist within. I am proposing that members of the Elites experience a queerness that allows them to persist through social realities that are often marred by malevolence and injustice. That is, the same queerness they are abased for also acts as a bulwark from quotidian forms of oppression. In the end it is their everyday experiences of sisterhood, leotards, embodied femininity, the particular ways they position at each other's sides, how they understand community through the dance aesthetic, and their Blackness that firmly root them in a queer collective here and now that challenges a world that sees them as illegible. This here and now is a temporality they cannot completely remake through hegemonic acts of resistance only available to those who the social order exists to serve. Instead, the Prancing Elites endure alongside a hostile present that is made manageable only through the creation of a granular world rooted in their embracing of a simultaneous queerness.

(Re)Reading Adrian and Arletha: What's the Tea?

In the opening of this chapter I introduced confounded readability as a multilayered social location inhabited by the Prancing Elites. The dance troupe *confounds* established theories of queer worldmaking because they exist at a nexus of Black southern identity as it merges with queerness. This social location means the Elites must be *read* on their own terms or we risk missing the nuance with which these subjects create their worlds. Cultural Studies scholars and queer theorists can interpret the lives of the Elites more wholly when locating the group within a larger multidimensional reality that privileges their converging identities. My reading of the Elites shows how the dancers experience their social designation (Black, queer, gender non-conforming, Southern) in ways that do not fit neatly within, and in fact troubles, established paradigms outlining queer worldmaking. In the rest of this chapter, I refocus on the specifics of confounded readability via offering an additional example, showing how nuance related to identity can reconfigure the ways everyday phenomena gets interpreted from the series.

My point here should be familiar, that is, while I read *The Prancing Elites Project* as richly coded with meaning, I grapple with the ways Blackness and its traversing social layers often confounds readability, opening up space for what I see as other easier interpretations that lack full context. Sifting through what it means to sit in varied social locations allows for more intentional readings of the series, and in this case, also helps show how Black familial relationships exist in myriad forms. Next, I unfold one of the subplots of season one, which purports to represent an apparent tension between Elites member Adrian and Arletha, who is his mother. I see this plotline as overly dramatized, which risks reifying tropes that situate Black subjects as intolerant or as always in need of liberal development.

In Essex Hemphill's famed *Brother to Brother* anthology, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer note:

> The call by gay activists to reject the heterosexist norms of the nuclear family was totally ethnocentric as it ignored the fact that Black lesbians and gay men *need* our families, which offer us support and protection from the racism we experience on the street, at school, from the police, and from the state. Our families are contradictory spaces: Sometimes we cannot afford to live without the support of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, yet we also need to challenge the homophobic attitudes we encounter in our communities. (Julien & Mercer 207)

Here Julien and Mercer's words shed light on why Black queer people have historically opted to live within larger Black communities and why Black queers tend to refuse all-or-nothing approaches when it comes to familial acceptance. Just as significantly, the scholars' gesture toward the supposed mandate within LGBTQ+ activist circles to reject hetero-normalization, particularly when those forces are attached to one's family. This often translates into disavowing those with whom you are connected because of their inability or reluctance to see and accept queerness in its fullness. Those racialized as Black are at times reluctant to sever ties with families that buffer them from white supremacy and other forms of anti-Black state violence, even if said family struggles with fully accepting and understanding one's queer/trans identities. Using Adrian's relationship with Arletha, I advance that a desire for acceptance can encapsulate more than simply a benevolent recognition of queer sexuality, and further the ways familial reluctance in embracing queer identity can be less about homophobia and have more to do with concerns for overall livelihood and survival.

The *Prancing Elites* series portrays Arletha and Adrian's relationship as strained. Evidencing this is the murky plotline carried throughout the season in which Arletha seems unsupportive of Adrian's passion for dance, inviting viewers to speculate about her reasons. Despite scant details about the interpersonal dynamics between Adrian and his mother, the energy between them gets dramatized by series producers, turning ambiguity into something like a problematic. Viewers may be compelled to ponder, is Arletha homophobic? Is she transphobic? Arletha's initial "disinterest" is hinted at when Kentrell is joined by Jerel and Adrian in his kitchen. The three Elites engage in discussion about whose parents will attend Prance to the Beat. Jerel and Adrian are visiting with Kentrell to get a glimpse of the team's new tie-dyed leotards. Adrian accidentally knocks over a bottle of dye at the very moment Kentrell's mother, Cora, enters the kitchen. The dancers try to blame Kentrell for the spill as Cora jovially insists they clean up the dye. She is concerned the orange solution may stain the countertop. Before Cora departs the kitchen, Kentrell asks his mother if she plans to attend Prance to the Beat to which she does not offer a direct answer. Rather, with what appears to be good fun, Cora sassily responds by interrogating the trio about where she will sit and if she will be considered a VIP.

In response to Cora's queries Kentrell and Jerel remark that the team should carve out preferred rows for family. Cora exits. At this point the dancers begin to ask each other about whose family will show up to their competition. Adrian responds to his two teammates pensively, expressing that he will invite his mother, Arletha, but is unsure if she will attend because she has not shown interest in their performances in the past. As the trio converses, production adds soft piano music to the background, engendering the effect that this is a touchy subject for Adrian in particular. Furthering this melancholic mood, Jerel remarks in confessional

that, “There’s absolutely nothing like a mother’s love and a mother’s support,” and further, that Arletha’s absence will emotionally crush Adrian (“Prance to the Beat” 8:10).

A byproduct of the above scene is a type of covert juxtaposition of Kentrell and Cora’s relationship with that of Adrian and Arletha’s. Cora’s presence in the scene along with her jovially inquiring about seating gives the impression that Kentrell has few issues related to whether or not his mother “shows up,” even as Cora neglects to explicitly say if she will attend the competition. In this way Cora’s frolicking with her son and his teammates is meant to suggest that she is supportive of the Prancing Elites, even as she appears to not take Kentrell’s question about her attendance seriously. Rather than answer Kentrell directly, Cora jokingly responds with her own quip about VIP seating. Toward the end of the scene, Adrian says to his two teammates, “we’re gonna see which mother is gonna come, when those seats are gonna be filled” giving the impression that the Elites in general do not always know if their mothers will attend their performances (“Prance to the Beat” 8:20). Adrian’s comment suggests that Arletha’s absences are not at all unique to the Elites. Nonetheless, the mood between Adrian and Arletha is highlighted with the suggestion that something is amiss.

When Arletha is first shown onscreen, Adrian is inquiring about her attendance at Prance to the Beat. He wants her to attend the competition. Adrian meets Arletha at Mary’s Southern Cooking, a local Mobile, Alabama establishment. Arletha enters the eatery sporting a short blond haircut, oversized silver-hoop earrings, and eyelash extensions. Adrian welcomes his mom to his table. He is donning a studded motorcycle jacket and a chain necklace composed of oversized links. From the outside looking in the two possess a daring sense of style that grabs the eye, and all surfacing awkwardness appears to be more about the presence of cameras and not a reflection of their comfort with each other. These details outlining their initial onscreen meeting are

pertinent because they suggest that neither Adrian nor Arletha seemingly places limits on each other's gender expressions. In my reading these interpersonal dynamics work to limit any speculation that Arletha is ashamed or reluctant to embrace her son because of his expressed femininity. Why, then, does she not attend the Elite's performances?

The lighthearted conversation between Adrian and his mother turns sullen when the dancer appears to become visibly upset. The troupe member expresses to his mother that he has never understood her lackadaisical support for the Elites. Adrian, searching for reasons for her apathy, in what seems like free association, exclaims that perhaps his mom does not see "guys dancing in tights" as leading to any productive career paths. He also suggests that it may be his chosen style of dance that has prompted Arletha's hesitancy, since women traditionally perform J-Sette and not men. The dancer even comments that his mother has made time to attend his brother's basketball games. Undergirding much of Adrian's ruminations seems to be a desire for his mom to see him dance, in person. In his confessional, Adrian offers, "If I could get one wish, I would want my mom to see me perform. I just want her to see what, you know, the audience and the crowd sees from me when I dance" ("Prance to the Beat" 12:28). During his plea, Adrian and Arletha shed tears. Arletha seems devastated by Adrian's grief while also expressing concern about her job, hinting to her son that asking for time-off to attend Prance to the Beat may endanger her standing at work. At the scene's conclusion, Arletha asks Adrian if her showing up will ease his anxieties. Adrian responds that her presence and support will mean a lot to him. Arletha concludes the conversation saying, "Imma come" and the two exchange smiles as they enjoy the rest of their soul-food dinner (12:44).

Arletha does not attend Prance to the Beat and no further explanation is given in the episode as to why. During the competition the camera pans over a series of empty seats as

Adrian, referring to Arletha, expresses, “of course, there’s no mom” (“Prance to the Beat” 14:52) Yet viewers remain unaware of why Arletha (his mother) is not in attendance even as the series focuses on these seats, imbuing their emptiness with meaning that may or may not be there. The camera does show, perhaps unintentionally, Adricia, who is Adrian’s sister. She is standing near the empty seats carrying a baby while cheering for the dancers. Adricia has not yet been introduced on the show as Adrian’s sister. Adrian awkwardly concludes the “Prance to the Beat” episode, verbally expressing sadness that his mom was unable to attend but expressing gratitude for his Prancing-Elites family. Interestingly, there is no mention that his sister attended the performance. Fast-forward to the end of the season and additional narrative is offered about Arletha.

To understand his mother’s behavior, Adrian is filmed visiting with Adricia to gather insight about their mother. The conversation between the siblings focuses on Adrian’s curiosity as to why their mother seems unsupportive. During their talk, Adricia rehearses her own development around her brother’s dancing, advancing, “I didn’t like it at first either, but, it’s y’all. Y’all got to be y’all” (“Keep Prancing On” 3:39). What this can evidence is that Adricia’s support and admiration for Adrian is represented as developing over time. It also leans toward this idea that maybe Adricia disliked Adrian’s dancing because it was a style of dance traditionally associated with women and therefore she came to the conclusion that “Y’all got to be y’all.” However, her initial dislike of J-Sette does not automatically equal her being homophobic or that her aversion to dance is uniquely notable, particularly among siblings who, as a matter of course, can have varied types of relationships and show support to each other in a plethora of ways.

During the conversation with his sister, Adrian explains that their mother has on occasion inquired as to why he did not pursue cosmetology or nursing—both of which are traditionally feminine vocations. This, again, is an indication that who he is as a person is not of issue to his mother, Arletha. Further, the dialogue between Adrian and his sister Adricia highlights a few things about their mother: First, if Arletha in fact does have anxieties about Adrian, they perhaps center on his livelihood and future and do not stem from a phobia about his gender performance and sexuality. In fact, we see Adrian attempting to counter what might be Arletha's concerns when during their initial dinner he expresses a desire for her to see what the audience sees when he dances. In this way, Adrian may want to challenge the narrative that his version of queerness has no depth or, one could even say, no future. I understand Adrian's move to invite his mother to the competition as his attempt to display the ways his passion for dance is more than a hobby but in fact a life's calling that can eventually be a means to self-sufficiency.

Not surprisingly, much of the producer's dramatized hoopla gets put to rest at the close of the season even while the underlying "issue" between Adrian and Arletha is never made clear. The two engage in discussion when Adrian visits his mother to announce that the team will finally march in Mobile's Mardi Gras celebration. Arletha compliments Adrian when he enters her home. She notes that he looks good and, in jest, asks Adrian to give her the jewelry he is sporting since he's taken all of hers. Adrian is wearing a matching necklace and bracelet, both of which are composed of huge diamond-like crystals. The mother and son appear to share an affinity for ornamental costume jewelry. During their conversation, Adrian tells Arletha that The Prancing Elites have been invited to participate in Mardi Gras. The team will be marching under a secret society known as the Order of Venus. Knowing that this is the team's dream, Arletha expresses interest in how this milestone has finally come to fruition. Adrian describes the

invitation process to his mother making a point to emphasize that the Order of Venus knows what the team wears and how they dance.

Adrian remarks to Arletha that their participation is a huge deal and like their meeting at Mary's Southern Cooking earlier in the season, he asks that she come out to support the team. Arletha, again focusing on her job, shrugs and makes a hand gesture then verbally indicates to her son that she wants to attend but has little control over taking time off work. Adrian quickly responds to his mother, exclaiming that she has not shown him much encouragement as a J-Setter. After hearing Adrian's comments about her dearth of support, it seems Arletha wants to be clearer about where she stands. As such, the mother brings into the conversation the one time when she "whooped" Adrian ("Keep Prancing On" 15:51). By whooped Arletha means disciplined her son using physical force. She suggests she whooped him not because of who he is (gay, feminine, dancer) but because of his irresponsible behavior: the dancer was not attending school. Arletha is likely recalling her reasoning for whooping him to be clear to Adrian that his identities have not had any bearing on her support for him. Further, Arletha seems to be communicating to Adrian that she has always respected who he is as a person and any tension between them was the result of parenting not some underlying hidden tension about his identities.

As their conversation continues Adrian begins to acknowledge Arletha's varied support for him. He recollects the hardships she endured as a single mom. Arletha tells Adrian she is proud of him and the work of The Prancing Elites. However, what should not go ignored in this moment is Arletha's economic situation, a factor of life she continues to bring up when Adrian asks her to attend events. Arletha remarks: "I don't have the type of job where if I take off I can get paid. I can't depend on nobody but myself, but hopefully I'm going to be there" ("Keep

Prancing On" 16:24). Arletha keeps central the notion that her choices are limited by her hours at work. As a non-salaried laborer, she must maintain a certain schedule to keep herself afloat.

Adrian wishes to be actively affirmed by Arletha. For the dancer, this looks like his mother showing up at his Prancing Elites events. While Arletha, being an hourly worker, is conscious of requesting time off. While I am asserting this last scene as an apparent meeting of the minds, a mutual understanding is never gestured to within the series. Yet, the episode concludes with the team hitting a milestone, as the troupe has an invited slot in a large local parade. During Mobile's Mardi Gras, Arletha is filmed standing on the sideline accompanied by another woman and two young children. Arletha and crew are jumping for joy while verbally expressing excitement to see Adrian prance through the parade route. And in this moment a quagmire that has clouded the season is apparently resolved. But what is it that has caused Arletha and Adrian's tension and is it resolved? Is their relationship at all unique?

I spent the above portion of this section outlining how Adrian and Arletha's supposed contention manifests in the show. I did this to ultimately explore how their relationship is mediated as a site of contention, potentially leading viewers to the deduction that Arletha is ashamed of Adrian. One could hypothesize that Arletha's sentiment toward Adrian is imbued with homophobia. In this way her lackadaisical support for her son's dance career becomes a manifestation of her antagonistic view of his sexuality and gender performance. This is perhaps emphasized by Adrian's observations that his mom places more value in being present during his brother's basketball games than at his J-Sette performances. But, undermining this theory is Arletha's suggestion that Adrian pursue cosmetology or nursing, two vocations that when embodied by Black men are traditionally associated with femininity and queer sexuality. These occupations, when contrasted with dance, also signify a more direct accumulation of capital or an

easier way to make money, which for Arletha translates into a better life for her son. Arletha's suggestion of traditionally feminine vocations shows that, like other parents, she attempts to coax her son into a career best suited to him (and capitalism), rather than prompting him to explore a career simply aligned with traditional masculinity (which would signify an uneasiness with his gender expression). Additionally, it brings forth this notion that Arletha is not as bothered by Adrian's queerness as much as she is concerned about the lifelong financial rewards dancing may or may not offer.

As a scholar interpreting the series, I cannot overlook that it is perhaps the same pressure forcing Arletha to choose between Adrian's dancing and his brother's basketball games that plays into how she must negotiate her hourly-wage job. That is, her Blackness, her "Southern-ness," and her working-class identity means she is constantly negotiating what choices engender a fruitful future for both her and her children. With that, what may feel to Adrian like apathy can be Arletha managing anxiety around what career paths are most economically rewarding for her children. In response to what he perceives as his mother's disinterest, Adrian's remedy is to motivate Arletha by having her experience him from the audience.

The dancer hopes that by seeing him perform his mother will, in some ways, be inspired to see a different kind of future for him, one that is queer inclusive and not so attached to commonly extoled capitalist modes of economy. But, Arletha may have a hard time seeing beyond the antagonistic present—a temporal space in which J-Sette may translate to her as unstable and offering no financial safety (which can also mean physical safety) for her son. The economic roadblocks experienced by Arletha are perhaps not unique to her, since Adrian's comments in Kentrell's kitchen suggest that each of the dancers struggle with getting their parents to performances. It may be that there is a general disinterest in dance, but it also may be

economically minoritized people struggling to support their (queer) children's dreams. And as I point out above, when Arletha talks about whooping Adrian, she might be working from a different model of "support" than the show privileges. The series focuses on parental support through showing up at the event and cheering because it makes good TV and fits into a more sentimental narrative, but Arletha is suggesting that support might be pushing him to stay in school, or might be about his economic future as she understands it.

Julien and Mercer posit how Black families are constituted by spaces where much queer negotiation transpires: Adrian yearns for a connection with his mother that seems to move beyond procedural recognitions of queer sexuality. This grappling with getting her to see his J-Sette vision does not mean he is developing her out of homophobia. While Arletha may feel she knows and affirms who her son is, according to Adrian, she struggles to see the world from his vantage point. This is not uncommon between a parent and child. Adrian sees dance as an ultimate passion while Arletha's position on dance is not so clear. This is a dilemma for Adrian. But perhaps this is not a contention for other Elites members who may feel obliged by families who express less nuanced recognitions of their queerness. By queerness I mean all that situates the dancers on the outskirts of heteronormativity, which includes J-Setting.

The emerging point here is that Arletha's divergent priorities should not and do not *automatically* relegate her to the role of homophobe or as someone needing development. What I argue is that Black parents experiencing trouble understanding the choices of their queer offspring should not be a unique drama, as evidenced via the multiple scenes in which Adrian in particular is presented musing about Arletha's support. In addition, the producers use music to foster an effect that something is melancholic. Viewers may then interpret Arletha's position as a personal affront to Adrian. But these moments do not have to be solemn. This mediated effect

risks situating Arletha as a disinterested mother and seems to have an aim of cultivating an uncomplicated narrative. Therefore, I have chosen to explore this plotline, because it is mediated representation falling risk to shallow interpretation.

The larger reality of Adrian and Arletha transcends monolithic narrativizing, yet their lived experiences are presented and perhaps consumed by viewers in ways that foster facile storytelling and understanding. I advance that this *Prancing Elites* plotline contains within it myriad possibilities, from an exploration of the ways a son yearns for his mother's validation, or, a mother grappling with queer antagonism, to what happens when poor people are forced to negotiate their priorities around low-paying jobs. A truism is that the most comprehensive take will show that Arletha and Adrian's relationship is complicated well beyond the cursory plot represented via the reality TV screen. This attempt to offer this theme nuance will inevitably leave out pieces of a puzzle that shape their reality. But it is imperative to explore dimensionality within the reading process when minoritized subjects are being represented. My concern is that the show's ambiguous framing of Adrian and Arletha risks falling into the problematic stereotypes of who and what Black families are, which is often guided by popular representations that reduce Blackness to monolithic social tropes of inherent heterosexism to always in need of queer sensitivity training.

Conclusion

The Prancing Elites Project features a group of Black, queer, gender non-conforming, Southern, dancers who create worlds by exploring and embracing their queerness—a queerness encompassing non-traditional style of dance, gender-expansive sisterhood, flamboyant garb, and their ability to transform identity as a buffer against quotidian forms of antagonism. Like other minoritized subjects, troupe members weave in and out of everyday growing pains and the hurt

associated with interpersonal relationships. But, with each dilemma the Elites invoke their chosen sisterhood and collective affinity for dance to carve out parallel "safe spaces" existing alongside the oppressive forces that continually impact their worlds. Scholars have provided thoughtful and rigorous analyses of the ways queer people experience and create culture, in addition to those theorists who have broadened critical analyses by highlighting the effects of racialization and its connections to queerness. But within these projects Black subjects will find themselves represented under theoretical rubrics that do not adequately account for the ubiquity of anti-Blackness or material realities associated with class and geography. This does not mean previous works are dispensable. It does mean that scholars must better discuss the dimensionality of race and its compounding factors. Within *The Prancing Elites Project*, I conclude that Blackness and its converging layers unearth trouble within canonical queer theory, since Blackness' status as a social designation sits outside popular conceptions of queer worlds and the ubiquity of anti-Blackness, for some, means that even future worlds will be marred by antagonism. The reality of racialization means that research involving Black worldmaking must always start from the ground up and be prepared to tackle the confounding nature of a subject's identity as it interacts with the realities of anti-Blackness, sexuality, gender, and geography.

CHAPTER 2: ENTREPRENEURIAL SUBJECTHOOD: *EMPIRE'S* JAMAL LYON AND WHAT WE CAN MEAN WHEN WE SAY NEOLIBERAL

On February 21st, 2019, Eddie Johnson, Chicago's then Police Chief, along with a multitude of city law enforcement officials, held a press briefing to address the ongoing saga involving the alleged hate crime committed against Jussie Smollett, a prominent Black gay actor.[12] In the emotional and somewhat bizarre briefing, the chief commented:

> Chicago hosts one of the largest Pride Parades in the world. We're proud of that as a police department and also as a city. We do not nor will we ever tolerate hate in our city, whether that hate is based on an individual's sexual orientation, race, or anything else. I'm offended by what's happened and I'm also angry. I love the city of Chicago and the Chicago Police Department, warts and all, but this publicity stunt was a scar that Chicago didn't earn and certainly didn't deserve. To make things worse, the accusations within this phony attack received national attention for weeks; celebrities, news commentators, and even presidential candidates weighed in on something that was choreographed by an actor. First, Smollett attempted to gain attention by sending a false letter that relied on racial, homophobic, and political language. When that didn't work, Smollett paid $3500 to stage this attack and drag Chicago's reputation through the mud in the process. And why? This stunt was orchestrated by Smollett because he was dissatisfied with his salary, so he concocted a story about being attacked. (NBC News)

Chief Johnson's admonishments to Smollett, who is a leading actor on Fox's television series, *Empire*, seemed to stray well beyond his role as head of Chicago law enforcement. Johnson is clearly perturbed by the alleged misconduct committed by Smollett. The official is also uneasy

[12] In December 2021, Jussie Smollett was convicted by a Chicago jury of falsely reporting a hate crime (Chappell & Romo). While a judicial decision has been rendered many still believe Smollet was indeed attacked in 2019. As of the writing of this dissertation the actor has not been sentenced.

about the consequences he forecasts for Chicago as a result of the celebrity's misdeeds, revealing what is at stake for the modern-multicultural metropolis when "undeserved" national attention threatens to call into question not your city's Black murder rate, for example, but your queer-friendly index. Will this nationalized anti-gay hate crime act as a stain on Chicago's brand?

Meanwhile, officials give little public consideration to the violence committed against Black trans women in Chicago proper, and perhaps this ineptitude is what Johnson calls his department's "warts." In line with that, the relationship between Black communities and police remains fraught at best.[13] Yet while myriad atrocities involving Black Chicagoans fails to engender outcries from senior law enforcement officials, the former chief manages to direct his public ire solely at the Smollett incident. Johnson's behavior is peculiar here because he attempts to blast the actor for misrepresentation of facts. But while the official theorizes Smollett's attack as largely orchestrated for personal financial gain, the chief can, similarly, be accused of manufacturing outrage to burnish Chicago's queer name. And like his accusations against Smollett, Chief Johnson's strategic posturing is also rooted in the kind of neoliberal economics that sees reputation as coterminous with the bottom line. In this way, both Johnson and Smollett are working from two sides of a "brand value" coin: the actor's brand is himself while the chief's is the police department and Chicago itself.

I indulge Johnson's seeming hypocrisy to begin naming the multilayered ways neoliberalism operates within the quotidian, particularly as scholars have ruminated about the demise of the socioeconomic phenomenon for over a decade now. We tend to interpret neoliberalism through limited framings outlining the phenomenon as purely and obviously

[13] In Logo's NewNowNext entertainment news, Kate Sosin reports on the growing frustration among Chicago's LGBTQ+ communities. Concerned Chicagoans are incensed by the number of unsolved trans murders as compared to the feverish attention given to the Jussie Smollett incident.

problematic or flagrant, resulting in a dearth of consideration given to readings locating the condition outside of a kind of spectacularism.[14] In interpreting neoliberalism beyond its most egregious parts, I pick up from the provocation notably advanced by Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong, that neoliberalism is less a totalizing force and more of a contradictory and unstable one (Ferguson & Hong).

The real-life Chicago incident also foreshadows what is at the heart of this chapter, which is a combination of the cultural residue of neoliberal economics and Jamal Lyon, the Black and gay singer who is played by performer Jussie Smollett on Fox's television series *Empire*. Rather than a grand argument about an all-encompassing neoliberalism, I look at the ways the series perhaps unintentionally plays with the socioeconomic conditions. I parse out how ideas related to self-sufficiency, authenticity, autonomy, and competition surface in smaller, oftentimes racialized, ways in the life of Jamal Lyon. My goal is not to recreate another argument about neoliberalism's ubiquity, but to theorize how Jamal manages to navigate his world under its conditions. This kind of reparative reading allows for an analysis of Jamal that is generative, one that moves beyond simply interpreting the series for what it does (or does not do) with the character's race or sexuality. This chapter partly asks a different question: what might we learn about neoliberalism when we explore its local and cultural manifestations as represented within a hit television series in which a leading character is Black, gay, and the product of substantial wealth?

In this chapter I use neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology as parallel terms, arguing that the phenomena surface in uncanny ways. Neoliberalism does not always appear as a particular

[14] My language here is not meant to suggest that previous research about neoliberalism has missed a mark. Here, I build on previous research by thinking not about neoliberalism's most obvious parts but in how the condition exists within representations of everyday Black queerness.

travesty that ends the "social," nor does it necessarily adhere to a commonly argued trajectory of being uniquely tied to monetary capital. And finally, within the series, neoliberal ideology is guised as what is required for artistic self-actualization. Seldom does research about the cultural emergence of neoliberalism focus on representations of Black gay men or spotlight the condition outside of a specific emphasis on mass privatization. Moving in a different direction, I explore how neoliberalism is represented within a family unit in which notions of Black authenticity get linked to economic resources, access, and musical success. What becomes clear via this chapter is that while scholars feel compelled to theorize a post-neoliberal world, the phenomenon's everyday life remains viable through pervasive ideologies, and to the point of this study, neoliberalism can be made recognizable by close reading the *Empire* series. Through interpreting what I am calling neoliberalism's depictions on *Empire*, perhaps scholars can extrapolate from this research to better identify the condition's intricacies within everyday worlds offscreen.

Within my analysis, I make two overarching claims: I first advance that on *Empire* neoliberalism is presented as familial relationships that are co-constituted simultaneously by love and transaction. Specifically, Jamal Lyon experiences kinships that are benevolent and transactional, especially with his parents Cookie and Lucious Lyon. The desired outcome of these familial ties, particularly for Jamal's parents, is that he brands himself as either Cookie's Black and gay prodigy or Lucious's masculine and heterosexual R&B clone, or risk familial and musical irrelevance. A question that arises from Jamal's familial bonds is: How can his sexuality (both gay and "straight") be used as a tool for not just monetary capital but also as a vice for his parents to prove their recording-industry acumen, which is really about their competition with each other.

I then explore the series arc in which Jamal defiantly choses to relinquish the resources provided by his music-mogul father. Here, I suggest that when Jamal retreats into inner-city Brooklyn, a move that coincides with his breakout hit song "Keep Your Money," neoliberalism surfaces via a kind of "non-profit" logic in which the singer garners cultural capital as a result of his proximity to poverty, even as he never materially understands the plight of those who are impoverished. Here I am referring to actual non-profit organizations, which often receive social benefits from being proximate to the issues they exist to confront, regardless of their effectiveness as an organization. Within this new yet less-than-lavish world the questions I ponder consider how Jamal seizes upon this urban environment to brand himself as a credible and authentic Black artist—the thing Lucious's homophobia tells him he is not. In connecting my first two propositions, I conclude by suggesting that Jamal's nascent cultural capital finally allows him and Lucious to develop a more substantial bond, ultimately presenting neoliberalism as a meaningful father/son connection predicated on the men being in perpetual competition.

Neoliberalism in the Literature

As previously noted, Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong advance that neoliberalism is marked by contradiction and insecurity. For instance, the pair suggests "neoliberalism's relationship to sexuality as one characterized by the accumulation of various racial projects, an accumulation that produces the political and economic conditions for inciting and regulating racialized gender and sexual formations" (1057). Ferguson and Hong support their claim by offering a literature survey of neoliberalism, employing Ferguson's own monograph, *The Re-Order of Things,* to highlight, for example, how universities rally around, finance, and advocate for a post-civil rights framing of "minority culture" (1058). The latter results in the assimilation

of previously "degraded forms of subjectivity" through, notably, the establishment of legitimating spaces like university Offices of LGBTQ+ Student Life/Services (1058).

Yet, according to Ferguson, these "inclusive" measures are not demonstrations of majoritarian culture folding, "but of its redeployment" (Ferguson 1058). In this way, offices of Multicultural Affairs, LGBTQ+ Student Life, and Latina/o/x Student Services, to name a few, "did not usher in a season of unbridled liberation but provided the building blocks for a new way to regulate" (Ferguson, *Reorder* 111). What is more, regulation of certain identities, bodies, and experiences comes with the "death and devaluation" of other subjectivities, or what sociologist Orlando Patterson might call their orchestrated "social death" (Ferguson & Hong 1057). These "formations of violence and social death… disproportionately impact devalued communities minoritized by race, class, gender, and sexuality" (1058). At the same time, Ferguson and Hong suggest, queer of color critique and women of color feminisms provide source material to produce "sites of possibility from which alternatives to neoliberal incorporation can be articulated" (1061). Because neoliberalism facilitates legibility on one hand and curates social death on the other the condition both produces subjects and dispels others, producing contradictory and destabilizing social forces within the realm of culture.

In branding the idea of homonormativity as the mainstream's neoliberal deployment of sexuality, Lisa Duggan notes, "neoliberalism is often presented not as a particular set of interests and political interventions but as a kind of nonpolitics" (178).[15] This nonpolitics symbolizes a "third way," an imaginary center found somewhere between "the moral conservatism of the Right and the perceived multiculturalism and 'civil rights agenda' of the progressive Left"

[15] I use "mainstream" to name those who represent the "highly visible and influential center-libertarian-conservative-classical liberal formation in gay politics," which Duggan argues is positioned against the more radical "in your face" queers promoting more expansive and inclusive definitions of democracy (Duggan 177).

(Duggan 179). Yet Duggan unearths the ways homonormative ideology gets largely deployed as a benevolent counter to the egalitarian spirit of civil rights (voting, healthcare, just laws) as its proponents champion "access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the 'free' market, and patriotism" above all else (179). Positioning homonormativity as a mollifying, yet conservative center is thus far from nonpolitical. Despite approaching the issue from differing vantage points, Duggan, Ferguson, and Hong, interpret neoliberalism exactly as I deploy the term in this chapter: as a multilayered and heterogeneous concept injecting "economic logics [into] every sector of culture, such that all value becomes reducible to economic value" (Ferguson & Hong 1057). In this way, Chief Johnson's accusations against Smollett represent a manifestation of these logics in action. Johnson accuses the actor of staging a crime to increase his name recognition while concurrently the official seemingly choreographs outrage to reconfirm Chicago's status as a gay-friendly enclave. Though their actions might read as incongruous, both the accused actor and former chief are working from the idea that reputation is ultimately monetary.

Neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology are ubiquitous terms. In addition, these economic phenomena appear to have so many connotations that they have no central meaning at all. This is partly because the word neoliberalism serves as academic catchall for naming the deleterious effects of capitalism and the mass privatization of all aspects of our contemporary social world. In this way, both impoverished South Asians participating in marketplaces to sell their body organs for economic survival and now separated megastars Kim and Kanye West opting to hire private firefighters (a service available to the mega rich) to protect their home from California wildfires are all understood to be features of neoliberalism (Madrigal). In the latter half of the 20th century neoliberal economics arose as the (forced) successor to the Keynesian welfare state. Organized within the Chicago School, neoliberalism bourgeoned through its seductive

philosophical underpinning encouraging governments to be less concerned with social safety and instead focus on unfettering economic markets. Deregulation stimulated competition through prompting the "transfer of wealth and decision making from public, more-or-less accountable decision-making bodies to individual or corporate unaccountable hands" (Duggan 178). Since neoliberalism is constituted by an idea that "many ostensibly public services and functions be placed in private profit-making hands," like education, urban water management, and housing, competition and privatization are theorized to induce markets to attend to many of the social services previously understood to be the province of the Keynesian welfare state (178).

Because of its promise to be both private but also attentive to public good, neoliberalism is not a hands-off project. The framework contains patches of regulation, even as these government-enforced measures tend to mirror pro-capitalist proclivities. The free market being prompted to tackle non-economic issues might be what Wendy Brown argues is the "neo" in neoliberalism (38). According to Brown, classical liberalism, birth parent to "hands off" economic theories, ascribes naturalness to markets and to the rationality of economic behavior. The notion that markets will organically "do what they do" gets troubled within the neoliberal frame as, "far from flourishing when left alone, the economy must be directed, buttressed, and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms…" (W. Brown 41). In this way neoliberalism is guided both by its philosophical attachment to free markets and via its historical predecessor, the Keynesian welfare model. Neoliberalism surfaces as an alleged "best of both worlds," offering both unfettered competition and a "responsibility" for the public good.

Within practice the neoliberal model serves to regulate and direct markets on behalf of capitalism's benefit and not the good of a public. Government intervention is welcomed to both

stimulate competition when markets decline, jeopardizing profit, or to provide welfare to more affluent and Right-leaning citizens who reside within conservative voting blocs (Duggan 178). A contemporary illustration of this discussion is the Trump administration encouraging congress to offer bailouts and tax incentives to farmers hurt by the former president's arbitrary trade wars while they simultaneously admonish Puerto Ricans for an "incapacity" to bounce back after the devastation of Hurricane Maria. This, in addition to U.S. Southern municipalities and states attempting to "solve" their unemployment woes by dangling tax credits in front of film production studios as enticement to move beyond the demarcated walls of Hollywood. These locales offer media corporations tax incentives while also pushing union-busting legislation, ultimately disrupting collective efforts to secure and maintain employment.

Being less interested in governing for social safety and more invested in creating pro-market conditions means that individuals on the ground necessarily become their own discrete advocates and interface with their social worlds in the same spirit of competition championed among governing bodies. That is, if ensuring social safety is only a byproduct of government and not one of its primary features, then the responsibility falls to individual citizens to directly address social concerns. Recent moves to dismantle public housing and instead offer rent vouchers for people experiencing poverty to negotiate directly with private landlords, emblemizes this government retrenchment. State actors often seize upon the "you-take-care-of-yourself" model, even making self-autonomy coterminous with individual liberty, a feature often promulgated as the bedrock of the United States experiment. By linking tenets of neoliberalism with the origins of the country, state officials aid in situating the economic framework as both appropriate and organic to U.S. culture (Gane 6).

The notion that individual subjects are private entities whose survival is based upon their ability to "compete" rather than "live in accordance with community" has blossomed within the neoliberal (re)order and gets alluded to in a series of influential lectures delivered by Michel Foucault called *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Nicholas Gane analyzes these talks and offers that Foucault believed neoliberal economics work to shift "attention to the capacity of individuals to allocate scarce means in order to make concrete choices between different outcomes or ends" (6). Foucault rehearsed a model that "redefines economics so that it is focused on the 'internal rationality of…. human behavior' and on the analysis of individual activities rather than broader social and economic processes" (6). Foucault's contentions animate Wendy Brown's idea that "neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education polices to practices of empire" (39). That is, neoliberalism is not just an abstract governing idea but also a disciplining that prompts and rewards subjects who world-make in accordance with its economic principles.

Foucault recalibrates the political economist's term homo economicus (economic man) to call attention to how social life has devolved into the orbit of economic principle. And, more specifically, how subjects, namely Americans, "are expected to maximize our economic potential as we enact a market-based freedom" (Walker 91). According to Foucault, subjects are now entrepreneurs of themselves and "best left to their own devices, meaning, state support in the form of welfare is no longer necessary" (Gane 7). In this way there is little need for collective good as subjects "fend" for themselves, negotiating as individuals in their interactions with workplaces, healthcare providers, places of residence, governments, and even their families. The not-so-obvious flip side of this "autonomy" mandate is that subjects get mapped as backwards or socially inept when they fail to break through structural barriers in achieving the self-

actualization of which neoliberalism purportedly makes room. Within the neoliberal imaginary anything is attainable through "self-care," hard work, and self-advocacy.

Moving away from the idea that neoliberalism is some genuine expression of a U.S. American ethos, Wendy Brown contends, "neoliberalism is a constructivist project: it does not presume the ontological givenness of a thoroughgoing economic rationality for all domains of society but rather takes as its task the development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such rationality" (40). If we take seriously Brown's claim that neoliberalism is a top-down socioeconomic project of capitalist indoctrination, we can also see the framework as exacerbating racialization. Scholars who integrate studies of economics with the collective realities of racialized people have long interrogated the ways neoliberal capitalism promotes social inequality along racial lines. For the purposes of this overview I will mention two. According to Melamed, one such way that neoliberalism creates racialized subjects is via "the racial-economic schema [that] continues to associate white bodies and national populations with wealth and nonwhite bodies and populations with want, naturalizing a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South" (14). Melamed advances that the contemporary version of this logic "breaks with an older racism's reliance on phenotype" to now employ social realities like geography, culture, religious beliefs, and health to "produce lesser personhoods" (14).

Though not historically unique, neoliberal ideology seizes upon a diverse set of social realities to privilege and make normal one group's accumulation of resources over the next, for example, by perpetuating ideas about who "works" hard and how certain types of work should be rewarded. Another way neoliberalism intensifies racial inequality is through coopting both U.S. civil rights and gay rights rhetoric for the purposes of constructing a private, self-autonomous,

and depoliticized citizenry. This contention lays the groundwork for Duggan's concept of homonormativity and for Ferguson & Hong's argument locating "neoliberalism as the current stage of racial capital[ism]" (Ferguson & Hong 1057). In both instances social gains resulting from the toil of 20th century social justice movements like privacy, freedom to choose, and liberty are repurposed to spread a compliant and market-friendly discourse benefiting a mostly white gay mainstream desiring fuller access to heteronormativity by way of market participation. At this same time Blacks who lack economic freedoms because of social barriers like racism and classism are unable to participate in market economies and get cast as cultural failures (Ferguson & Hong). In this way, the rhetoric used to symbolize freedom from various strands of U.S. injustices, whether around race or sexuality, is coopted by privileged sexual minorities and has one effect of re-marginalizing those who experience racial injustice.

Neoliberalism and the Black Queer Subject

Scholars who study the Black queer experience within neoliberal capitalism have often revealed themes illuminating how these subjects (Black queer people) form new kinds of agency and resistance. Spotlighting Black gay men, Rinaldo Walcott evokes similar sentiments to Duggan, Foucault, Hong, and Ferguson suggesting "that since the new queer citizenship is fundamentally based upon class, consumption, and whiteness, queers of color are forced or pushed into finding other ways of engaging their 'queer citizenship'" (239). The scholar advances that Black gay men can be "complicit in the production of queerness, in its representative forms as whiteness" (239). Using Toronto's largely white queer scene, Walcott reveals how Black men function as arbiters of taste in queer economies of pleasure, like bars, parties, and nightclubs. Evidencing his claim, Walcott highlights the popular Torontonian publication titled *Fab* in which Black queer men pen columns instructing the city's primarily

white gay constituency about where to seek fun and what wardrobes to don. Here, Walcott shows how instrumental Black men are in shaping local queer economies even while they are made symbolically invisible by a larger neoliberal order tethering gay sexuality to consumption and whiteness.

Kemi Adeyemi also offers an adroit reading about how neoliberal logics bear upon the racialized queer subject, theorizing that Black women practice a right to slowness to navigate the gentrifying city. The performance studies scholar draws upon Slo 'Mo: Slow Jams for Homos (and their fans), a dance party featuring mid-tempo songs once hosted in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood and frequented by Black women. Adeyemi asserts:

> As the social choreographies of gentrification continue to be shaped by multinational investments, making it seemingly impossible for private citizens to intervene via economic capital to stake out space for themselves, black women's practices of slowness may very well (re)organize the registers of intelligibility within the neoliberal city, underscoring how important haptic and affective capital are to asserting ones rights therein. (553)

Borrowing from geographer David Harvey, Adeyemi views "rights as more than issues of urban social and economic justice, but necessarily encompassing the question of desire" (547). For the scholar, "black queer women's engagements with the physical and sonic contours of slowness articulate vernacular theorizations of rights in and to neighborhoods and cities where the rapid movement of people and capital is virtually compulsory" (547). Like many organized Black queer gatherings in urban centers, Slo 'Mo happens during a single night of the week and is hosted at a predominately white bar and struggles in the face of gentrification.

Amid Logan Square's inevitable turn to mass privatization by those with means, Adeyemi shows how Black queer women draw upon and perform slow tempos as a buffer from the gravity of neoliberalism in what amounts to their right to the city. Here, Black queer women claim rights not through traditional capital accumulation but by challenging neoliberalism's imperative for speed and efficiency. Both Adeyemi and Walcott discuss how Black queers create and draw upon pockets of agency in the face of neoliberal orders that rely on processes of racial exclusion. And like the goal of this chapter, each scholar also highlights the intricacies of neoliberalism through a kind of examination of scale, that is, what more might we learn about the condition and its manifestations by focusing on how it operates on local levels. I turn now to a study more closely tied to media studies, here I explore one essay that reads *Empire* as a purveyor of neoliberal ideology.

The *Empire* Series

From mid-twentieth century economic rationale to hegemonic cultural ideology, neoliberalism has had a defining role in the development of contemporary television (Meyers 2019). The late Stuart Hall argues that media reflects the states preferred sociocultural views (Hall, "Thatcherism"). As such, Western contemporary television programs emanating neoliberal bias is par for the course. Whether through personal responsibility edicts delivered via daytime court TV, makeover programming encouraging non-stop personal transformation, or dramas themed around self-reliance, the cultural residue of the state's market rationale thematically informs what airs and also the fictive worlds portrayed within the series we watch. With that, the connection between neoliberalism and a program aptly titled *Empire*, which chronicles a Black family-run multimillion-dollar music label, is apropos for thinking through the cultural implications of modern-day economics. Premiering in January of 2015 on the Fox network, the

Empire series has been the subject of a modest amount of academic treatments, of which even fewer analyses have tackled questions related to neoliberalism.

In one essay that does touch on *Empire's* relationship to neoliberalism, Cheryl Thompson argues that media works as a form of governmentality, a term often used by Foucault to elaborate "the process through which individuals shape and guide their own conduct –and that of others – with certain aims and objectives in mind" (Thompson 181). If as scholars have argued, citizens are prompted to perform life in accordance with neoliberal economic principles, Thompson's ultimate intervention is to assert from where and how might subjects learn such principles. Here the scholar nuances *Empire's* season-two story arc concerning Jamal Lyon's Pepsi endorsement, which originates when the singer wins a competition sponsored by the soft drink. Thompson contends that ideas about neoliberal market rationality often stem from sources "beyond formal institutions of official government" and as such proceeds to show how these ideas can emanate from series like *Empire* (181). Thompson advances that the body of academic work discussing how television seduces viewers into behavioral and ideological patterns based on a collective neoliberal reality has too often focused on reality TV. In line with her assessments, the scholar argues that theorists must now consider this a cultural moment in which questions regarding the connections between neoliberalism and scripted programs must also be investigated.

In her essay, Thompson reveals that within the world of *Empire* "neoliberal notions of hard work, success, and individual achievement intersect with controlling images of Blackness (all men are heterosexual and masculine), to obscure the interlocking oppressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia" (177). Additionally, the scholar is in part critical of the romantic notion that a (Black) subject's hard work already surmounts structural inequity. According to Thompson, *Empire's* achievement/hard work theme is apparent when the series integrates the

corporate-backed Pepsi storyline, which doubles as a real-life endorsement of the drink. That is, at the same time *Empire* goes corporate, Thompson contends the series frames sexuality as a choice when Jamal kisses guest star, Sky Summers played by Alicia Keys, and he is awarded an American Sound Award. The scholar concludes that, "while the audience is asked to celebrate Jamal's triumph in the Pepsi competition, homophobia and racism are rendered invisible and inconsequential to his success as a Black gay man in America" (Thompson 188). While I heed Thompson's cue that neoliberalism must also be considered within the realm of scripted drama (and not just reality TV), we differ in that my goal is less about exposing where viewing publics learn neoliberal logics and more about unearthing the phenomenon's ability to hide within plain sight on screen.

Jamal Lyon and neoliberal ideology are the phenomena this chapter takes up for study. My discussion of Lyon is not an attempt to unearth hidden plots within which viewers are taught to understand themselves as economic subjects—even as that kind of excavating is useful. Rather, I seek to investigate and perhaps reveal the ways neoliberalism shapes and shifts Jamal's world, which is my attempt at further situating neoliberalism within the contemporary moment. Previous research about neoliberalism tends to focus on the egregiousness of late capitalism or the spectacular ways privatization and competition has forced subjects to develop new modes of existing. I seek to provide additional references for neoliberalism's cultural implications, specifically as it relates to scripted media. I am less concerned with composing a study rehearsing that which we already know, which is that culture has taken an "economic turn." This shift has been well documented, studied, and largely deduced as problematic. By examining the unexpected (and not so unexpected) ways market rationale, branding logics, and self-sufficiency gets interwoven into Jamal Lyon's world I hope to point out (1) local instances of

neoliberalism's everyday life, (2) how love and transaction is conjoined within a Black family unit, and lastly (3) the ways neoliberalism situates urbanity and poverty as branding tools for Black authenticity. What is more, within research on neoliberalism, Blackness is often undertheorized while straightness is often over assumed.

Arguably, Jamal gets partly represented as all things antithetical to what theorists contend is neoliberal: he seeks Black community, opposes wealth and celebrity, and places value on a subject's character rather than their ability to benefit him. Yet my reading of the series asserts that these elements coexist alongside the two contentions I propose, which is that Jamal siphons cultural capital from his proximity to poverty and the singer's familial relationships are built dually on love and transaction. In the coming section I review how each of the main characters on the series is introduced. This elaboration helps set the tone for how Jamal's familial relationships are composed of binary elements that are often thought of as opposite of each other, but the series suggests in fact are overlapping.

The Lyons

When Jamal Lyon is first shown on screen viewers are encouraged to see him as a contemplative, dedicated, and talented musician. The singer is presented as a man who is of the Lyon namesake yet not the typical Lyon. *Empire's* season one opens onboard the record company's yacht. In a series of short scenes each of the Lyon men are introduced. They are Lucious Lyon, founder and head of the record company and his three children: Andre Lyon, the oldest son and the company's Chief Financial Officer (CFO); Jamal Lyon, the wayward and talented middle child who is the focus of this chapter; and Hakeem Lyon, the youngest son who is an aspiring rapper. Lucious is below deck with Anika Gibbons, his significant other. Gibbons is current head of A&R for Empire Records. Lucious and Anika are hosting a recording session

with real-life singer, Veronika Bozeman, who plays one of their emerging artists on the series. Veronika sings a song titled, “What is Love.” As she sings, Lucious looks on pensively. The episode uses Lucious’s contemplation to cut to a narrative flashback in which the patriarch is having his blood pressure analyzed in a patient cubicle at a medical facility. The medical practitioners, along with Lucious, appear concerned as they glimpse at a CAT scan of his brain. Something is amiss. Later it is revealed that Lucious has been hiding a recent amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) diagnosis.

When the narrative flashback at the medical facility concludes and the series focus returns to the yacht, Lucious prompts Veronika to be rawer with her vocals. He walks into the recording booth and encourages the singer to use the moment she learned her brother was shot as fodder for intensifying her delivery. Appearing uncomfortable with his request, Veronika stares at Lucious, but eventually proceeds to belt out the chords with ferocity. Lucious is pleased. The scene switches to the yacht’s main deck while Bozeman’s vocals fade into an up-tempo hip-hop beat. Now visible is a crowded and energetic soiree happening above deck where myriad people are dancing. Sitting amid the crowd is Hakeem, the youngest brother. Hakeem is being fed shrimp by two women. In the next cutaway, Jamal is alone at a piano concentrating on mixing the beat that now plays prominently in the background. It is odd that so much is happening onboard, yet Jamal is alone focusing on crafting music. As Jamal turns his attention from the grand piano to the electronic synthesizer at his side, Hakeem enters the room from a balcony above. Hakeem, hearing the music Jamal is mixing (which also serves as the music entertaining the guests on deck) descends the curved staircase moving toward his brother with a kind of hip-hop swagger. Hakeem is inspired by Jamal’s work. In a bit of a surprise Jamal turns and sees

Hakeem approaching. The two appear to psychically connect, and begin performing the song, “Live in the Moment”.

As Jamal and Hakeem sing and rap together in the yacht’s grand room Andre, the eldest son, and the company CFO, looks down at the duo from above. His presence is unknown to his brothers. Andre, along with his wife, Rhonda Lyon, watches from the balcony assessing Jamal and Hakeem. Rhonda comments that Jamal and Hakeem are “showing off again” (“Pilot” 4:00). While Andre, in agreement with his wife, replies “that’s what they do, babe” (4:03). Andre continues by expressing surprise that Hakeem is performing, particularly since Lucious is not around to watch. Here Andre is hinting that Hakeem is a showoff when in front of Lucious, their father.

These opening moments provide much insight into not only Jamal, but the cadre of Lyon men. Each is introduced partaking in those activities that will seemingly characterize their personality for the season. Lucious stands firmly in the studio insisting his artist sings harder and stronger to awaken a song’s full potential. Lucious is a man who gets what he wants and judging by his treatment of the singer, his ends always justify his means. He is the executive and “knower-in-chief” possessing the “special sauce” for music success. Andre stands with his wife perched above Hakeem and Jamal privately discussing the two men, he appears to be both a schemer and a keeper of secrets. The words Andre utters about his brothers seem to be imbued with jealousy. Unlike his brothers who sing and rap, Andre has no musical talent. But he does possess an Ivy League education. Hakeem, first seen with the two women, and later rapping, emblemizes the quintessential millennial, having his cake, eating it, and showing not a care in the world while doing it. Jamal is clearly adept at playing music and singing. The idea that instruments singularly accompany him while his brothers and father are introduced during social

interactions with others, suggests that Jamal may be a loner as well as someone dedicated to his craft.

The next time we see the Lyon men they are all together in Lucious's dining room. The patriarch has called his sons into a family meeting to relay that he and Andre have been preparing to turn Empire Records into a publicly traded company. Andre, the eldest brother, enters the room and attempts to antagonize Jamal by asking, "how's that friend of yours?" ("Pilot" 6:49). Though the audience is unaware, Andre is talking about Michael, Jamal's live-in partner who has yet to be introduced within the series. Unbothered by Andre's microaggression and still looking down at his phone Jamal replies by asking Andre why he flaked on their dinner plans some nights ago. Andre remarks that he got busy. Jamal looks disapprovingly at Andre as Lucious enters the room. In addition to going public, Lucious announces to his sons that he has decided to groom one of them to serve as Empire Records' next CEO. While Hakeem and Andre are attentive to Lucious, Jamal offers a quip, comparing his father to King Lear. Lucious calls Jamal a smartass. Jamal's retort to his father coupled with what appears to be his failed attempt to have camaraderie with Andre gestures to the ways Jamal gets positioned as both within and outside of the family and in some ways above the competitive fray that seems to stick to the Lyon men.

Lucious's calls to appoint a successor are both about Empire going public and his recent ALS diagnosis. Lucious eventually informs his sons that part of what it means to go public is to ensure Empire Records has a legacy plan, and quite frankly, he feels that none of them are prepared to become the company's next leader. In other words, Lucious is both admonishing his sons for their ill preparedness but also announcing that they are now each other's rivals for his role as CEO. In this instance, Lucious is both expressing a fatherly disappointment with his

children but also tapping into a desire to have his offspring see their family as a kind of business opportunity since they are all vying for the same role at the company. Andre, already being head of finance, is taken aback by this new news and bewildered that his brothers would be given the opportunity to rise to CEO. Andre believes it is only him who possesses the appropriate business acumen to be the company's next leader. Yet despite Andre's perplexity, Lucious puts all his sons in play for CEO and whether purposefully or not starts a covert war amongst the trio.

Cookie Lyon is the family matriarch. Her presence is gestured to shortly after Lucious announces his plans to take Empire Records public. Cookie is introduced during the processing of her release from prison. The Lyon family matriarch has spent the last seventeen years in prison due to drug crimes she committed in concert with Lucious, prior to the success of Empire Records. Cookie and Lucious were school-aged sweethearts and grew in love together on the streets of Philadelphia. Even as youngsters Cookie is said to have always recognized Lucious's musical genius and Lucious has always revered Cookie's ability to recognize great talent and music. Before Empire Records and while their three sons were small children, Lucious and Cookie sold drugs and lived a life blanketed by poverty, violence, and fast money. In fact, Lucious poured these harsh realities into his music and as a result is accepted as a paragon of rap authenticity within the series. Out of Lucious and Cookie's humble beginnings Empire Records was born and now thrives. The duo is presented as an almost classic "rags to riches" story. I use "almost" because the riches have largely gone to Lucious and the couple's three sons while Cookie served her time in prison. The presented backstory is that Cookie's $400,000 in drug money helped start Empire, yet prison has kept her at a distance from her spoils. With that, it is no surprise Lucious is anxious when he hears of Cookie's release. The two have not seen each other outside of Lucious's inconsistent prison visits and since the success of the record company.

Transactional Love by Cookie Lyon

One way to unearth neoliberalism within Jamal Lyon's world is to consider his familial and social relationships, particularly with his parents. Jamal's connections to his family mirrors more traditional understandings of love while also being imbued with a kind of transactional nature that mimics economic rationale. Here I want to suggest that within Jamal's familial milieu love itself becomes conditioned around economic exchange while not necessarily being reduced to it. Jamal's connections to his parents can be described as both loving and transactional and therefore a kind of kinship that is simultaneously sentimental and opportunistic. Ultimately, Cookie expresses a desire to see Jamal fully blossomed as a Black gay man, but she also views Jamal's openness about his sexuality as a tool to get back at Lucious for the years of neglect while she was in prison. Here, Cookie seems to only legitimize Jamal's gayness if it is in some ways disruptive to Lucious. Cookie's goal is to have Jamal brand himself as a Lucious-like musical genius who is also gay. Further, while she views her desires for Jamal to "self-actualize" as what is best for him in a world steeped in (Lucious's) homophobia, she also interprets his transformation as what will ultimately secure her the record company. In this way, neoliberalism is a new kind of familial love-transaction, and not simply in a historical sense in which parents rear offspring as a way to, for instance, upkeep a family farm. Cookie is contradictory, seeing Jamal's sexuality as a fact to be celebrated, yet only wanting him recognized when his gayness yields a particular kind of monetary or cultural gain for her.

Cookie's first visit with Jamal post her release from prison is illustrative of the familial bond I describe above. To contextualize the mother and son connection, the episode flashes back to Jamal as a young boy meeting with Cookie during her prison stint. This flashback is interwoven throughout the scene in which Cookie visits Jamal upon her release in the present

day. In the flashback, Lucious accompanies Jamal to the facility yet only sends the young boy into the visitation room with Cookie. Lucious instructs his son, “Go in there and tell your mama I love her and don’t come back here crying” (“Pilot” 11:30). Jamal enters the visitation room where he and Cookie converse through a thick glass pane that separates the prisoners and visitors.

During the visit Cookie grows sentimental when responding to Jamal’s admission that he is bullied by his peers. Young Jamal recounts a story in which a boy named Bashir stole his lunch. He then explains to his mother that he is hesitant to involve his father because Lucious may force him to fight Bashir. Cookie tries to console Jamal by advising him that he is “different” and because of that difference life will inevitably be difficult (“Pilot” 12:20). Cookie’s advice is meant to symbolize her understanding that young Jamal is gay. She goes further, sternly telling Jamal “I got you” (“Pilot” 12:28). Here it seems apparent that even as she is serving a prison sentence, Cookie sees herself as both a champion to and a protector of her son. She knows his sexuality and desires for Jamal to see her as his support. Yet even as the past sentiment between Jamal and Cookie seems authentic, her choosing to visit him first, upon her release from prison in the present, is less about their bond and more about the beginning of a scheme she is implementing for access to Empire Records. Below I illustrate Cookie and Jamal’s first interaction when she is released. I start first by detailing the conversation ensuing between Jamal and his partner Michael just before Cookie unexpectedly pays a visit.

Prior to Cookie’s arrival at his loft, Jamal and Michael are discussing whether Jamal would be interested in being considered for Empire’s next CEO. Jamal reveals to Michael about Lucious, “He’d never pick me anyway…There’s way too much homophobia in the black community” (“Pilot” 10:30). Michael counters by pointing toward the acceptance of gay football

players. Jamal shrugs him off. Michael then asks the singer what he wants since he is reluctant to tour or release an album. In answering Michael, Jamal calls out Lucious for being too concerned with material things. “Look at my dad. That’s a real artist. Well he was. Now he is more concerned with selling t-shirts and watches and whatever” (10:57). Jamal seemingly indicates that Lucious has lost his musical touch because of his desire to brand and sell paraphernalia. Also, in this moment, Jamal racializes homophobia, expressing there’s “way too much” among Blacks. Jamal’s comment raises the question, what Black people is he discussing? Is he simply mapping his father’s queer antagonism on to all Black people? Since Michael appears to be of color but not African American, Jamal may be highlighting differences in their two communities. But this line also comes across as didactic since it’s an essentializing claim that is put out there with no complication offered as if this fact is common knowledge for some. Jamal’s internalized struggle with equating Blackness with homophobia comes up again later in the chapter. The singer also reveals his hesitancy to partake in the culture of the music business arguing that it somehow waters down artistry. This too becomes a theme in this chapter as I think about the cultural capital that makes an artist “real” within the series. Michael ends the conversation initiating a kiss with Jamal. During their kiss the phone rings. It is Cookie calling to tell Jamal “let me in!” (“Pilot” 11:20). Surprised, Jamal and Michael become frantic. When Jamal peers out of his window he sees his mother waiting downstairs. The two men race around the apartment attempting to straighten up and prepare for Cookie who is on her way up.

Once Cookie enters, she and Jamal embrace lovingly. This is their first time seeing each other outside of a prison setting in almost two decades. When Cookie notices Michael, who she has never met, she seems excited that Jamal is partnered. Unfortunately, in her comments, she misgenders Michael while also calling him a “little Mexican” (“Pilot” 13:36). Cookie tells Jamal

he is a messy "queen" due to his apartment's disorganization (13:14). Her continuous quips give us a sense of her campy, lighthearted, yet raw attitude. Cookie is a woman who says what is on her mind. She lacks political correctness perhaps due to her upbringing or having been in jail for the past seventeen years. It should be noted that just before Cookie arrives Jamal opines to Michael that Blacks are homophobic when discussing if his father would appoint him CEO. This suggests that Cookie's arrival might serve as a challenge to this notion particularly since she is featured in the narrative flashback as the parent who accepts Jamal's sexuality. And, while her remarks within the scene can be interpreted as distasteful, the matriarch is painted as possessing a melodramatic antagonism toward homosexuality that can be read as maybe homophobic but maybe not since she appears to be a dramatic character generally. Cookie is complicated. Yet, even as Jamal's mother saturates the scene with wisecracks and benevolent insults, she seems distracted, as if something other than her immediate present is on her mind. While offering his mother a home-cooked meal, Jamal questions Cookie about her release, inquiring as to why she neglected to contact him to chaperone her from prison. Anxious about all that has transpired and what may be next Jamal asks his mother "What are you gonna do now?" (13:56). Cookie's one-line response is framed as the climax and end of the scene; she responds, "I'm here to get what's mine" (14:00). And this I argue is what seems to be plaguing Cookie. She wants her share of Empire Records.

Cookie has historically been affirming of Jamal's sexuality. However, Cookie's current support seems contingent upon how much Jamal's queerness can increase her net gain, while at the same time she expresses a belief that her son should be self-actualized. During a narrative flashback of a time before the family became wealthy, young Jamal models Cookie's oversized shoes and headscarf during a gathering his parents are hosting. Lucious is mortified when he sees

his young son awkwardly saunter into the living room dressed in his mother's garb. The guests seem equally concerned but not at Jamal's playing dress up; they seem to sense Lucious's rage. And indeed, Lucious reacts violently. He grabs Jamal and brings him into the backyard where he proceeds to forcefully stuff his son into a metal garbage can. Lucious then places the lid on the can. Cookie runs after her husband screaming for him not to hurt Jamal. Once outside, she removes her son from the garbage while crying frantically, kicking at Lucious in reaction to his violence. Cookie rescues Jamal from his father's wrath, holding him tight as she carries him back into their home. Cookie's desire to protect her son is framed as genuine and instinctual. However, their contemporaneous relationship and the dynamics around it unfold in such a way that because Cookie has seemingly validated Jamal's sexuality and gender expression as a young kid, she somehow has a right to both him and his potential celebrity as an adult. In particular, she behaves as if his status as a budding singer and songwriter, the part of him that is profitable, belongs to her evidencing the idea that their relationship becomes both about love and transaction.

Cookie's initial visit with Lucious after her prison sentence happens at Empire's Manhattan headquarters. Cookie, standing alone in Lucious's office at the top of a New York City skyscraper, appears aghast at how things have changed. The series treats this moment in two ways, Cookie is simultaneously taken aback by the sheer wealth her family has accumulated but also upset she has not been part of it. When Cookie and Lucious finally interact they spar over what role she will play at Empire. Cookie wants ownership of half of the company, contending that it was her money that provided the backing to create the label. Lucious rebuffs her wishes arguing that he owns only ten percent of the label and must report to a board of directors. Unmoved by excuses, Cookie demands her fair share of the company to which Lucious responds

offering his ex-wife close to a three-million-dollar a year salary. Cookie is not appeased and when she leaves their meeting much is still unresolved. The next time the ex-couple interfaces, Cookie interrupts an Empire Records board meeting. This intervention is part of a hatched plan concocted by Cookie and her eldest son, Andre. The two seek to proposition Lucious for control of Jamal's career. Andre supports this plan because he believes Lucious will ultimately offer the CEO seat to Jamal because of his talent and potential for celebrity, something Lucious envisions in the next chief officer. Andre feels that once the company is under Jamal's purview, he can effectively undermine his brother and steer the corporation under his control. But, when Lucious refuses to "give Jamal" to Cookie as part of her post-prison consolation she threatens him, advancing that she will expose the company as being inaugurated with her drug money, the 400,000 for which she went to prison. If Cookie reveals the record company's origins, it will imperil Lucious's plan to go public.

At the end of this meeting Cookie walks to the grand piano sitting prominently in the corner of Lucious's grandiose office. In the room is Cookie, Lucious, and Vernon an old family friend who is now an executive at Empire. As she plays several notes on the keyboard her and Lucious continue to squabble:

Cookie: I've been living like a dog for seventeen years and now I want what's mine.

Lucious: And you would sink this whole empire over that?

Cookie: Give me Jamal.

Long pause.

Lucious: You got him.

Cookie nonchalantly walks toward the office's exit.

Cookie: It's nice to see you again Vernon

Vernon: Good to see you Cookie.

Lucious: I never wanted him anyway. (Talking about Jamal)

Cookie: I know.

Cookie exits. ("Pilot" 29:30)

Cookie's final retort "I know," refers not simply to Lucious's reluctance to guide Jamal's career, but to his negligence to embrace and fully affirm his gay son. The CEO refuses to accept Jamal and as evidence of this literally stuffs his son into a garbage can when he dons Cookie's high-heel shoes as a young boy. In this way, Cookie's "I know" shows her insight and knowledge of Lucious's years of antagonism. "I know" contextualizes the narrative flashbacks, Jamal's status as a loner, and Lucious's current treatment of Jamal. Lucious's comment about not wanting Jamal is also noteworthy because he at first refuses to allow Cookie to manage their middle son, yet now when threatened Lucious claims he never wanted the singer. This scene reveals that Lucious's original reluctance in releasing Jamal to his mother was about his intertwining of kinship and transaction. Lucious rejects (gay) Jamal, but clings to the success that his son's musical acumen may bring and perhaps even feels threatened by his son's talents and therefore wants to hold Jamal under his tutelage.

Cookie is conscious of Lucious's historical disdain and is also aware that his homophobia has deeply impacted their son. In addition, she knows that Lucious's resentment toward Jamal's sexuality is also his weakness, which means she can leverage Jamal's potential music success to ultimately get back at her ex-husband for neglecting her in prison. She can further use Jamal's projected success as a gay artist to position herself as affirming and Lucious as "out of touch." So, while Cookie is the narrative hero as it relates to the perceived acceptance of Jamal, she also sees her gay son as an opportunity she is owed, hence her remarking to Lucious, "I want what's

mine" during their conversation about Jamal's career. In this way, while Cookie outwardly performs a dutiful allyship she contemporaneously sees Jamal as a means to an end. Her actions dampen any moral accolades she could be given for taking a stance to buffer her son from Lucious's queer antagonism. What this suggests is that the series declines to turn Cookie into an easy ally in which to cheer, but instead, raises questions about what might motivate allyship, and in this instance it appears that while Cookie seemingly loves Jamal she simultaneously sees him as an opportunity.

Even if Cookie's new role managing Jamal is interpreted as a move toward inclusion, there are instances when the matriarch displays her own "Lucious-like" (that is overt) antagonism toward her son. For example, Cookie attends Jamal's live show when he headlines a small NYC venue. The song he performs responds to his contentious relationship with Lucious. His lyrics express a desire to be seen, "I just want you to look at me/ and see that I can be worth your love/ I just want you to look at me/ and see that I can be/good enough, good enough" ("Pilot" 30:56). During the performance the episode strings together several of the narrative flashbacks featured already in the episode. This is meant to help intuit what is motivating Jamal's lyrics. As the singer belts out heartfelt words, Cookie looks at the stage in awe of her son. She is mesmerized by his singing and stage presence. And judging by the conversation that ensues post Jamal's performance; Cookie also sees dollar signs.

> Cookie: You got it Mal. You got it all. Now we just have to show the world.
>
> Jamal: I mean I am showing people. I showed a whole room tonight.
>
> Cookie: You shouldn't be selling donuts and cookies with your music. You should be selling out stadiums. And you will. ("Pilot" 32:49)

During the exchange the episode cuts to Michael and Becky, who is Lucious's assistant. Like Cookie the two are also in the audience watching Jamal. During her chat with Michael, Becky expresses hesitancy about Cookie's motives. She asks Michael "What do you know about her?" and Michael replies, "I think she's real and genuine." "She just got out of Jail" Becky replies 33:06). Here we see that Becky is suspicious of the pace with which Cookie has reappeared in Jamal's life. When the scene cuts back Cookie and Jamal continue their dialogue:

> Jamal: I just want to play. All that touring and albums, it messes up the purity of the sound.
>
> Cookie: Yea, you're so pure only a couple hundred white kids in Brooklyn and San Francisco even know your stuff. Mal, you got to share what God gave you with the world.
>
> Jamal: Ma, I'm not that guy. But I love you.
>
> Cookie: Yeah, I love you too. Go on over there with your friends. (33:12)

As Cookie watches Jamal walk toward Michael and Becky, she utters to herself "stupid sissy" 33:42). Cookie is annoyed and while she hears and is even moved by Jamal's song regarding his fractured relationship with Lucious, she immediately thinks of how to capitalize on Jamal's talents. Cookie is not necessarily concerned with just money but with Jamal being a known brand, someone who can sell out stadiums and is recognized as a true talent beyond the few hundred (inauthentic) white kids who see him at local venues in Brooklyn.

Cookie calling Jamal a pejorative in response to his wish to remain "pure," which in many ways can be read as his desire not to turn into his father, highlights a tension she experiences in her relationship with her son. Cookie feels that what will best allow Jamal to rise above the sometimes-harsh realities of being a Black gay man is to develop impenetrable and

vast celebrity. Celebrity is a panacea for all ills. I argue that this is also part of what marks their relationship as both loving and transactional. That is, even as Cookie knows she is steering her son along a trajectory ultimately beneficial to her, she also sees this path as a win for him—if only he would submit to her wishes. This win would allow Jamal to be self-sufficient and less reliant on his homophobic father, Lucious, for resources.

In Cookie's estimation Jamal's attainment of celebrity is retribution to his dad who she, and Jamal, see as a representation of the harsh anti-gay world that exists all around. In this way, Jamal trumping his father's hostility means he can survive and perhaps thrive in a world of homophobes. Cookie's love for her queer son revolves around her teaching him how to be an entrepreneur of himself—which according to Cookie benefits both him and her. At this same time, Cookie espouses a homophobia that marks her as no better for Jamal than Lucious, since she believes Jamal's desires to remain outside the orb of the music industry mark him as a "stupid sissy." Not only does Cookie deploy a gay epithet to admonish Jamal, she also minimizes his relationship with Michael when she instructs her son to "Go on over there with your friends" (33:39). His friend is Michael, his partner. Despite the two professing their love for one another at the scene's conclusion, much of this interaction goes sour because Jamal refuses to take his mother's advice about branding himself. This is to say that Cookie's love for Jamal seems wrapped up in a vision of him as her well-known celebrity son.

Later, Jamal in fact does decide to work under his mother's professional tutelage, but it is only after he learns Lucious is actively minimizing his contributions on a song they both penned for Hakeem, Jamal's younger brother who is a rapper. Jamal's decision however is less about a desire to work with Cookie and more about how he can strategically teach Lucious to respect him. Consider how it unfolds. Originally, Hakeem and Lucious partnered on a song, but Hakeem

felt something in the score was missing. The father and son quarreled in the studio as the budding rapper failed to "flow" to the rhythm of the music laid out by Lucious.

Jamal later hears the material his father and brother have been disputing over. Jamal offers changes to the melody to better align to what he knows about Hakeem's style. Hakeem happily heeds his brother's suggestions and expresses that the song now suits him. When Lucious hears Hakeem perform Jamal's version of the song he singularly lauds Hakeem as "beautiful" a "genius" and as possessing an inner musical "monster" ("Pilot" 38:45). Hakeem reveals to his dad that Jamal's advice is what made the song special. But, Lucious refuses to praise Jamal equally and in fact gives Jamal a blank stare through the music-studio glass. Jamal responds with uneasiness to his father's stare, deploying his own nonplussed gaze. As a rejoinder to his father's slight, Jamal is next seen visiting Cookie's apartment. He is there to act on his mother's offer to manage him. Cookie is apathetic about seeing Jamal since, in their last interaction at the small music venue, he refused to sign on to her vision of him selling out stadiums. Cookie answers the door exclaiming, "What you want?" (38:55). When Jamal mentions that he is on board with her plan, her indifference shifts. Cookie's (and to a lesser extent Andre's) plan will finally be set in motion:

> Jamal: You win. I'm doing this for you, but I wanna do it as me.
>
> Cookie: I love it. Not only is Lucious's son a genius, but he's a gay, too. Yea, we'll make the gay angle all about Lucious not accepting you and the talent all about you. That'll drive Lucious crazy.
>
> Jamal: Imma come out. (40:00)

Here Cookie and Jamal highlight sexuality as a means of social capital and capitalist accumulation. Jamal will only sell out stadiums if he can do it as a gay man (his response to

Lucious) and Cookie will only affirm Jamal as a gay man if he sells out stadiums (her response to Lucious). In this way the series partly deploys Jamal's sexuality to address contentions with a homophobic Lucious. And while *Empire* is not overtly scripted to highlight these strategic maneuvers around sexuality, within the world of the series homophobia eventually engenders a divided music industry in which some laud Jamal's desires to be out while others see him as antithetical to Blackness. Further, Jamal eventually cuts ties with Lucious because of his father's queer antagonism.

Transactional Love by Lucious Lyon

While Cookie sees Jamal's sexuality as coterminous with amassing wealth, Lucious views Jamal's queerness as the company's (read as his own) worst nightmare. The CEO reluctantly prefers the more homonormative iteration of gay identity, which is found within Lisa Duggan's articulation of neoliberal sexuality, that is: perform your gender according to norms, live your life in private, while participating in consumer markets as much as you want. For Lucious, when you are not heterosexual, sexuality is something done and kept in private, not only because it is "unnatural" but also because it may hurt sales. Therefore, the patriarch has, in exchange for Jamal's "closetedness," (conditionally) sponsored his son's lavish, yet private, life (huge loft, money, access to Empire's resources). Lucious extends his wealth to both create and contain Jamal. He creates Jamal in the sense that access to Empire's resources will supposedly keep his son a closeted gay man and all who are around Lucious can read Jamal as, for example, "not having found the right woman yet."

The patriarch's riches have sustained Jamal's lifestyle while also wedding him to a particular type of normativity. Jamal's sexuality is tolerated so long as one cannot read him as gay or hear him say it. When Jamal begins to ponder coming out publicly, he risks putting his

relationship with his father (and all that his father represents) in jeopardy. Yet, even as Lucious embraces a more homonormative sexuality for his son, in which Jamal's queerness is stomached so long as it's appropriately private, he still deems gay sexuality as foreign to any of his offspring and therefore his namesake. Unlike Cookie, Lucious's manifestation of neoliberal ideology envisions homosexuality as the condition that keeps Jamal from self-actualizing. That is, the sky's the limit for Jamal so long as he does not "choose" homosexuality. Through Lucious, Jamal, and Cookie the series emphasizes the conflicting nature of neoliberalism since, on one hand neoliberal ideology says to express yourself/brand yourself and you will get rich and be happy, but on the other hand the phenomena insists we cover ourselves to hide that which is not marketable or preventing us from being fully accepted. For Lucious, queerness is the coercive force that will ultimately stifle Jamal's chances of musical success. Along these lines, the CEO believes his antagonism toward queerness will ultimately save his son and build wealth for the family record company further calcifying their relationship as loving and transactional.

In outlining how neoliberalism emanates from the series *Rupaul's Drag U*, LeMaster discusses the writing of Nikolas Rose whose work focuses on neoliberalism and governance. Rose contends that under neoliberal governance "freedom [is] imagined as the absence of coercion and domination; it [is] a condition in which the essential subjective will of an individual, a group or a people could express itself and was not silenced…or enslaved by an alien power" (1). Rose's quote speaks to the possibility of nuance in Lucious's understanding of both sexuality and freedom, since the rap mogul appears to flip back and forth between Jamal being born gay versus his son's sexuality having an on/off switch.

According to Lucious, Jamal's sexuality is the thing that binds him, particularly as a Black man who is the son of the Lucious Lyon. Gay sexuality is alien. It is a foreign condition

one can detach from and hence Jamal can choose alternatively. In Lucious's ideal world his relationship with Jamal would be perfect if only his son would dig deep and find his inner "straight" man. Evidencing Lucious's more traditional and overt homophobia (as opposed to Cookie's covert yet campy antagonism) is the first scene in which Jamal and his father alone directly interface. Lucious calls Jamal to his office. The CEO starts their meeting saying "Look 'Mal this is the last time imma have this talk with you. Your sexuality, that's a choice son. You can choose to sleep with women if you want. I'm saying this to help you because I know eventually, you're gonna release another album" ("Pilot" 22:28). Jamal responds to his father, exclaiming "I get it, because a sissy can't sell records to the black community, I get it" (22:50). In this way, Lucious connects Jamal's musical success to his sexuality and more specifically to the idea that sleeping with women will increase his popularity. Jamal's response about being unpopular among Blacks further evidences the ways the series treats homophobia as a uniquely Black condition, particularly since in the prior scene Cookie names Jamal's current fanbase as mostly white kids from Brooklyn.

The transactional nature of Jamal and Lucious's relationship becomes further apparent when Lucious insists he is simply trying to help Jamal via encouraging him to choose to sleep with women. Jamal pleads with his father to "get to know me" ("Pilot" 23:07). Like many minoritized subjects Jamal understands Lucious's responses to his sexuality as predicated on stereotypes and misconceptions and therefore wants to form an intimate bond with his father to counteract his learned antagonism. Yet Lucious is uninterested in simply "spending time," contending to his son that he should release another album if he wants to strengthen their bond. Frustrated by his father's lack of understanding, Jamal expresses passionately a verbal desire for Lucious to see their relationship outside of a business lens, to which Lucious chastises Jamal's

tone and not the concern he is announcing. In Lucious's estimation, Jamal's longing to spend time together seems unnecessary. The CEO insists to his son, "I know you better than you know you" (23:00). Lucious and Jamal's interaction revives not only choice rhetoric, in which gay people are seen as having wrongly chosen a "sexual preference" and can therefore be made right by choosing otherwise, but it also brings forth this notion that bonding between men is only appropriate when there is a business end. Still, it should not be concluded that Lucious wishes complete ill on his son but that the CEO has been conditioned to see relationships as only worthy when they produce, or are in the service of engendering commodifiable products—products the CEO sees as beneficial to him and therefore to Jamal. The patriarchy Lucious espouses rests on the notion that as father, his words should always be heeded, because he knows what is best for business, which translates to knowing what is best for his family.

Lucious's paternalism rears its head when Cookie hires a publicist to stage and broadcast Jamal's "coming out." When news of the press conference arrives through Andre, Lucious resorts to shaming and threatening Jamal to force him to reconsider his public "outing." In his Bentley limousine Lucious again chastises Jamal, "I don't know how many times I can keep having the same conversation with you" ("The Outspoken King" 28:35). Lucious uses the death of Cookie's cousin Bunkie, who helped raise Jamal and his brothers while their mother served time, as the reason his son should remain closeted. Lucious suggests that coming out would be disrespectful to Bunkie's memory. This, even as Lucious is the person who secretly kills Bunkie. Nonetheless, Jamal rejects his father's attempt at shaming, telling him that Bunkie had no qualms about his sexuality. The CEO is afraid that if Jamal comes out it will turn off the financiers who are supporting him in taking Empire Records public. Lucious warns Jamal that coming out will hurt business by prompting artists to leave the label. When Jamal tells his father that "the world

does not revolve around you" Lucious responds to his son by saying "your world does. I pay for everything…come out and you're on your own. I'm done" (29:00). In a subsequent scene, Cookie and Michael stand at the steps of Empire's headquarters, where Jamal has failed to show for his press conference. It appears he is shaken by his father's words.

After the failed publicity stunt, members of the Lyon family convene for the opening of Lucious's nightclub called Leviticus, an obvious anti-gay biblical reference. When Jamal sees his mother Cookie, he attempts to salve her ill feelings. Cookie is upset because Jamal neglected to show for the press conference she arranged. He tells his mother that the staged coming out did not feel right. Cookie leans toward Jamal and exclaims, "In this business son, you're going to have to do all sorts of things you don't want to do. There's a price you got to pay to hit big and soon that bill is gonna come" ("The Outspoken King" 36:00). Cookie's words are a premonition. She is warning her son that much of what he sees around him is rehearsed and that one must understand success as performative. This is also her way of trying to bring Jamal down from what can be read as his deep self-righteousness. After Cookie's brief harangue, Jamal reaches for her arm, but she pulls away. Jamal then heads to check on Hakeem who is backstage. Hakeem is scheduled to perform for the club's opening. Notwithstanding both Lucious and Cookie's goal of using Hakeem and Jamal for their own self-interest, once backstage Jamal lifts Hakeem's confidence when he tells his brother that he is more talented then Kid FoFo, the other rapper who was scheduled to accompany Hakeem onstage. In a previous scene FoFo is kicked out of Empire Records after he harasses Cookie on an elevator in front of Lucious.

Hakeem and Jamal's relationship has not yet come to the dueling nature of their parents. Hakeem even tells his brother "I'd play better if you was up there with me, for real" ("The Outspoken King" 37:50). Hakeem and Jamal do perform together and dedicate their song to the

memory of Bunkie. The track is titled, “No Apologies.” Cookie is electrified when she sees and hears Jamal singing with Hakeem, while Lucious is perturbed since he wishes to blackball Jamal until he agrees to keep his sexuality out of the public sphere. Jamal belts the hook, “I do what I want and say what I want with no apologies/ Excuse me if I’m blunt I say what I want with no apologies/ And they won’t shut me up/Hell naw. Hell naw” (38:43). Jamal’s rhetoric is illuminating and even as Cookie is seen reacting to her sons’ spontaneous collaboration in a joyous way, Jamal’s words are just as much of a message to her as they are to Lucious. Jamal’s sentiment signals a desire to be free as the singer negotiates his potential stardom with the reality of his truth. Will Jamal say what he wants and be who he is, unapologetically?

Jamal’s developing sense of freedom comes to bear in the episode “The Devil Quotes Scripture.” The singer deploys the entrepreneurial expertise he learns from his parents to challenge the monolithic visions in which they each want him to fit, Cookie wants Jamal to be branded as out and proud, so long as the out part is negotiated around financial terms and upstages Lucious. Lucious wants Jamal to remain publicly straight, since he fears gay sexuality will dampen Jamal’s celebrity and the company’s profits. Jamal interrogates Cookie’s decision to hire a songwriter for his upcoming album. In a somewhat heated exchange the singer announces, “Ma, I write my own stuff, period” (“The Devil Quotes Scripture” 9:30). Cookie’s propping up of her son as a paragon of music has backfired resulting in Jamal thinking he can do it all on his own. With that, Cookie finds herself backtracking to help Jamal see that every artist employs assistance. During the exchange Jamal challenges Cookie for her constant juxtaposing of his career with that of Hakeem’s. Since Cookie sees Lucious, who is managing Hakeem, as her competition she feels Jamal should see Hakeem in this same way. While Jamal and Hakeem

eventually succumb to the socialized pressures of rivalry, up until this point the brothers have managed to reject Cookie and Lucious's tainted influence.

There is a turning point within the series when a song penned years ago for Lucious winds up in Jamal's hands. Cookie secures the music from a former love interest named Puma. Jamal performs Puma's song "Up All Night" for the family when Lucious convenes the group for dinner to celebrate Hakeem's new romantic coupling with another Empire artist. When the Lyons hear Jamal perform his rearranged version of the ballad, they all applaud. Lucious reacts first with nostalgia then becomes condescending toward Jamal.

> Lucious: That song. I had never really liked it until I heard your version. I mean, now I think John Legend would kill that song on his new album.
>
> Cookie: Lucious!
>
> Lucious: I own the song. I bought it from Puma but I never saw its true potential until this moment right here. I think son you've got a great career as an arranger.
>
> Jamal: Sighs
>
> Cookie: What has this money done to you? ("The Devil Quotes Scripture" 34:30)

The exchange devolves into a full-on dispute when Jamal comments: "You can keep the song man. I didn't want the song anyway, right?" (35:10). He looks toward Cookie for approval. Jamal argues further "She [Cookie] told me back in the day that you couldn't make the song work. I mean how does it feel that your little girl could do something that you couldn't? You're washed up. And the songs that I'm writing will only further prove that I'm you but on steroids" (35:30). Jamal calls out to Michael to signal they are leaving. As they exit Hakeem asks his brother to stay. "No. No. No. Let him go. This night is to celebrate a man and a woman, not some sensitive punk and his bitch," Lucious interjects (35:40). Lucious's "shadiness" is deployed

to suggest that John Legend is the performer Jamal is not and that Jamal could not possibly be the one who ultimately sings the song, even as he arranged it. Jamal in a bit of reclaiming, calls himself "a little girl" to remove the power out of his father's epithets, which often serve to feminize him.

The tragedy of the neoliberal logic undergirding Jamal and Lucious's pairing is that Jamal seems reluctant to view their relationship for what it is: business until he is proven to be a straight singer. Jamal continuously extends himself to his father, wishing for Lucious to understand him beyond sexuality and music. Yet Lucious seems only interested in fathering someone who performs his passed down version of ideal masculinity, which he connects to success in the music industry. Jamal continually finds himself dismayed by his father's unresponsiveness to more traditional bonding.

No Longer for Sale

In the moment meant to signal the end of Jamal placating his father's homophobia, the series invites the audience into Jamal's loft after the debacle regarding Puma's song. Michael tells Jamal to let the incident go. In the spirit of a bourgeoning capitalist, Jamal remarks, "the more I play it, the more I want to win" ("The Devil Quotes Scripture" 39:27). Jamal is referring to the overall sentiment of competition undergirding relationships within the Lyon family. He is slowly becoming a player. Lucious shows up at the loft surprising Jamal and Michael. Lucious tells his son "I wanted to see you" (40:36). Jamal reacts explaining to his dad "You saw me tonight. I sang a song for you. I arranged that song for you because I love you and you spit in my face" (40:40). Lucious attempts to make his harsh response about providing "tough love" insisting "I tried to tell you since you were a baby that it's not about black eyes or bloody noses in this world. It's life or death and if you don't toughen up these streets will eat your ass alive"

(40:53). Lucious's sentiment continues to conflate Jamal as a gay man with weakness and an unpreparedness for the world, a world Lucious believes Jamal has not seen. Jamal remains unmoved by Lucious's patriarchal metaphors exclaiming to his father that the tough love he endured, including the beatings as a young child, were the products of his father's hate toward his sexuality, not love.

Lucious tells his son "I don't hate you. I don't know you. I didn't bring any women into this world, and to see my son become somebody's bitch. I don't understand you" ("The Devil Quotes Scripture" 41:20). Lucious's harsh words seem to conflict with his earlier sentiments, since he once told his son, I know you better than you know yourself. Jamal, who is almost in tears, reacts to his father by mimicking the same hyper-patriarchy he is receiving, "You don't have to understand me… I'm a man. A man. So you can keep that stupid ass song, your money, and whatever it is that Lucious Lyon thinks that he owns. My obedience is no longer for sale" (41:30). Jamal comes to a self-realization that he must disavow his father and the riches he brings, including his luxury apartment.

Jamal flings the keys to his loft at Lucious and tells Michael they are leaving. Once outside the loft Jamal and Michael stand just off the curb with packed duffle bags. They attempt to hail a taxi. Michael asks, "You sure you want to give everything up?" Jamal replies, "I'm not giving anything up. I'm going after his empire. Imma take it" ("The Devil Quotes Scripture" 43:05). The singer appears to represent an idealized version of capitalist ideology, figuring he could take something economically via competition, through sheer force or will or the desire to work hard for it, and believing he can do so with zero capital behind him. Here, what surfaces is a neoliberal ideology in which Jamal, with basically no assets, assumes he can deploy grievance and strategy to secure and direct a corporation at his whim.

Jamal's declaration about taking Empire concludes the episode and is commonly understood to be what Robert LaRue argues is "Jamal's shift toward darkness" (103). LaRue points out that this is the first moment in which Jamal expresses a direct interest in Empire Records. Jamal's capitalist aim to take Empire may liken him to Lucious but there is a difference between the singer's sudden desire for control (using what sounds like nefarious means) and Lucious's neoliberal ideology, which is the CEO making economic decisions based off of some supposed good they will bring to his family, and Jamal specifically.

Cultural Capital or Keep Your Money

The notion that Jamal experiences a turn toward darkness that will morph him into the same antagonist Lucious is presented as gets narratively hinted at in the series and is asserted by some scholars, but such a turn does not fully come to pass. In fact, Jamal's more assertive and directed priorities, represented by his nascent mission to now take his father's empire, expose a bourgeoning ideology unlike Lucious's and more like a nonprofit neoliberal politics. A politics in which proximity to urban poverty yields the cultural capital needed to be regarded as authentic, especially in the world of Hip-Hop and R&B music. The end of what some call Jamal's innocence, which is his being docile in the face of Lucious's homophobia, is actually the beginning of a hybridized neoliberal ideology that arises from the singer's disdain for his father's wealth and his quest to be more "of the (Black) people." Particularly since Jamal comprehends Lucious's homophobia as also a critique of his own embodied Black gayness, evidenced by Jamal reading antagonism of his sexuality as always about him not being able to connect to Black music consumers. As I explore in this section, this is a politics that conflates inner city living, traditional masculinity, and Jamal's now endless quest to go at it alone with artistic

success. Neoliberalism emerges as a legitimizing force in which Jamal uses his time away from money to brand himself as authentically Black.

While Jamal now eschews everything that reminds him of Lucious's monetary influence, particularly after their fight in his loft, the singer ends up representing a different kind of power dynamic when he temporarily moves to inner-city Brooklyn to protest his father's riches. This develops into a situation in which the series gives Jamal a kind of insider status within this new community based on his Blackness and not through a robust understanding of poverty and urban life. Jamal's urban status transforms him into a true/authentic artist since the music he begins to create is rooted and inspired by the Black poor communities of which he is now temporarily a part and not the other world of access and riches where he is from.

Jamal and Michael's new Brooklyn apartment is dark, dank, and as Cookie points out during her initial visit "This place ain't half as bad as where we lived in Philly. But me and your daddy, still made some number one hits in there, we sure did, shooting rats in between takes and all" ("False Imposition" 14:30). The apartment's shabby interior is graced by giant portraits that are not hung up yet but placed against the walls—of prominence is a large painting of Nina Simone resting behind the couch. After experiencing her son's new meager place of residence, Cookie whips out and offers Jamal a wad of money to "fix the place up" since as she exclaims "y'all divas like to decorate" (14:19). Jamal reacts, saying to his mother, "please get that out of my face, that's Lucious's money" (14:21). Jamal's rejection of Cookie's help, even when Lucious is not present to witness, signals the character's newfound intentions to ward off any sponsorship stemming from his father's wealth. During her visit Cookie announces that she needs new music from Jamal and has no time for a "mental artsy block brain fart," which supposedly has been the side effect of the singer giving up his former life and now doing

everything on his own, including all aspects of his music (15:09). Part of what is being gestured to in this scene is that Jamal's new status as outsider in his family rests on his channeling the gritty geographic roots he and Empire Records were born out of—highlighting that Jamal's move to the inner city is, or will soon, immerse him in a kind of authenticity that Lucious's wealth blocked him from. Therefore, he refuses Cookie's cash offering as "Lucious's money." This move away from Empire's resources will enhance his creativity and in turn make his sexuality more palatable. And similarly, Jamal's new neighborhood will help strip away the layers of wealth, exposing to both the singer and the world, his authentic sound, which has been lying and waiting to be liberated.

When Hakeem makes his way to Jamal's new abode, he abruptly squashes a cockroach with his shoe, signaling the extent of Jamal's devolving riches to rags story. Jamal and Hakeem banter about the apartment's loose pipes which, as heard in the background, let out a continuous rattle. Jamal tells Hakeem in jest to listen closely to the sounds emitted by the neighbors "I can't tell whether he's fighting her or banging her," he says ("False Imposition" 33:50). Hakeem chuckles and while listening to the amalgam of noise in the distance he offers a glimpse of what is to come, remarking to Jamal, "Yo, you should make a song out of that" (34:03). Later in the episode Jamal does employ the "sounds" of the inner city as the crux of his next music single "Keep your Money". Alone and peering through his apartment window, Jamal listens to those same noises he and Hakeem remarked on earlier. "Yo give me my money" is heard in the background along with other distant chattering (34:59). Jamal exits his apartment into a dimly lit alleyway. He is donning a skullcap, sweatpants, and a zippered hoodie that he flips up onto his head as he walks. Jamal struts and hums, piecing together an incoherent music track in his head.

The scene is reminiscent of the 1980s Michael Jackson style music-video era, the mood is a bit dystopian, it's dark, and Jamal appears newly fearless as he walks through the alley.

The singer walks intentionally. He is focused as he passes by a sex worker who is discussing a transaction with a potential client. As he moves a group of people playing a game of dice are seen in the background—while a car alarm and ambulance siren blare in the distance. Visually, Jamal is no longer in the comforts of the New York glamor of which he (and the viewer) is accustomed. Nor does he have the privilege of the multi-track studio he is used to recording in. But, even as Jamal is out of place, he is right where he needs to be, evidenced by his banging on a green garbage dumpster, which serves as inspiration for the tune he murmurs. Jamal is intrigued by the sounds of (poor) urbanity. The singer grabs a chain from a non-secured fence and rattles it melodically, furthering the rhythm he began on the dumpster. The singer then lifts a glass bottle from the ground and aggressively flings it at a concrete wall, as it breaks he kicks over an empty garbage bin belting out "It's time to be a man now" ("False Imposition" 35:50). The scene concludes with the camera focusing on what appears to be a pensive Jamal. Jamal's time in the alley stirs his creativity. The neighborhood's ethos has apparently freed him from the "brain fart" Cookie chastised him about earlier.

It is no accident that Jamal is moved to pen the song "Keep your Money" at the same time he navigates and vandalizes the dark alley behind his new apartment. Jamal's time in the "streets" is meant to give him and by extension his talent/songs the kind of cultural capital of which, as the (gay) son of a millionaire, he knows very little. Cultural capital within this section is both similar to and different from what Pierre Bourdieu articulated as "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed." (Bourdieu and Passeron 488). This is because it is not just what a privileged Jamal brings into

Brooklyn as the product of substantial wealth, but also what the series allows him to draw from his new surroundings. A fed-up, privileged, Black, and gay Jamal melds into the Black urban poor with such sophistication that he is apparently now one in the same. And now the music Jamal creates is rooted in the same urban squalor from which Lucious grew his rap career and Empire Records. Cultural capital, in this sense, represents how Jamal's experiences in Brooklyn foster his transformation into a credible and authentic Black artist.

Jamal is presented as a type of survivor and none of those homophobic epithets Lucious spews degrading his masculinity can stick, now. Just look at how he flung the bottle against the wall and drummed up a song using the artifacts of the poor working-class neighborhood in which he now resides. What is more authentic and rawer than this? The singer's crash course in the politics of the 'hood is enough to instantiate his emerging artistic wokeness, which is a combination of his now tapped-into hyper-masculinity, raw talent, and his self-motivated work ethic demonstrated when he sings "Work hard and play even harder. Gotta save up all my nickels and quarters. Can't ask you for a handout. It's time to be a man now" ("Dangerous Bonds" 18:05). Jamal has come to and through his rite of passage and is indeed making it on his own, as a man.

Jamal is amassing a kind of capital not tied to the generational wealth bestowed via Lucious, but a currency enlivened by his new affiliation with urban Black culture—a cultural accumulation meant to mark him as authentic and "in the know" even as an outsider temporarily within. Jamal's new world transforms him into a version of everything Lucious says he is not: self-reliant, talented, and most importantly masculine. And for a Black gay artist who is negotiating his homophobic and hyper-masculine father's riches and his own desire to be himself, cultural capital is his end goal. When Jamal resides within Brooklyn the series plays

with an outdated trope that suggests the closer the singer moves to representing musical authenticity and socialized masculinity the more he sheds his gay characteristics. For instance, not only do Jamal and Michael end their relationship because of Jamal's supposed inability to be both a good (gay) partner and a musician, but prior to the breakup Cookie warns Michael that Jamal is "toughening up. He's becoming a top" ("Out, Damned Spot" 5:30). Cookie tells Michael this to address his concern that the music is changing Jamal. Apparently, Cookie agrees and likens Jamal's new focus to being more sexually dominant. In line with this, *Empire* seems stuck on what Dwight McBride asked some twenty years ago, which is, Can the queen speak? That is, can Jamal be his gay self and develop agency? In Brooklyn, the apparent answer is no.

For Jamal, neoliberalism is being made whole by the poor, urban, working class despite his belief that he is a one-man act who writes his own music, channels his own inspiration, and rejects the resources associated with Empire Records. The singer capitalizes off and romanticizes impoverished geographies while at the same time these spaces get narratively sensationalized as rodent infested, violent, and largely uninhabitable. However, if you can make it here you can make it anywhere and therefore Jamal feels legitimated by his new world. This "survivor" theme continues into the actual studio recording of "Keep your Money" when Jamal escorts Cookie to the Bronx to finalize the track inspired in the alley.

Jamal brings even more attention to how he extrapolates cultural currency from working-class Blacks. The scene is quite instructive: The door of the building in which the studio is located is laced with graffiti. Young men of color line the building's hallways. Jamal preempts Cookie's coming critique, contending "before you start judging, just know a lot of hits came out this place, you know" ("Dangerous Bonds" 4:35). Cookie responds telling Jamal that they could have hired the producer to come to them, "to a real studio" (4:44). She also warns her son to be

wary of the "grimy types" of men who inhabit the building (4:48). Jamal advances, "Well this is all I could afford, Lucious can take all that money and give it to Hakeem, this right here is mine" (4:50). Trying to be affirming, Cookie tells Jamal "Well you do you baby. You're keeping it ghetto that's for sure. If this is the sound you want and you think it's going to put you ahead of Hakeem, then this is what we're doing baby" (4:55). Cookie and Jamal's conversation stops abruptly when the two reach the room where the studio is located and notice the cracked glass within the door. It is adorned with bullet holes. They enter. Before they can begin recording, Cookie cuts her time in the studio short when she is alerted through text-message that federal agents are outside of the building wanting to speak with her. When Cookie tells Jamal she has to leave he is caught off guard and despite selling himself as his own best ally, Jamal becomes nervous about recording the track without his mother's guidance in the studio. Before leaving Cookie asks the producer to "take care of my baby boy, okay?" while she pats her pocketbook, gesturing that a weapon is inside and that she will seek vengeance if Jamal is harmed (5:55).

Beyond Cookie's flamboyant antics she is in a performance mode that seems uncharacteristic. Cookie delegitimizes Jamal's choice of a music studio because the space is not wrapped in the resources of Empire Records—even as she continuously lauds Empire's humble beginnings in the undesired parts of Philadelphia as what has made the record company the success it is today. This lends to the notion that the series is signaling that Cookie is now interpellated into wealth. In a prior episode Cookie also critiques Lucious for his moderate-style politics around rap music, telling him in front of Anika (his live in partner),"I liked you better when you was a thug," a clear indication she prefers the "streets" over the boardroom ("The Outspoken King" 28:00). I rehearse this brief history of Cookie to argue that there seems to be role reversal between her and Jamal as they navigate toward the music studio. That is, Jamal is

now comfortable in the 'hood, a position that, up until this point, seemed reserved for Cookie and Lucious, particularly within their narrative flashbacks. Jamal offers to his mother the same rationale regarding the recording studio that she offers to him when she initially sees his new apartment. When Jamal praises the studio by noting that "a lot of hits have come out of this place," it mirrors Cookie's comments about her and Lucious creating beautiful music in their run-down apartment while they shot rats. In both instances Cookie and Jamal wax poetic about urban life with which neither must presently contend. Yet in individual ways each has been tied to these poor locales to offer their character credibility. Therefore, Cookie makes a point to tell Jamal that Lucious would be proud if he knew they were in the Bronx studio, as she too knows it offers Jamal a type of credibility.

Aside from uttering the words "it's time to be a man now" and the additional context posed, there are other subtler ways the series demonstrates how Jamal's self-imposed exile in the ghetto boosts his masculinity, artistic prowess, and heteronormativity, all things I view as his cultural capital and hence his appeal as a "real" artist. In his attempt to break Hakeem and Jamal's bond, Andre manipulates a group of men (who happen to be friends with Hakeem) to go to the Bronx studio where Jamal is recording to rob the singer of his clothes and jewelry. Before the culprits get to the studio Jamal and his producer listen to the parts of the track he has recorded so far.

The men in the studio are unlike those who person the recording booths at Empire. In the Bronx they wear skullcaps, hoodies, and sweatpants, all items normally associated with urban communities. To recognize the appeal of Jamal's song and talent, one man in the studio asserts "Yo, even though you got the whole gay thing going on, you got heat homeboy" ("Dangerous Bonds" 24:50). In response, Jamal replies with a nod and verbalized gratitude. This is an

interesting compliment since moments before we see Jamal talking on the phone praising Cookie for all the ways her suggested edits contribute to the song's wow-factor. Yet Jamal is presented as the creative force behind "Keep Your Money." The man's compliment, which is also a microaggression, puts forth the idea that Jamal's artistry has an ability to, whether intentionally or not, make his sexuality palatable and therefore he can be seen as both gay but also outside of gayness, which apparently is where credible and profitable talent lives. This is also a moment in which the series suggests that perhaps Jamal should not focus on implicit slights about his sexuality and instead focus on the end goal of creating music. In this way, Jamal learns to better negotiate his gay identity. The urban development of the singer's artistic abilities gets presented as that which helps him from being thought of as just a gay artist.

When the men tricked by Andre eventually rob the studio, Jamal is valiant. While most of the people in the room cower when the culprits enter with guns drawn, Jamal is defensive and wants to know who the men are and if the robbery is a setup. Because the men have been manipulated, they believe Jamal possesses a pricey watch and other fancy items for taking. When they ask the singer about his watch he raises his arms in defiance demonstrating he has no jewelry. What is illuminating is that the studio is inhabited by men who are presented as tough, even thugs, yet Jamal is the subject who seems unafraid of the gun-wielding robbers who enter, even after one man lets off a gunshot. Jamal's producer eventually compels the culprits to leave when he brandishes his own shotgun. Jamal is unfazed by the incident. In fact, when the singer is shown again later in the studio, toward the end of the episode, adoring people—all seemingly of color—surrounds him. Perhaps they are fans. They slowly dance in the background and nod in approval as the producer plays "Keep your Money." Cookie also returns and is seen in the background. She is proud when she hears the completed song. Jamal has officially attained the

credibility of those people he thought were most homophobic, Blacks. He is now a man of the people. His people. No more exclusive shows in Brooklyn for hipsters. Jamal is post-gay, framed as outside of the sexuality that marked his character to this point. The singer is no longer weighed by his gayness but now marked by his talents. This is evidenced by the Black people in the studio affirming him and this new song. With Jamal's Blackness shored up, what can Lucious teach him now?

I argue that Jamal's song "Keep your Money" serves as the soundtrack to his independence from Lucious. "Keep your Money" is themed around the singer's refusal to accumulate capital through his prior connections to Empire Records and hence the story arc featuring the creation of the track foregrounds the emergence of a nonprofit-like neoliberal politics within season one. This politics emanates from the ways Jamal garners credibility, specifically based on his "devalued" social position within New York City's inner city. *Empire* both authenticates and romanticizes impoverished landscapes by connecting the founding of the multi-million-dollar record company to a particular kind of humble yet necessary urban beginning. The series then plops Jamal into this same kind of impoverished urbanity to use the inner-city context to bolster his credibility as a "true" and "authentic" artist.

Part of the goal of the series arc is to feature Jamal inhabiting these spaces in opposite ways than what his homophobic father suspects. The series embraces something other than the foundational entrepreneurial rags-to-riches neoliberal idea, representing instead an "urban" version of this logic via both Lucious and Cookie's backstory and now Jamal. Here, cultural capital becomes key to economic capital by way of Black authenticity. In many ways, *Empire* localizes and troubles the power of the twinned neoliberal fantasies by representing how (1) Jamal can attain success with grit, talent, and by trying hard, and (2) Jamal's success will come

from embracing himself. In this case, authenticity is doubly a fantasy: in the first place it means embracing phantasmal versions of Black poverty and masculinity and in the second place it cannot encompass Jamal's sexuality.

The Impending Bond: Jamal and Lucious Connect

This chapter is a combination of demystifying and expanding the concept of neoliberalism through close reading the representation of a Black and gay television character. To elucidate iterations of neoliberalism's contemporary forms I contend that Jamal experiences familial relationships that are simultaneously loving and transactional. While these descriptors are thought of and even surface as antithetical to one another in a kind of general knowledge sense, Jamal's relationships with both Cookie and Lucious illuminate how love and transaction merge to create their brand of kinship. Second, I show how Jamal attains a type of non-profiting cultural capital at the same time he rejects his father's riches and relocates to inner city Brooklyn. Jamal's migration story romantically frames impoverished geographies as ground zero for masculinity and artistic prowess—the two main features on which Lucious supports his homophobic impulses against his son. Below I conclude this chapter by suggesting that *Empire* tries to have it both ways with Jamal's character: to in some instances frame transaction as antithetical to love (which is why Jamal moves away from his lavish life) but repeatedly suggest that success comes from blending the two.

Even as Jamal is still living outside of the comforts of his father's sponsorship, Lucious consults with his son after seeing him described in a magazine as "the future of Empire." When the two chat at Club Leviticus, Lucious reveals that he is getting "stuck" when penning new music ("Die but Once" 23:49). This is a kind of vulnerability that is uncommon for Lucious to express. With that, Jamal helps his father name the anxieties he is experiencing around writing.

Further, Jamal sympathizes with Lucious since he is now facing legal injunction from a former business partner and cannot use his older music. While finding a CEO successor has taken a backseat, Lucious asks Jamal if he believes that he is the future of the Empire. Before Jamal answers, Lucious reveals what he believes, which is that the singer should be the next leader. Lucious notes "I just need to know that you have that monster in you that does what he has to do?" (24:29). Jamal himself never responds to Lucious's query.

When the men are featured next, Jamal escorts Lucious back to the Philadelphia neighborhood where Empire Records was inaugurated. In what has become the series trope of using impoverished landscapes as rehabilitative and inspirational fodder Jamal asserts to his dad, "You challenged me to break you from your creative block. In order to do that I had to take you out of your comfort zone" ("Die but Once" 25:22). The two men walk toward their old home, trekking through the mud-soaked back yard. From the narrative flashbacks of prior episodes, we can tell that sitting next to the stairs is the same garbage can in which Lucious stuffed Jamal some 20 years earlier. Apparently, time has stood still at their former home, almost as if it is waiting for this moment of their return. In fact, interjected through the scene is the narrative flashback of Lucious violently accosting a young Jamal for donning Cookie's clothing. When the two enter the home things here are also exactly as they left them, Jamal even asks Lucious to play on the old keyboard. The CEO reveals the song in which he is stymied. When Lucious plays the tune like a novice, Jamal first listens and next tries to inspire his father in a way that resonates with Lucious's brash style. Jamal tells his father how bad the song sounds, hinting that Lucious may no longer be a musical genius. "If I didn't know no better, I would say you were a complete fraud," Jamal utters (26:43). Jamal further stresses to his father how much he used to adore him for his ability to engineer music. Jamal's antagonism enlivens Lucious who looks at

his son fiercely but notably, and unlike when Lucious was able to lift Jamal and toss him into a garbage, Jamal is unmoved by his father's growing excitement. Jamal tells Lucious to step aside and gets behind the keyboard. The singer begins to adlib a tune using undertones from the song Lucious played not seconds before. Lucious listens and in awe says to Jamal, "that's good" (27:30). As Jamal plays, he responds confidently "Well, yeah. Except it ain't yours" (27:35). Lucious grows more frustrated.

Jamal asks "Dad, what happened to you? Is it 'cause you're afraid of dying?" ("Die but Once" 27:40). Lucious responds to Jamal expressing "What do you know about death boy. What do you know about them killers?" (27:43). This moment is revelatory because moments later the series uses a narrative flashback of Lucious sauntering alone at night beneath elevated train tracks. Eventually the CEO approaches an unknown person who he shoots. While this flashback sustains the idea that Lucious is an ultimate monster, it also brings attention to the notion that Jamal's first-hand experience at the mercy of his father means he indeed does "knows about them killers." This is because it was Lucious himself, a killer, who violently tried to discard Jamal as a young boy—a trauma that, until this point seemed unforgivable. As Lucious argues further about how unafraid of death he is, he grabs a guitar and strums a Spanish-style melody. When Lucious rests the guitar, Jamal adlibs another musical run. Lucious exclaims, "that's nice but it ain't dangerous enough. Maybe it's because you ain't been there yet" (28:34). Jamal quickly expresses, "What makes you so sure that you've been somewhere that I haven't been?" (28:40). Lucious responds to Jamal saying, "Show me" (28:48). He wants to see if Jamal has "been there." Each of the men appear to play a game of showing one another the tough love that will produce a great track, which is apparently a game of who can sing the hardest and strum the guitar the fiercest.

Jamal's query, which is also an assertion that perhaps Lucious and him have been to similar places, is illuminating and can be understood in a few ways. For one, the singer's retort gestures to his current social position in the impoverished community where he now lives. This is the geography that the series romantically frames as brutal but necessary for artistic authentication. Therefore, Jamal brings Lucious back to inner-city Philadelphia, journeying from New York City to help his dad get artistically unstuck. This time however, the power deferential between the men has plateaued. Not only does the singer live and navigate within this same urban context Lucious repeatedly claims executive privilege over, but also Jamal is portrayed as having conquered these geographies. Further, Jamal's time in the Bronx studio allows him to compete with his father's musical prowess. Second, and more poignantly, Jamal has in fact been places where Lucious has not been, most notably on the receiving end of his father's homophobic violence. This violence has been just as life altering for Jamal as Lucious's time being curated by the "streets," effectively leveling the playing field between the two men.

To show his father that they have figuratively been to the same places, Jamal and Lucious go back and forth improvising the song "Nothing to Lose." The camera spins around the two men as they move throughout the frozen-in-time house belting with intensity. Lucious sings a note and strums a chord and Jamal follows right behind playing the keyboard and singing. It is a sing-off. When they finish improvising, a song has come to fruition. Lucious is motivated and screams to Jamal "That's how you murder a track. Now I got a song!" ("Die but Once" 31:25). Jamal tries to play it cool, even as he too seems to feels the emotion of the music he and his father have just generated. The singer responds dousing the CEO's excitement "It's not your song" (31:29). Jamal remarks that the song can only be used if Cookie is hired to produce Lucious's comeback concert. And here, Jamal turns what perhaps is a moment of father and son

bonding into his own transaction. The CEO injects his own stipulation, asserting, “What? You think your work is done?” (31:44). Lucious then tells Jamal “I need you to get my masters back” (31:46). Lucious’s masters are currently under legal injunction from Beretti, Lucious’s former business partner and now foe. Something about Jamal’s ability to stand up to Lucious via song, in their old home, has inspired the CEO to send his son into battle for his music catalogue. This is Jamal’s final test. Jamal obliges his father and secures the music catalogue by threatening Beretti while hanging him off a skyscraper balcony—a violent act that was uncharacteristic of Jamal right up until this point. Once the masters are secured Lucious announces to the family that Jamal will be next in line for CEO. Jamal takes the CEO seat sooner than he thinks when, at Lucious’s concert the CEO is arrested for the murder of Bunkie. This is how the season ends, Jamal as CEO and Lucious in prison.

Jamal (now deemed “the future of Empire,” as suggested by the magazine Lucious viewed and later affirmed by the CEO himself) has garnered the cultural capital his father respects. Jamal is depicted as having moved away from the comforts of wealth and on his own attained the respect of the people he thought his sexuality blocked from him. This migration narrative buttresses Jamal’s confidence in challenging Lucious’s musical abilities when at their former home. Lucious sees Jamal’s growing gravitas and rather than accost his son for the slights he expresses toward the CEO (i.e. you might be a fraud), Lucious alternatively grabs a guitar and engages Jamal in a type of musical duel. This is the realm in which Lucious grasps how to demonstrate love to his queer son. Which is to say that Jamal is only affirmed by Lucious when he can hold his own against the CEO while engaging the musical arts Lucious proclaims to know and do best. This is characteristic of Lucious’s articulated vision for their relationship since he insists to his son that the way for them to bond and be closer is via music and not just spending

time together. It is only through music that Lucious gets to know Jamal and vice-versa, here their relationship buds but only because it is framed around competition.

Jamal also gets a glimpse of the relationship he has been yearning for, even though it has come at the expense of the traditional father/son bond he thought he needed. Jamal, engaging his father in the musical duel and agreeing to secure the CEO's catalogue demonstrates that the singer understands the conditions of their kinship—he and his father can only bond if they are competing against each other, or are in opposition together against some larger force threatening Empire Records. In addition, it is no accident that the backdrop of the scene is the flashback of Lucious violently placing Jamal in a garbage can. Bringing attention to this moment in this next to last episode of the season, particularly as the men musically battle in their former home signals (1) Jamal's development into a man, (2) this notion that Jamal can now fight back (at least musically, which is all that Lucious seems to care about) and (3) that Jamal has summoned the ability to forgive his father.

Conclusion

The term neoliberalism is ubiquitous within cultural studies and has come to stand in for ways the accumulation of capital has a bearing on what we know of as culture. However, even with its academic proliferation, seldom has scholarship accounted for how neoliberalism surfaces in contemporary representations of Black gay men on television. On *Empire* and more specifically within Jamal Lyon's world, neoliberal ideology is demonstrated in the ways Lucious and Cookie Lyon, Jamal's parents, see his sexuality as a means to either increase or decrease their own monetary capital and hence impact brand value. What is noteworthy is that even as Cookie and Lucious see their visions for Jamal as personally profitable they believe they are motivated by offering what is best for their son, and hence do not recognize their motives as self-

centered. Jamal learns that his parents express a love for him that is hinged upon how he generates visibility around sexuality, masculinity, and his ability to compete, and not about some natural kinship that exists between parent and child.

Neoliberalism becomes personified when Jamal moves into the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of New York City. Here the singer is infused with a type of credence for his ability to navigate urban squalor as a man who was prompted by and now unmoved by his father's homophobia. But Jamal is still gay and still critical of the CEO's patriarchal violence and imperatives even while he siphons cultural capital from the very communities said to have produced Lucious. This chapter shows that neoliberalism thrives within small cracks of culture producing familial bonds in ways that seem implausible, for example, by predicating kinship on both love and transaction without adequately acknowledging the ways those two forces might come into conflict. *Empire* illuminates the ways neoliberalism shifts from a necessary monetary logic privileging instead the ways cultural capital works to create racialized authenticity and in turn brands Jamal as both commodifiable and credibly Black.

CHAPTER 3: LIVE! WORK! *POSE*: THE RADICAL ARTICULATION OF BLACK QUEER LIFE

In "The Radical Potential of Queer, Twenty Years Later" Cathy Cohen reflects on her canonical essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens, The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." Cohen details three factors that motivated her penning of "Punks" in the late 1990s. One reason was the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis plaguing Black America, while her second impetus stemmed from the devastation of neoliberalism as it was introduced by Ronald Reagan and further effectuated by Bill Clinton. Cohen's last reason for writing "Punks" "was one of hope and stood in contrast to the loss generated by HIV/AIDS and neoliberalism" (Cohen 140). Here, the scholar highlights the progressive politics that constituted "the emergence and solidification of both Black feminist and Black gay and lesbian communities during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s" (140). Cohen further advances this last point:

> It is this third factor I want to spend some space and time reflecting on, because I am worried about a process of erasure. Specifically, I am concerned with the erasure that happens through the rewriting of histories, where the politics of Black feminists and Black lesbians and gay men of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, are framed not as a radical attack on the politics of respectability in Black communities or a radical attack on the state violence perpetuated through Reagan's neoliberalism, or a radical articulation of Black gay life in all its fullness and idealism, and ordinariness, but instead the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s become only a gay movement in response to HIV/AIDS, leading to a path dependent result of professional organizations and assimilation. (140-141)

Above, Cohen expresses trouble with how stories of the past are told, specifically how a Black radical tradition of community and resistance gets excised from contemporary narratives aiming to historicize Black queer life. And while she acknowledges how the onset of HIV/AIDS informs

her ideas in “Punks,” the scholar is concerned with how that very real history of responding to disease gets propped up as the fulcrum of the Black lesbian and gay past. For Cohen, in reducing the collective attention of earlier Black queer and feminist subjects to a singular response to HIV/AIDS, one “inhibits our ability to know [...] that there were radical Black queers who fought similar fights for liberation to those being waged today, who insisted on reimagining what liberation might look like” when minoritized Black communities are centered (Cohen 141). In this way Cohen is advocating for a more nuanced way of remembering to capture what is a complex history.

While Cohen’s more recent response to “Punks” highlights her worries about how we might write about and recall the past, it is also worth spending some time on rehearsing the original points offered by the theorist. “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens, The Radical Potential of Queer Politics” spotlights how the larger promise of queer politics has failed those in search of a “new political direction and agenda… [that would] transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (Cohen 21). Queer politics has instead manifested a kind of flattened “us vs. them” phenomenon premised on identity. Here sexuality serves as the basis to neatly position on one hand those who are queer and by extension oppressed and on the other hand, “straights” who are by virtue of the structure of homophobia all oppressors. Using sexuality as the quintessence of oppression obfuscates the ways racialization, gendering, and class exploitation, to name a few, bear upon queers and other subjects, privileging one-dimensional identity politics over more complex, real-life lived experiences that move beyond single-issue activism. Within an emerging Black-queer analytic Cohen sought to build from the shortfalls of queer politics via proposing a process of radical-left coalition building. The scholar advances a kind of organizing by which punks, bulldaggers, and

welfare queens might see one another as "connected in the struggle," while simultaneously understanding normative power as the oppressive other (Cohen 141). In this way, queerness represents the status of one's social position and not simply the embodiment of nonnormative sexuality and gender identities. It is both Cohen's more contemporary concern regarding the erasure of the radical politics birthed by Black queers and feminists, combined with her call to engender coalitions centering positionality that guide the direction of this chapter.

This chapter's focus is *Pose* (2018), an FX network drama centering the lives of Black and brown queer and trans people set in 1980s New York City. My analysis covers three facets of season one. First, I explore the development of the House of Evangelista and its undercurrent of privileging membership along the lines of both social positionality (i.e., one's access to resources) and identity. I then employ the concept "sista-talk" to interpret the bonds forged between Blanca Evangelista and other Black and brown women in the series, namely Helena St. Rogers, Elektra Abundance, and Lulu Ferocity. I then place emphasis on Damon and Ricky Evangelista's budding romance, which I put into conversation with Joseph Beam's maxim, "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 80s." Using these examples, I argue that *Pose* illustrates a radical politics of the 1980s past, while the series also highlights the transformative possibilities of coalition building. Here, Cohen serves as my launching point, as I use *Pose* for the ways it invites viewers to imagine and recall the 1980s not as a time structured only around death, but instead reframes the decade as a period of nuanced Black queer worldmaking and community-building.

Yet, even as I see *Pose* as imbued with many of the progressive political aspects with which Cohen is concerned in "Punks," I am not simply invested in using the scholar's work as a theory wringer through which I confer significance to the series by designating it as Cohen's

particular brand of politics. This is because in large part Cohen moves away from demarcating sexuality and gender as where queer politics will find its radical potential, while I contend through *Pose* that those social identities are where we can locate much progressive organizing. Cohen provides the impetus for this chapter by advancing the idea that the rich history of the 1980s gets erased and a calcified retelling about Black social death and AIDS takes its place. I intervene to suggest that *Pose* emblemizes such a full history in its depiction of the 1980s even as the series veers from the political vision offered by Cohen. *Pose* is about the daily forms of organizing happening in Black and brown queer and trans lives and the stories of those minoritized subjects who gather in "gay houses" as forms of resistance and survival.

Queer Memory

Pose is a cultural product that recreates and offers a mediated remembrance of the multiplicity of Black experiences, as queer subjects in the 1980s (and later 1990s) responded to AIDS at the same time they engendered community and fended off queer antagonism. Like Cohen's concern about more fully recalling the past, Darius Bost is similarly attentive to how life for Black queers is often rehearsed as simply tragic. For example, in his text highlighting the "Black gay cultural renaissance" of the late seventies to the mid-nineties, Bost discusses the impact of AIDS on how we recollect queer life. According to the scholar:

> Many prominent black gay writers of this period succumbed to AIDS, which has contributed to readings of black gay social life in the early era of AIDS as wholly determined by (social) death. While acknowledging that the black gay body was a site of loss during this period, I turn to black gay literature and culture as evidence for reimagining black gay personhood as a site of possibility, imbued with the potential of creating a more livable black gay social life. (4)

While Bost utilizes Black gay literature and other ephemera to facilitate a more complex remembering, I turn to television production since scholars have argued that film and media are indeed where queer memory work happens (Horvat).

Not only do I see *Pose* engaging Black queer and trans people's historical struggles against what we might call a neoliberal order, which in this instance looks like a privileging of individualism at the expense of collective good—a continuing struggle still in existence today. I also interpret *Pose* through communication scholars who have adeptly pointed out the ways cultural production informs public memory. In this way, *Pose* and its meaning making, are pivotal for the articulation of Black queer pasts, specifically for communities who do not find their stories preserved within the building blocks of gay enclaves (Lynch).

Pose facilitates what Anamarija Horvat calls "postmemory," an idea she borrows in part from Marianne Hirsch to "emphasize the ways in which the memory of individual trauma can travel from the person who experienced it to others who have heard and been emotionally affected by their remembrance" (4). The caveat here is that *Pose*, as a production about queer and trans life, privileges subjects who transfer memory along nontraditional routes (Gelfand). The series acts as a vessel through which stories of queer pasts, even as fiction, can be passed on, and in my estimation offers lessons to illustrate Black queer histories as not just sites of devastation and turmoil. Horvat points out, "One of the main arguments of my work on queer memory is precisely the fact that it is shaped in greater measure by on-screen representation than other types of minority community memories, which do not have to deal with the same obstacles to familial memory transfer" (5). Yet, in a bit of a turn from Horvat, *Pose* and its storytelling is all about familial memory transfer, perhaps not in a biologic sense, but in ways no less real.

When Janet Mock, one of *Pose's* producers and writers, reflected on the meaning of the series in a 2018 *Variety* piece, she notes something intriguing about pre-production:

> This issue of whose gaze, whose stories, and whose bodies were in focus and in leadership behind the camera presented me with much caution as I considered the offer to write on "Pose." I would soon learn that Murphy was aware of this issue. That's why he assembled a team of culturally specific collaborators from the ball community, including Dominique Jackson who plays one of "Pose's" leading ladies, as well as Leiomy Maldonado and Danielle Polanco, who serve as choreographers, and our braintrust of consultants, Freddie Pendavis, Hector Xtravaganza, Jack Mizrahi, Michael Roberson, Skylar King, Sol Williams and Twiggy Pucci Garçon. (NP)

Here, Mock's use of "culturally specific collaborators" is meant to call attention to the employment of members of the house and ballroom scene the series works to depict. With that, I contend that *Pose* is in fact scripted in part through familial memory transfer, intervening in studies that locate queer memory as passed down outside of family structure.

While the next section of this chapter elaborates more fully on house and ballroom, one of its main features is chosen family, and the ways these networks pass down information about queer and trans worldmaking. When Mock mentions, "Freddie Pendavis, Hector Xtravaganza, Jack Mizrahi, and Twiggy Pucci Garçon," in particular she is recalling, via their last names, legendary house and ballroom families, ushering the point that these subjects showed up to *Pose* pre-production with family histories that do not originate with themselves, but within the networks to which they belong. In this way, memory studies must account for the culturally specific ways Black and brown queer chosen families create and disseminate generational knowledge.

In addition to expanding conceptions of family within memory studies, this chapter works from the idea that the spectacular trauma of AIDS can become all that is remembered of the 1980s (according to Cohen and Bost) and the ways the disease impacts what can be remembered (Horvat). This chapter, then, further intervenes by using *Pose* as both a way to imagine fuller queer pasts while also recognizing those pasts as being largely impacted by the legacy of AIDS. *Pose* imagines a world that was, as Black and brown subjects turned their precarity into a kind of worldmaking that allowed them to exist alongside, and not be reduced, to trauma.

Ballroom Representation

When it first aired in June 2018, *Pose* was immediately likened to Jennie Livingston's famed and controversial documentary, *Paris is Burning* (1990). These comparisons arise for several reasons. One of which is that *Pose* and *Paris* both explore and bring into mainstream media the inner world of New York City's 1980s and 1990s Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ ballroom communities. Here, Black and brown trans people, gay men, and lesbian women congregate in "gay houses" that challenge each other in competitive balls using a style of dance called voguing or by walking categories. When walking categories participants vie to present themselves as idealized embodiments of majoritarian phantasms chosen by event organizers. More specifically, on *Pose* and within real-life ball events, gay men contestants rival one another to present themselves as beacons of traditional masculinity in one category (e.g., navy officer) and embodiments of femininity in another (e.g., fem queen). During competitions these men walk the floor under the scrutiny of a panel of community judges who are tasked with ranking contestants' ability to convey "realness." Realness in this sense is gauged by how well a subject

can compel a judge to believe their performed embodiment in each of the categories. Winners typically receive "tens across the board," which is to say he scored a ten with all judges.

Marlon Bailey, who was first to offer an in-depth ethnography on ballroom culture in Detroit, Michigan argues that the scene is comprised of three interrelated parts "the gender system, the kinship structure (houses), and the ball events (where ritualized performances are enacted) (Bailey 4). Bailey points out that members of the ball scene often conceive of gender and sexuality outside of normative binaries and spectrums and this serves as the basis for much of the scene's social relations. This kind of subverting of gender and sexuality norms is demonstrated most notably in the way kinship is enacted within the houses. Ball houses "are family like structures that are configured socially rather than biologically" (Bailey 5). One may be part of a house where the leader (for example the mother) has recruited them for their prowess in voguing or house members may gravitate toward leaders they admire or respect, thus forging a mentorship bond. Houses can be literal spaces where Black and brown LGBTQ+ people reside, or they can be comprised of networks to which one is only socially connected.

As demonstrated by *Pose's* House of Abundance and House of Evangelista, houses are often given names that reflect super models, haute couture designers, or positive attributes with which house founders wish to be associated. These houses may feature cisgender men as mothers, women as brothers or be led by trans people. Ball leaders may be older or younger than the house children they mother. While these modes of kinship move beyond traditional realms of familial relations, ball events can be less subversive. Balls are the epicenter of ritualized performances, which can serve to both reify and uproot conventional understandings of gender. Many of the academic responses to ballroom, and *Paris is Burning* in particular, highlight how ball culture ostensibly allows contradictory elements to coexist. For instance, at ball events one

might be made victor for queering gender norms at the same time another may be lauded for demonstrating conventional ideas of femininity.

While *Paris is Burning* is a documentary that chronicles Black and Latina/o/x ballroom members, *Pose* is a television series scripted to do the same. The noted difference, that *Pose* is plotted while *Paris* is a documentary, has an opposite effect around notions of authenticity. This is because *Paris* is directed and presented through the lens of Jennie Livingston, a white, lesbian woman from outside of the communities her film attempts to depict. With that, it is Livingston's own social positionality that has historically marred *Paris's* public and academic receptions, due in part to several debates about the documentary's race and class politics (Clark, Collins). That is, *Paris* has been critiqued as a film shot through and for the white gaze (Clark, hooks). *Pose's* season one however is largely recognized for being co-created, scripted, and played by gender and racially diverse people, some of whom are actual members of the ballroom communities both projects seek to represent (Bendix, Mock).[16] Because of our current moment in which minoritized groups are forthright about seeing intentional representations and *Pose's* perceived proximity to the queer and trans members it portrays, the television series surfaced to much fanfare. The series is even recognized as one of the first mainstream programs to feature an array of Black and Latinx trans women performers (Bendix, Mock). Yet even with *Paris's* historical critiques, *Pose* creators, writers, and performers have expressed reverence for Livingston's documentary, advancing that her film engendered a conversation about Black and brown subjectivity and culture giving their contemporary television series a widely known precursor (Bendix, Dry).

[16] My juxtaposition of *Pose* and *Paris* is partly meant to signal that, despite *Pose* being co-created by Ryan Murphy, a wealthy gay white television producer, the series is lauded for incorporating Black and brown voices in all stages of its production.

Ballroom culture has garnered a plethora of academic responses by way of *Paris is Burning*. The notion that Black and Latina/o/x queer and trans New Yorkers would organize into competing families, often to be recognized as the very embodiment of the whiteness that benefits from their subjugation, is itself a cultural studies quagmire. Therefore, gender, sexuality, and race studies scholars have continuously expressed curiosity in gauging whether embodying or parodying hegemonic structures is enough for their dismantling. In other words, does exposing gender's malleability via drag have a bearing on the ways gender can be violently imposed on (poor) subjects of color? The answer is not so clear.

In one notable response to ball culture, Judith Butler offers a reading of *Paris* to clarify her often-mischaracterized position in the canonical text, *Gender Trouble*. Here, Butler focuses on the relationship between subversion and drag performance, which she notes as non-analogous:

> Although many readers understood my book *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary correlation between drag and subversion and that drag may very well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. (125)

One might also read Butler's restating of her *Gender Trouble* thesis as a veiled response to bell hooks who in the polemical "Is Paris Burning?" critiques Livingston's presented version of ballroom culture. While hooks does not offer a zero-sum analysis of drag (as Butler seems to allude to), she does critique forms of drag which hold white femininity as pinnacle of womanhood. hooks, pens:

> For black males to take appearing in drag seriously, be they gay or straight, is to oppose a heterosexist representation of black manhood. Gender bending and blending on the part of black males has always been a critique of phallocentric masculinity in traditional black experience. Yet the subversive power of those images is radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the "feminine" that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to female impersonation as gender […] (147)

Here we see what Butler might call drag's "certain ambivalence," as both scholars conclude that drag enacted through ballroom culture does not automatically challenge gender's normalizing order. The latter is true even though drag as an imitation of gender can be used to critique the ways identity is often rooted in some sort of essential truth. For example, Butler was first to note how drag performance highlights gender's insecurities by showing how masculinity and femininity are less fixed than social scripts tend to suggest. Taking a more race-centered approach, hooks argues that *Paris's* representations of drag risks becoming part of a larger white supremacist project when ballroom culture is presented as mere reverence to white womanhood. Both hooks and Butler offer nuance, suggesting that even as drag can critique the fixity of gender, the subversiveness of these revelations tend to be in the eyes of the beholder. Drag in this sense, as an act, will not automatically engender a social critique if it is deployed in ways that re-calcify binaries or uncritically challenge how gender is racialized.

Though penned some time ago, Butler and hooks's treatments of *Paris* allow me to start from the premise that ballroom has always and already been a contradictory yet intriguing phenomenon within academic circuits. I contend that *Pose's* depiction of 1980s ballroom culture warrants a new type of interrogation attuned to how media can be used to shed light on a complicated past often overshadowed by the devastation of HIV/AIDS. The question this chapter

centers on is, how does *Pose*, as a mediated cultural product, illustrate what Cathy Cohen calls "the radical articulation of Black gay [queer] life?" Even though scripted, I suggest that *Pose* demonstrates how 1980s Black queer communities existed as robust spaces where coalitions were formed and respectability was challenged, in addition to the ways the series makes visible Black men loving Black men in ordinary yet striking ways, which itself complicates narratives that have often framed Black gay desire as always wrapped in interracial pairings.

Pose evidences Cohen's assertions that prior Black feminists, gays, and lesbians were more than just HIV/AIDS activists. According to Christina Hanhardt, "Cohen reminds us that our analysis of power shapes our interpretation of social movements, including how we find and define the very subjects and strategies of activism" (147). With that, I contend that *Pose* offers a sharp and necessary look at how Black progressives coalesced and moved with a sense of hope and purpose to challenge systems of power (homophobia, classism, trans antagonism) that prevented their collective wellbeing. In advancing this claim I am arguing for the inclusion of the personal and "political activities of those outside the normative narrative for LGBT political history, including those whose lives have been structured as queer" within and beyond markers of gender and sexuality (Hanhardt 147). In this next section I turn to how *Pose* depicts the genesis of the House of Evangelista by way of its founder, Blanca Evangelista. By opening with Blanca's story, the series illustrates two themes. First, *Pose* shows the limits of organizing around a one-dimensional queerness based not on community but on reverence to the competitive spirit of the balls, and second, the series suggests that Blanca actively taps into her own precarity to create her version of a home for queer and trans people.

No Place Like Home

Blanca Evangelista is *Pose's* central character in season one and is performed by trans actress and singer, MJ Rodriguez. Within the series, the Afro-Latina is depicted as an outcast within her initial queer community, the House of Abundance, founded and led by the fierce femme, Elektra Abundance. Although clearly home to minoritized people, Abundance highlights the ways queerness (as in non-normative sexuality and gender identity) can be insufficient as an organizing paradigm when its members fail to consider, celebrate, and incorporate the diversity within its ranks and hence privilege a kind of sameness for the sake of mimicking larger normative orders to win ball competitions. This is a point Cathy Cohen illuminates when suggesting queerness can and must actively incorporate something larger than cohering around a homogenized sexuality and gender to be transformative. Blanca ultimately leaves Abundance, partly due to its members and their exclusionary politics, to create her own gay house and uses her experiences confronting antagonism to foster a space she believes is welcoming and inclusive.

When *Pose* commences it is 1987. Abundance is home to New York City's foremost voguers, and Mother Elektra is extolled for her ability to blend "naturally" into cis-womanhood. Within ballroom competition, Elektra is unbeatable in categories tasking contestants with showcasing their femininity. But while Elektra and family are the ones to beat at ball events, Abundance's interpersonal dynamics are fraught with rivalry and petty infighting and this is largely a reflection of their leadership. Keeping Blanca in a space of inferiority, Elektra and her other house daughters Lulu and Candy, also trans women, create distinctions between their more traditional feminine aesthetics with that of Blanca's, which they deem masculine. Their aim is to position Blanca as physically not woman enough. The notion that Blanca is not "passable" for

her gender becomes linked to whether or not she can survive without being connected to the house. In fact, Blanca is treated as if she needs Abundance more than it needs her. Blanca is kept in a position of servitude because she too, in some ways, believes she would be lost without her Abundance milieu, internalizing much of the trans antagonism directed at her by the people within her own circle.

Blanca is introduced preparing a meal for the House of Abundance. As she cooks, her siblings and mother Elektra talk beauty, practice their vogue, and relax. The scene is reminiscent of Cinderella, in which Blanca is the overlooked and often mistreated stepdaughter performing household chores while the others participate in a life of relative leisure. Elektra grows vexed as she applies makeup in a vanity. The mother is perturbed that the House of Pendavis (a real-life house showcased in the documentary *Paris is Burning*) has ended Abundance's ten-year winning streak at last week's ball by taking the top trophy. In response to her mother's concern, Blanca proudly offers that Abundance could reclaim the top spot at the next competition by walking as a unified group under the theme of royalty. Elektra initially shrugs off her daughter's idea then later suggests the very same theme employing different words. When Blanca takes issue with Elektra's taking credit for her ideas, Elektra becomes callous, asserting that Blanca's thoughts are incomplete because she is not a "real mother," while Candy and Lulu further make light of their sister's frustration ("Pilot" 1:55). Elektra's use of real mother takes a jab at both Blanca's limited social network, which mostly comes from her association with Abundance and the running theme that Blanca's femininity is incomplete. The one house sibling appearing to express a modicum of understanding for Blanca is Angel, her other sister. Angel reacts to the vitriol directed at Blanca with visible unease as she sits atop the couch listening to the back and forth.

It might appear that by focusing on the antagonism between members of Abundance the series discounts queer community. However, I contend that despite and because of Blanca's status as Abundance's outcast she is motivated by the possibilities of chosen family. For Blanca, community is revered both because of the love ethic she carries for Black and brown queer and trans people (oftentimes unrequited) and her keen understanding of how structural forces create synergy among those who might otherwise be strangers. The latter becomes evident as Blanca begins to invite members to join her new home.

Blanca's uncertainty is deepened when, along with membership in a house antagonistic to her subjectivity, the character finds she has contracted HIV. The series frames both Blanca's rocky relationships with members of Abundance and her recent diagnosis as reasons why Blanca becomes focused on cultivating a new gay house in which she can leave a legacy for other Black queer and trans people. When initially seeking her test results, Blanca is rightfully anxious, uttering to the clinician who is reviewing her file, "So what does it say? Come on don't keep me in suspense. Rip the Band-Aid off!" ("Pilot" 16:14). Here, Blanca gestures toward her lived experience via a Band-Aid, as if to suggest the realness of life is always hiding but one thin strip away. After hearing she has seroconverted, Blanca rises from her seat to leave the exam room. Her relative impatience seems to signal that the clinician is simply confirming for her what she has already suspected. The clinician asks Blanca to sit back down while handing her literature regarding what might be her next steps. She takes the brochures and thanks the doctor, asserting that it must be difficult revealing to patients every day that they are going to die. The scene closes as the two sit in silence, the camera observing them through a small window in the exam room door. Notwithstanding her ruminations on mortality, HIV does not get materialized within

Blanca's life as a death sentence; it is quite the opposite. Her diagnosis partly motivates her to envision for herself, a new world.

Later, Blanca discloses her newly learned status to Pray Tell, her mentor and friend. Pray is an almost-middle-aged Black gay man who is central to the series because he is the figure who emcees the Harlem balls, which includes selecting the music and naming the categories in which the houses compete. Pray Tell attempts to console Blanca by redirecting her melancholic contemplating into something more aligned with his philosophy of living, advancing "there is nothing more tragic than a sad queen" ("Pilot" 18:17). For Pray, HIV testing is unnecessary as he maintains one should, instead of seeking to confirm their status, put on their "tallest pump" (high-heel shoe) and live life each day as if tomorrow may not come (18:12). Blanca and Pray Tell are somewhat similar ideologically since she responds to his wisdom proclaiming, she is not sad, her pensiveness has more to do with finally feeling certainty about life. Blanca states, "I don't want to die. I want to live. I know it sounds crazy but I always knew I wasn't gonna be long on this earth. I still don't know the when, but at least now I know the how. At least now something in my life is for sure" (18:41). Pray Tell tears up while jovially responding to Blanca's admission, "all that says to me is that it's time for you to find a dream" (19:09). When the scene changes the exterior of an apartment building is foregrounded. The façade is adorned with classic New York City fire escapes. Blanca looks up at the building and is shown next viewing a rundown apartment inside. Blanca looks toward the older woman showing her the unit and says, "I'll take it" (18:43).

The featured apartment will come to serve as home to Blanca's House of Evangelista. But, before she can dislodge herself from the reins of Elektra, she must reveal to the Abundance family she is leaving to begin her own journey as a house mother. Elektra does not let Blanca go

without a verbal lashing, after revealing that, through mysterious means, she's heard about her daughter's apartment hunting in the Bronx. Elektra is furious when Blanca shares she is not only moving out but starting a gay house, one that, in Elektra's mind, can potentially be her own competition at the balls. Elektra, unaware of what is motivating her daughter to leave, shouts that Blanca is ungrateful and will fail at any endeavor that does not center her allegiance to her mother. Blanca, while asking for Elektra's blessing, utters, "I'm going to form my own house. It's my time, it's my dream, and I'm going for it…. Because in our world there is only one way to leave something behind, proof that I was here building a legendary house my way with my ideas" ("Pilot" 21:45). When Elektra refuses to recognize her daughter's independence, Blanca storms out of the loft with Angel worriedly following behind. In addition to highlighting the frictions between Blanca and her mother, this scene also becomes emblematic of Blanca's larger motivation for her own house. Blanca is more than just leaving the House of Abundance; she is determined to actualize a communal experience more attuned to how she sees the world.

What is compelling about Blanca's yearning for her own home is that it comports with the perspective of many Black queer cultural workers who were vocal in the 1980s and 90s. For instance, in "Black Queer Identity," Charles Nero contends "Home and the human relationships within it are recurring referents in the artistic, critical, and theoretical discourse of late 20th-century Black queers in the United States" (142). In this way, notions of home, represent a theme through which to understand the intricacy of Black identity and community. Yet even while Black scholars have focused on the dynamics of home, gay houses are mostly articulated in both scholarship and popular press as refuges and safe spaces within which one can find solidarity, particularly around an ostracized queerness (Bailey, Trott). But Blanca's time in the House of Abundance highlights the pitfalls of locating queerness as a kind of preeminent signifier of

communal belonging, especially since it is there where she is reminded of a dead identity. Blanca's gender expression is not enough for Abundance and it seems an HIV diagnosis hipped her to the idea that she can be more than a prop who lives to revere Elektra. Her seroconversion illuminates the conditions of her own temporality, which until the diagnosis has felt like a life of uncertainty. But according to Blanca, a house, done her way of course, brings with it a mark that she was here and the sureness of a cemented legacy. The question the series attempts to answer in its first few episodes is, how will Blanca's house be different than the one she is leaving?

Blanca's First Son

Narratively paralleling Blanca's departure from Abundance is the story of Damon, a Black seventeen-year-old ballet dancer who lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania with his family. Blanca and Damon's meeting is more than simply fortuitous. Her experience as a member of Abundance and Damon's home life in Pennsylvania are coterminous. Both endure hostility in the very places thought to be affirming—Blanca as a trans woman in a gay house (Abundance) and Damon as a suburban son in a Black "loving" two-parent home. Damon and Blanca connect because each have been left behind by those who, because of identity, were supposed to save them. But the conditions of their inclusion were predicated on embodying someone else's monolithic vision of gender and even of identity more broadly.

Damon has dreams of attending The New School in NYC. The dancer is accosted by his father whose friend spotted him departing his ballet class one day. Damon's father deplores his son's dancing and reveals that he found a gay-adult magazine under his son's bed. When Damon confirms, anxiously, that he enjoys dance and is gay, his father assaults him. Damon's mother intervenes to diffuse the tension, but she too expresses antagonism toward her son by attempting

to guilt him into suppressing his sexuality to appease his father. Damon rejects his parent's homophobic tactics and is subsequently disowned.

In line with the often-romanticized metronormative migration model, which assumes queer sexuality is most fruitful when actualized in an urban center, Damon treks to NYC where he slumbers in a Manhattan park by night and dances for passersby during the day (Halberstam 36). Damon's troubles shift from the showcased homophobia of small-town America as New York City brings with it the challenges of attaining resources, namely a place to live. After a few days of being in the city, Damon catches Blanca's eye while dancing in the park for money. Impressed at his ability to move, Blanca approaches to make an offering. The budding house mother strikes up conversation, asking Damon where he learned to dance and further if he wants to join a house to ultimately showcase his prowess in ballroom competition. Damon is unaware of ball culture and inquires further. After Blanca explains that a house is a place where one gets to choose their family, Damon is intrigued but reluctant. He responds that he wants to be a star, as if to suggest joining a house and participating in balls would be the antithesis of his future. He seemingly rejects Blanca's offer, advancing, "I'm not like you, I'm sorry. My dreams are real" ("Pilot" 28:57). Blanca challenges Damon by asserting "So you think your dreams are more real than mine?" (28:59). And after Damon's initial skepticism he decides to befriend Blanca. Ironically, during Damon's first experience of the ball scene, happening later in the episode, he is in awe, excited, and ultimately at home, perhaps feeling that this new world may be the place he has been seeking.

There is more at stake for Damon than being his father's pretend-to-be-straight son; therefore, he leaves his parents. Similarly, Blanca's understanding of her womanhood moves beyond the roadmap plotted by her mother Elektra and house sisters, Lulu and Candy. It makes

sense, then, that Blanca and Damon set the foundation for the House of Evangelista, which at its inception is nuancing what it means to coalesce around social and material otherness, a point gestured to in Cohen's call to engender coalitions built around the intersecting nature of identity. For example, when Blanca asks Damon about his interest in joining a house, she has no confirmation of his sexuality, she only knows he is skilled at dancing and in need of money. Similarly, when Damon meets Blanca his knowledge of the house and ball scene is limited. But Blanca engages Damon in a way that does not pathologize him; she sees his worth and senses his needs. He is in fact in a park dancing for money and recognition. Damon is inquisitive about the ball scene prompting Blanca to flex her experienced knowledge of gay culture and what she envisions for Evangelista.

Blanca and Damon express a mutual attraction to one another because of their interest in intentionally belonging to something more inclusive than the places from which each comes; these spaces are uncritically bound to identity. Interestingly, Blanca's time in Abundance has not always been tumultuous. When Blanca gives her speech to Elektra announcing her retreat from Abundance to initiate her own house, she thanks Elektra for at first providing her with a space of safety when she was left to fend for herself after being disowned by family some years ago. In this way, Damon being rescued via joining a gay house echoes Blanca's same trajectory. In fact, the series features a flashback in which a cash-strapped Blanca is regaled to a meal by Elektra in the same way Damon enjoys a meal Blanca treats him to in present day. *Pose*, then, exposes simultaneous ideas: the perils of gay houses when they are manifested exclusively around competition and simplistic articulations of identity, but also how those very spaces, when done right, save Black queer and trans folks from an antagonistic world built on their exclusion. While Abundance serves as an example of a monolithic house under Elektra's reign, the nuance with

which Evangelista emerges suggests Blanca places importance in viewing identity as more than just "who someone is," but also, "how someone has become who they are." This "how" question is not a frivolous one as it gestures to the importance of understanding the systemic failures impacting the lives of not just Black and brown people but also trans subjects and those without resources.

The Fallout with Papi Evangelista and the Meaning of Home

My thesis that the House of Evangelista is a place "built not exclusively on identities but rather on identities as they are invested with varying degrees of normative power," becomes further evident when Blanca, whose house now consists of Damon and Angel (her former Abundance sister, but now daughter), accepts the request of a new member named Lil Papi to join the family (Cohen 37). Blanca and Papi's budding relationship represents the 1980s as a time when Black and brown subjects forged connection across their varied social and material otherness. Their story highlights how bridge-building efforts were seldom seamless as members of minoritized groups, whether via race, gender, class, or sexuality had to purposefully invest in seeing one another as whole beings with different histories and capabilities for making mistakes.

Papi is a Puerto Rican hustler who we will learn makes his way into the ball scene via dealing drugs and sometimes participating in sex work. Papi would be what Cohen calls "heterosexuals on the outside of heteronormativity," a slippery term indicating the ways not all straight people benefit from the materiality of heterosexuality (37). That is, he does not identify as a gay man or trans person, but still shares a similar social location to members of the ball community because of the ways his racial and sexual identities exist outside of the grasp of compulsory straightness. Papi learns about the House of Evangelista on the night the family makes their surprise debut at the ball. Here, Blanca challenges her former Abundance family to a

battle. While Abundance ultimately comes out on top, Papi expresses admiration for the courage demonstrated by the Evangelistas in competing against one of the scene's top houses. Papi wants to be part of Blanca's new house, proclaiming, "You guys ain't shit yet, but I ain't shit yet neither" ("Pilot" 1:05:24). Recognizing that he has to contribute to the family in some way, Papi tells Blanca, Damon, and Angel that he sometimes works at a bodega breaking down boxes and can score food for the family. Amused and assuaged by Papi's antics after losing the battle, Blanca asks the young man if he is living on the street, to which he replies, "yeah, mostly" (1:05:34). Blanca welcomes Papi to the family insisting, "The House of Evangelista welcomes any lost soul" (1:05:48). Papi becomes the fourth member of the family so long as he can adhere to Blanca's house rules, which include no drug-related activities.

Later in the season Blanca stumbles upon Papi's mobile pager. She associates the device with drug dealing, interrogating Papi when he comes to retrieve it. While affirming his innocence to Blanca, Papi curiously inquires as to why she appears suspicious of him while being complicit in what he deems as Angel's perilous line of work. Angel, his house sister, is a sex worker and dancer at a seedy venue called Show World, where she entertains customers behind a protective but transparent barrier. Blanca rebuffs Papi for his analogizing, contending, "You don't get an opinion on what she does with her body. When you're a transsexual you take the work where you can get it" ("Pink Slip" 2:01). Blanca proceeds to educate Papi as to why the rules of the house apply differently based on the social identities he and Angel occupy.

Blanca asserts that as a trans woman, Angel's gig at Show World is safer than her pacing the streets. Further, her choices of earning a living correlate to the limited opportunities she is afforded in other arenas of more traditional employment. For instance, in an earlier episode we see Angel struggle with finding a position when she is dismissed by a white woman while

inquiring about a help wanted ad at a perfume counter. The woman assumes much about Angel's character based simply on her garb and race. Blanca notes that in trafficking drugs Papi is impacting the larger community, decimating the lives of Black and brown people in the process. Using an analysis rooted in the lived experience of a Black trans person, Blanca does not see Papi and Angel's activities as equivalent, even though both are illegal. In fact, Blanca empathizes with why a trans person may be involved in sex work, regardless of its legal status, while at the same time castigating drug dealing as unacceptable because of its larger impact on the community.

In many ways Blanca livens up when she or her close-knit community are imperiled, even if by one of her own house children breaking the rules. Part of Blanca's objective is to ensure Evangelista remains a refuge and since she views the space as her legacy, she wants it to remain viable. Further, she expresses her passion for "doing what's right" to the Evangelista members in hopes that they too will act in similar ways. Blanca's modeling of her queer progressive morals does not look like lowering her standards in appeasement or a kind of uncritical empathy for others. Her approach is demonstrated when she tells Papi he can no longer reside in the house after she learns he is indeed lying about selling narcotics. She chooses to make an example of his behavior, leaving her other children frustrated in the wake of her sternness as they see Papi's transgressions as more his "coming of age" than a character flaw.

Blanca often vocalizes the mantra that her children must always tell her the truth, and further, that in being an Evangelista one must reject the "code of the streets." This code, in part, suggests one refrain from snitching about another's proclivities. But Blanca will find that it takes more than a compendium of house rules to re-socialize her children. Upset about Papi's falsehoods she confronts him again at the Manhattan piers (a fictionalized version of the

Christopher street piers adjacent to the famed Greenwich Village). Blanca specifically brings to Papi her concerns about how he put the family at risk by selling drugs. But Papi and Blanca have different visions of family, as the two spar:

> Papi: What family? Aint nobody here. I been on my own since I was 13, in and out of foster homes. Ain't nobody ever gave me shit.
>
> Blanca: I did. Warm food, shelter. And you ain't the only one who had to learn how to survive on their own. But I didn't resort to dealing. You could get arrested, or worse.
>
> Papi: It can't get no worse. What other choices are there for a 20-year-old with an eighth-grade education?
>
> Blanca: I'm so disappointed in you.
>
> Papi: Yo, stop acting like you're my moms, 'cause you're not.
>
> Blanca: I want you out by morning. And if you don't pick up your shit, I'm-a put it on the street myself.
>
> Papi: You're just gonna turn around and leave me? Without giving me another chance? Where am I supposed to go? ("Pink Slip" 12:30).

Papi's words jab at Blanca in a way that seems painful, so painful in fact she turns and walks away from him because of his refusal to see her for who she is, a mother. Papi is surprised by Blanca's immovability, as she marks a clear line indicating activities she will not tolerate within the house. Blanca's incensed reaction may be from muscle memory connected to quarrels with her own biological mother and Elektra, as she authoritatively insists to Papi he vacate the Evangelista apartment. Toward the middle of the season Blanca's backstory portrays her turbulent family relationships prior to being taken in by Elektra, further exposing the rockiness of Blanca's past home life. In fact, it may be her past reflections on family life that prompt

Blanca to reengage with Papi since she eventually invites him to rejoin Evangelista after rethinking her decision. That is, Blanca's past may be both the reason she takes such a firm position against Papi's drug dealing and why she moves to make amends. Blanca ultimately partakes in a two-way coalitional politics that both sees her son for more than just his mishaps and offers herself grace as a mother, as she makes her own mistakes.

Blanca and Papi's fallout is salient because it is an instance within the series when the house fractures because mother and son are unable to empathize with one another. Blanca feels she must teach Papi and her other children a lesson about the value of family, and Papi feels like Blanca has discarded him despite her value for family. There is also the additional quagmire of Ricky, Blanca's newest son who joins the house after he and Damon become romantically involved. Ricky, who was previously homeless, tells Blanca about Papi's illicit activities to protect his status as a house member. Blanca quickly finds herself reassessing the decision to sever ties, particularly after she overhears her children arguing about the dangers of Papi now having to be homeless. Blanca listens in as Ricky pleads tearfully to Damon and Angel about Papi's ousting, "I never wanted this to happen. I got scared Blanca was gonna kick me out if she found out I lied to her. I can't go back to sleeping on a bench again. And I never wanted that for Papi" ("Pink Slip" 30:30). Here, Blanca begins to weigh if teaching Papi a lesson is worth him now having to navigate the unpredictability of being homeless. And while she ultimately understands the value in enforcing house rules, she also sees how removing Papi from the house is seen as harsh, particularly in an environment like Evangelista, which is constructed around members getting second chances.

While banished from Evangelista, Papi begins to help his uncle sell crack/cocaine and ends up arrested in a drug sting. After being released with no filed charges he joins the House of

Ferocity led by Candy and Lulu (Blanca's former sisters) who have broken with Mother Elektra and her House of Abundance. Papi's new house provides an apt contrast to Evangelista as it is here where Candy and Lulu expect him to deify them, like Elektra's expectations of Blanca when she was in Abundance. Unaware that Papi has moved to a new house, Blanca sees him outside of the ball one night and suggests he come back home to Evangelista. Blanca apologizes and learns from Papi that he is no longer dealing drugs. Blanca wants Evangelista to have a celebratory dinner to recognize his return. But Papi's reactions to Blanca seem cold and ultimately, he turns and walks toward Candy and Lulu. When Blanca intuits that Papi is now part of House of Ferocity she tells her former Abundance sisters they are using her son for retribution. Candy retorts, "Oh we're using him, to grab our takeout, to iron our clothes, to massage our tired feet. And he's happy to do it. And he snags trophies" ("Pink Slip" 39:49). Candy and Lulu bask in Papi's docility. Blanca walks away vowing to secure Papi back as a member of Evangelista.

Papi does return to his former home after being berated by Candy and Lulu and humiliated beneath the weight of his unreciprocated devotion to the women. I interpret Papi's story arc as demonstrating how Evangelista exists as something fundamentally different than Candy and Lulu's House of Ferocity and even Elektra's House of Abundance. For one, Evangelista is not a house in which the organizing principle is reverence to a dear leader. Nor is it about embodying a particular stylized gender and sexuality to reign over the balls. What Papi and Blanca's fallout does reveal about Evangelista, is that the house is an emerging site from which to grow a forgotten humanness. What I am suggesting here connects back to Blanca's realization earlier in the series when she learns she has contracted HIV, which is her desire to create certainty within her life.

Blanca has taken her yearning for conviction and enveloped within it both herself and Evangelista by deploying a well-intended but rigid motherhood. However, the lesson she and others in Evangelista demonstrate is what Joan Morgan might call "fucking with the grays," which is a term I use to exemplify a kind of ideology that refuses either/or distinctions (59). This refusal is visible when the mother hears Ricky both defending and fretting over his decision to expose Papi as well as when Blanca struggles to forgive Papi for his perceived shortcomings. More specifically, Blanca can empathize with her son while also recognizing her anxieties around his having strayed from the rules, and similarly, Ricky exposes Papi because of his own fear of homelessness but this does not mean he wants Papi homeless in his stead. Thus, within a queer scene comprised of competitive balls and turbulent gay houses, Evangelista showcases space for reconciliation and forgiveness, while highlighting the fact that life's troubles are seldom resolved and tied in a neat bow.

Sista-Talk

> But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.
>
> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In this next section, I delve into the interpersonal relationships among the Black and brown women within the world of *Pose*, and specifically how each of these characters builds camaraderie and community with Blanca Evangelista. The women of *Pose* engage Blanca in a sisterhood contoured by what Audre Lorde calls *a seeking of truth*. For example, when focusing

on the budding connection between Blanca and Dean of Dance at the New School, Helena St. Rogers, I posit that while the women are socially dissimilar by education, class status, and cis privilege, Blanca and Helena cultivate a friendship predicated on their mutual understandings of hope and allegiances to changemaking. Both women understand the ways community empowers the individual. The two refuse to "ascribe false power to difference," and instead employ a womanist ethic of care to nourish both the self and community (Lorde 51).

Select women of *Pose* practice bonding via what Dora Silva Santana recently called *papo-de-mana*, or "sista-talk." Santana employs sista-talk to foreground "Black women's voices, be they trans or cis, through face-to-face and also digitally mediated interactions as a site of dialogic theorizing" (211). Santana reminds us that sista-talk originates via the scholarly production of Black and brown feminist and womanist practitioners active in the 1980s. These women include Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, April Few, Dionne Stephens, Marlo Rouse-Arnett, and I would add Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. In fact, Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett coined "sister-to-sister talk" in the early 2000s as "Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between women" (205). Similarly, I engage sista-talk to interpret how women of color characters within *Pose*, among each other, exchange ideas related to their perceptions of morality and truth and the actions that result of these conversations. Through this phenomenon of sista-talk, *Pose* illustrates the 1980s as a time constituted by both likely and unlikely friendships and an era in which Black and brown women, oftentimes who were queer and trans, spoke truth to power and challenged the status quo notwithstanding trans antagonism and the wreckage caused by HIV.

Helena St. Rogers and Womanism

Helena St. Rogers is a woman of rank, talent, and privilege. As Head of Dance at The New School, St. Rogers has direct influence over students' lives as they dream of launching their careers through her conservatory. The dance head has immense cultural capital and is also a Black queer woman, and not in the axiomatic sense but in locating herself as sans children and spending time visiting Tony, who she calls her "most brilliant, dedicated student"("Giving and Receiving" 12:09). Tony is stricken with AIDS. While the camaraderie between Blanca and Helena ignites because of Damon, who becomes Blanca's son through his place in Evangelista, the women become a kind of younger sister-older sister pairing as they engage in mutual mentorship of one another in which each enriches the other. In their first meeting, Blanca is already anxious, as she must convince Helena to allow Damon's late application to be considered for fall. When shown outside the university building Blanca paces ahead of Damon who pleads "Please don't do this, it's embarrassing" to which Blanca responds, "We do not have the luxury of shame" ("Pilot" 1:06:53). Papi and Angel trail behind the two gawking at The New School's architecture. Blanca marches into the dance suite, bypassing the front desk, directly entering Helena's office.

Blanca attempts to get the dean to consider Damon's application. Helena responds by recalling the strict deadline policy of the school and suggests Blanca encourage Damon to apply in the spring. Blanca refuses the recommendation while simultaneously becoming visibly distraught and passionate, and the two have this exchange:

> Blanca: Do you know what the greatest pain a person can feel is? The greatest tragedy a life can experience? It is having a truth inside of you and you not being able to share it. It is having a great beauty, and no one is there to see it. This young boy has been discarded

and he is so young, he believes that it has something to do with who he is. It's like cancer. It is going to eat at him from the inside until he starts to resent even the best parts of himself.

Helena: Have a seat. I don't understand what you want me to do. We've accepted our full class. We are full.

Blanca: No, but he is special. He's got all the talent and all the hurt you need to be a true artist. Let him dance for you. Give him a chance. Give him three minutes of your time. When was the last time you were truly surprised by something in your life?

Helena: Who are you again?

Blanca: I'm his mother. ("Pilot" 1:07:45)

In response to Blanca's honesty and passion, Helena agrees to Damon's audition.

There is an aesthetic richness to Blanca and Helena's initial dialogue that evades capture via words—due in part to how the energy flows between the two performers and the ways Helena becomes emotionally swept up in Blanca's affect. The details of this scene are instrumental in comprehending how Blanca connects her own lived precarity as a trans person to that of her children's and how she translates this to a stranger who happens to possess the ability to materially change Damon's circumstances. Firstly, before Blanca enters the school building, she quips to an embarrassed and somewhat annoyed Damon that they "don't have the luxury of shame." This line is a gesture toward the social reality of their class status, particularly at a moment when Damon's future rests on whether Helena will endorse his late application. In this way, Blanca and Damon cannot afford to feel inferior or unworthy because they simply have nothing to lose. This is their only chance. Another way to interpret Blanca's comment regarding shame is as a disavowal of respectability politics. Here Blanca's rejection of shame is a refusal to

participate in social standards that continually leave people like her and Damon on the losing end. Blanca's approach is therefore radical in that she refuses to feel debased by her social position, one she did not ask to occupy. Hence, Blanca decides to meet Helena face to face to ask for what society has left Damon and many other queer folks afraid to do, which is to ask for the chance they deserve.

Once in the office Blanca's words connect to Helena as she describes a reality that resides within her own being, even while she is technically there to speak on behalf of Damon. The notion of having inside of you a truth/beauty unable to be shared or expressed highlights the plight of numerous queer subjects forced to reckon with the compulsory nature of heteronormativity and those queer and trans creatives alive in the 80s left dying alone in hospital beds forced to let death become all of them. In addition, the material reality of possessing inner truth that at times goes unrecognized is an experience trans people know all too well. Blanca focuses in on one potential result of not having an ability to share your truth, which is that one becomes resentful of even their best parts. And it is Blanca's familiarity with what she speaks that compels the Head of Dance.

Blanca's words effectively convey to St. Rogers that Damon is especially talented and worthy of audition, and later we learn of another reason Blanca's plea resonates with the dean. Helena has a close relationship with her student Tony who is in the hospital battling AIDS. When Tony is shown in the hospital, he is emaciated. Yet, Tony dances about the room in soiled hospital linen. The dancer is unable to recognize St. Rogers, calling her instead, Clara. Tony's rhythmic movements connect back to Blanca's assertions about having a beauty inside oneself that few people get to see. Helena recognizes this inner beauty within Tony, despite his appearance. After a brief struggle to get Tony back in bed, Helena kisses him on the forehead

and asserts “you were dancing my darling” (“Giving and Receiving” 12:13). When Tony dies later in the episode, the hospital phones St. Rogers for family information, for which she has none. Helena advances to the caller, “I’m not family. Just his teacher” (19:45). But the subtextual meaning and preceding scenes highlight that St. Rogers is so much more. Similarly, when Helena becomes moved by Blanca’s ability to channel such a poignant and resounding plea about considering Damon’s late application, the teacher asks, “Who are you again?” “I’m his mother,” Blanca proudly affirms, seemingly declaring all the dynamism on her and Damon’s relationship in a way Helena was unable to do with Tony (“Pilot” 1:08).

Blanca exits Helena’s office and confirms to the Evangelistas waiting outside that Damon will be given an audition. Damon is nervous. Tending to his anxiety, Blanca insists to Damon, “This is your turn now. You hear me? Take it” (“Pilot” 1:09:21). She hands him a cassette tape inscribed “Whitney!” Damon auditions for an admissions committee of three in a large empty dance studio. Helena sits on the right side of the panel reminding Damon to smile and own the moment as Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” plays. After the audition, Damon exits the building and sees the Evangelista’s waiting in anticipation. Blanca springs up. Looking at his mother Damon says, “I’d be dead if it weren’t for you. Another day in the park and I would have went with anybody for some food, done anything” (1:14:38). Finally, Damon reveals, “I got in” (1:14:50).

Blanca and Helena’s first encounter sets in motion a course of action that leaves Damon newly admitted to The New School. Their dialogue also informs how the world of *Pose* is steeped within Womanist values; concepts first articulated within the poetic verses of Alice Walker. Layli Maparyan, editor of the first compendium on Womanism contends, “Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women and other women of color’s everyday

experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extending to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people…" (Maparyan xx). In Maparyan's conception, both Blanca and Helena's actions are womanist.

Blanca taps into her own everyday reality to convey the seriousness with which she wants Helena to understand Damon's talent, while Helena is moved into a zone of problem solving to alleviate the pain from which Blanca speaks. Furthermore, Blanca and Helena's meeting exemplifies the duality of Womanist exchange as "dialogue is the locale where both tension and connection can be present simultaneously; it is the site for both struggle and love" (Maparyan xxvii). Blanca and Helena's initial interplay exemplifies the simultaneity of uneasiness and intrigue. It is painful to bare one's soul in hopes of forging connection. Yet Blanca exhibits this very balance. What is more, "Womanist rely on dialogue to establish and negotiate relationships; such relationships can accommodate disagreement, conflict, and anger simultaneously with agreement, affinity, and love" (Maparyan xxv). This last point illustrates the spirit of Blanca and Helena's next dialogue further detailed below, which concerns Helena removing Damon from class in response to his tardiness. Damon arrives late to the dance studio because he is choreographing Evangelista's upcoming ballroom routine.

Even while many of Blanca and Helena's interactions are because of Damon, the dialogues they engage are deeply personal. Oftentimes their talks touch on the social differences that persist between them, which they strive to reconcile. During Blanca's visit with Helena the two discuss the importance of Damon's self-discipline:

> Blanca: It's a different thing to be a mother who chooses her children. We got to deal with our mistakes and also the mistakes of the mothers who brought them into this world. We don't get the benefit of a clean slate. And I've seen a lot of mothers in my world use

> that as some sort of excuse for bad behavior, but not me. Once you're in my house you're my responsibility. And Damon doesn't understand yet that we don't got but so much time in this world. And that the people out there are gonna start stealing pieces of his from him.
>
> Helena: What's stealing from him is his interest in those balls. What we do here is work, not the instant gratification that comes from dressing up and walking for a trophy. ("Giving and Receiving" 31:09)

Feeling like Helena's words are cutting too close for comfort, Blanca tenses up.

> Blanca: Excuse me? Miss Uptown Fancy with your African Jewels and your sterling silver. We can talk about Damon but what we're not gonna do is sit here and look down our noses at my world. You have any idea that work and struggle that goes into walking a category?
>
> Helena: The point is I do understand, which is why I'm saying Damon doesn't have time for both. And unless a mother forces a child to make the right choice, he's gonna choose the work that makes him feel good right now. (31:40)

Though Helena's objective is not to scrutinize Blanca's mothering, she comes close to trivializing ball culture as a form of art not requiring perseverance. For Helena, ballroom is a kind of instant high, whereas dance as art is a lifelong endeavor in which only struggle and unmitigated focus can truly reveal one's greatness. Blanca is offended by this doctrine, particularly as someone who has toiled to be fully seen within ballroom culture—a reality that lives in perpetuity for the trans characters of *Pose*. For instance, within the series, both Elektra and Candy pursue surgery to align their bodies with their genders. The two women seek these procedures partly to attain status within ballroom. Candy eyes a curvier figure to vie for trophies

while Elektra ruminates gender confirmation surgery to solidify her reign as queen mother. *Pose* illustrates that these surgical processes come with complications and have a toll on one's psychology, informing the viewer that these women choose these options because they see within ball culture viable futures.

During Blanca and Helena's talk the dance head implies that she understands the dedication it takes to walk for a trophy, though not an end goal to which she has ever worked. Even as the dialogue becomes tense, the women remain amicable allies endeavoring to help Damon understand the importance of both his role in Evangelista and at The New School. But Damon cannot do both. As Blanca recognizes the dedication it takes to secure one's legendary status, so too does Helena understand what engenders a true dance artist. Damon must prioritize and the women eventually concur, his focus should be dance. Helena and Blanca's meeting shows that one's importance does not become canceled out by recognizing another's value. The women reach this place of commonality by possessing a willingness to be present and wade through the murkiness of misunderstanding, further showcasing the value of a sisterhood in which disagreement is not correlated with disregard.

Sista-Talk as Inclusive Motherhood

Unlike the instances of sista-talk in which Helena and Blanca sift through their differences as a means of understanding some larger lesson, the third time the women have an exchange it is Blanca who needs a familiar ear. After demanding Papi's excision from Evangelista because of his involvement with drugs, Blanca is devastated by how his departure remains on her conscience. Blanca turns to Helena to help reconcile her uneasiness. Blanca says, "Last time we spoke you were pretty hard on me and told me the truth even when I didn't want to hear it. Well. Now I want to hear it" ("Pink Slip" 31:24). As Helena insists, she has no

firsthand experience with being a mother, Blanca notes how the teacher's role as a mentor earns her great respect from dance students. Helena listens to Blanca and strives to allay her feelings about Papi, offering, "Well, you made a choice. And only time will tell if it was the right one. But you did what you thought was best for your family. To protect them. If it were me, I would have done the same thing" (31:36). Helena goes further, "You're upset because you have compassion and integrity, important qualities to possess as a parent. Don't change. They may not grasp the basis for your decision in the moment but years from now, they will, and you will have earned their respect. That I know to be true," utters Helena (32:16).

In the final episode of season one, Helena and Blanca convene for a fourth time. Unaware of the nature of their meeting, Blanca declares to the teacher, "Is Damon screwing up again? 'Cause I'll bust him upside his head if he trying you" ("Mother of the Year" 9:52). The two laugh in response to Blanca's confident yet jovial Black vernacular. Helena has requested a meeting to inform Blanca that Damon's scholarship has been renewed for a second year. Like their first convening, much of the dialogue flowing between the two women carries double signification. In one example Helena advances to the mother, "You…have given Damon something that will allow him to soar in this world: self-worth. As long as he knows his life has value, he will be unstoppable" (10:25). According to the teacher, Damon has come full circle, but the process has been just as developmental for Blanca. The house mother began the season with a goal of creating a family unit that would solidify her place in the world and within one year she has tangible evidence of her success both as someone desiring to be fully seen and as one invested in building a legacy through nurturing others.

What both Helena and Blanca's intimate dialogues reveal is that "motherhood is a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual meditation, and

dispute resolution" (Maparyan xxix). And further, that "anyone—whether female or male, old or young, with or without children, heterosexual or same-gender-loving—can engage in all these behaviors and therefore mother" (xxix). Yet there is also something to be said about sisterhood since it is the bond between Blanca and Helena that provides them both with new opportunities to better listen, see, and understand another's worldmaking. Therefore, when Blanca asks during their first meeting, "When was the last time you were truly surprised by something in your life?" both women can point to their growing friendship as something unexpected ("Pilot" 1:08:50).

Blanca and Helena do not bond over a shared status as outcasts, suffering under and resisting normative power, at least not in the same ways, since St. Rogers is a Black cis woman who enjoys the economic perks and social benefits of the professorate class. So, in many ways, both women do not equally confront material otherness. Yet, they both have an affinity for social concerns regarding community and seeing subjects beyond their HIV status. Also, as Dean of Dance, Helena deploys her resources to forge meaningful coalitions with those whose beauty may not always be apparent, for example, Tony. Similarly, Blanca uses her status as house mother to create spaces for those deemed socially undesirable, this includes herself. Through their pairing *Pose* demonstrates a historical reality Cohen insists we recall when historicizing the 1980s, which is the way Black feminists and Black queer and trans people cohered around a politics of resistance and radical inclusion to foster community. Blanca, at her own risk, moves beyond perceived power structures when she befriends St. Rogers and similarly Helena, despite her socioeconomic reality, is continuously reminded of the precarity of life as she both reveres her sick student Tony and watches Blanca embrace a womanist motherhood within her Evangelista family.

Lulu Ferocity and Boy Lounge

While the connection with Helena surfaces as something unpredicted, Blanca's relationships with her former house sisters and former mother are par for the course. Yet even with the dramatic rivalries, sassiness, and hostilities, Blanca and the network of women to which she is connected provide to each other apt lessons on the realities of being trans women vis-a-vis sista-talk. Here, *Pose* represents trans women as having a multiplicity of perspectives as they engage with each other about activism, the future, and the relevance of the house and ballroom scene to their daily struggles with social antagonism. Next, I discuss both an event in which Blanca and Lulu must navigate the exclusionary politics of 1980s New York City nightlife and how the series channels Black feminism within its narrative. In the influential "Combahee River Collective Statement," penned by Black women activists in the late 1970s, the writers advance, "We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privileges have" (276). Within the world of *Pose* this dynamic emerges within Blanca and her trans sisters' larger social scene.

At a popular gay bar in lower Manhattan, recommended to Blanca via the pages of *The Village Voice*, Blanca and Lulu experience firsthand how trans antagonism infiltrates queer communities. Blanca has invited Lulu for a drink to celebrate her inaugural ballroom win and to gauge her sister's interest in joining the House of Evangelista as second in command. Lulu is skeptical of the meetup, not for any suspicions related to Blanca but because of the location where they convene, a (white) gay lounge. Lulu, who would rather be at home viewing the television series *227*, tells her sister "You do know they don't serve our kind here?" ("Access" 20:54). But Blanca refuses to be swayed by her sister's premonition, even as a passerby exclaims

aggressively, “Happy Halloween Ladies,” implying that the women’s gender is mere costume (21:02). Lulu recognizes their presence in the bar as a sign of forbidden mixing but Blanca, seeing things pragmatically, insists that their money is as good as anyone else’s and wants to remain in the establishment. Blanca greets the bartender exclaiming, “Hello handsome.” He appears uninterested (22:18). After hearing the sisters’ drink order the server retorts, “this one is on me but then you got to go. I got ten guys in here asking me if it’s drag night” (22:30). Blanca quickly retorts asserting her gender as a woman and not one who is in drag. The bartender replies with a misogynist quip insisting the men in the gay bar do not like women.

When the bartender seeks out the manager at Blanca’s request, Lulu asks, “Girl, why you always got to pick fights you can’t win?” (“Access” 22:46). Blanca informs her sister that this is one fight worth having. Mitchell, the manager, creeps up behind the women, introduces himself and suggests they head outside to talk, where it is quieter. Once on the street, Blanca inquires about the bar’s discriminatory tactics. Unmoved by her questions, Mitchell goes on to plainly delineate the bar’s exclusionary terms. “This bar is called Boy Lounge. We have a specific clientele—gay, under 35” and before Mitchell can utter another criterion, Lulu injects, “white!” “Frankly, yes,” insists the manager (23:10). When the women refuse the manager’s repugnant offer to sponsor their drinks, but only at another bar, Mitchell becomes irate shouting, “I’m sorry, I’m not throwing a costume party” (23:25). Angered by the exchange Lulu turns to address Blanca as the manager reenters the bar, leaving the women outside. Lulu asserts, “Everybody needs someone to make them feel superior. That line ends with us, though. The shit runs downhill past the women, the Blacks the Latins, gays until it reaches the bottom and lands on our kind” (23:35). Lulu’s message appears to resonate with Blanca but is not new to the house mother.

In many ways, *Pose's* Boy Lounge story arc demonstrates what Horvat articulates as postmemory (4-5). The lounge scene is filmed at Julius's, a famed (now gay) bar in New York City's West Village (Large). Julius's was the site of gay "sip-ins," which were known civil disobedience strategies inspired by "sit-ins" hosted by Black citizens across the South. Sip-ins, according to Jim Farber, happened when in the mid-1960s, "members of the early gay rights group the Mattachine Society, aimed to challenge bars that refused service to gay people, a common practice at the time, though one unsupported by any specific law. Such refusals fell under a vague regulation that banned taverns from serving patrons deemed "disorderly" (Farber). It is ironic that the The Mattachine Society, membered by white gay men, protested for the right to be served at NYC bars pre-Stonewall in the same ways Blanca demands service at this now gay bar in the 1980s. And just as "disorderly" was mapped onto white gay men's everyday being, Blanca and Lulu are labeled as both troublesome and deviant by the white gay patrons and staff of Boy Lounge because they disrupt normative gay respectability that is tied to gender rigidity. Boy Lounge highlights a conundrum within gay history, where the very subjects formerly antagonized have now themselves become antagonist.

Blanca clears her schedule for the assured skirmishes ahead as she plans to visit Boy Lounge until she is properly served. In explaining to the Evangelistas her planned absence from the upcoming St. Laurent Ball, Blanca advances, "There are things more important than prizes, like my dignity" ("Access" 27:36). Blanca details her tumultuous experience at Boy Lounge to her family, promising her children, "Nothing in life is fair. But that's okay though. I'm-a do something about it. So that my children's world is better than the one I grew up in" (28:04). Days later Blanca returns to Boy Lounge, perches at the bar, demanding her long awaited cocktail. Noticing Blanca has returned the bartender inconspicuously nods at a white man alongside the

exit. Receiving his cue, the man approaches Blanca and violently latches on to her, throwing her out of the lounge onto the pavement. While being hauled out, the white-male patrons applaud Blanca's ousting. But even this violence does not deter her.

During her third visit Blanca attempts to establish camaraderie with a Black man who sits near her at the bar. "Have you noticed you're the only one here with a year-round tan?" she asks ("Access" 57:15). "What's your point?" the man responds (57:17). "They don't want us here," Blanca tells him cautiously (57:19). To her dismay, he exhorts, "no they don't want you here" (57:21). When the bartender hears the exchange, he rewards the Black man with a drink "on the house." Concomitantly, the manager calls the police who berate Blanca, then arrest her for disturbing the peace when she responds forcefully to their hostility.

While *Pose* is not explicit about channeling queer and trans historical figures, Blanca's activism can be likened to that of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two self-proclaimed drag-queen activists instrumental in the 20th century gay rights movements historically centered around the rebellion at Stonewall Inn. Not only did Johnson and Rivera individually challenge the ways gay rights were often framed through the limited experiences of cisgender people, they also founded STAR, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, to organize their efforts (Burgos). Through STAR, "Rivera and Johnson advocated for New York City's queer and trans community for decades, drawing public attention to critical social issues such as youth homelessness, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and police harassment before, during, and after the events at Stonewall in 1969" (Ellison & Hoffman 269). Blanca's push for trans inclusion and her tying that to her children's futures puts her character in the wake of Johnson's and Rivera's legacies.

Blanca's connecting of her activism at Boy Lounge to a better future world for her children—children who are cis, trans, queer, and somewhere else—calls to mind both Black feminism and futurity debates within queer studies. In chapter one of this dissertation, I explore Lee Edelman's provocation that the future is inherently anti-queer when tied to reproduction, and José Muñoz's call to see the future as all "we" (queers of color) have. In many ways, Blanca's yearning for a different present illuminates Muñoz's idea that the day-to-day is often experienced as a "prison house" for queers of color who navigate quotidian forms of antagonism (Muñoz, *Utopia* 1). Blanca gets represented as desiring a future in which inclusion for queer and trans people is the norm.

In terms of Blanca's Black feminist ethic, by using her "position at the bottom…to make a clear leap into revolutionary action…[Blanca's freedom would] necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression," including racism, sexism, and trans antagonism (Combahee 276). Hence Blanca's logic in demanding being served at the bar. If she, who is at the bottom, gains inclusion, so too will everyone else who is tiered higher. But in the spirit of activism seldom being linear, Blanca finds herself on the receiving end of even a Black man's antipathy as he is quick to remind her that it is not them both who Boy Lounge patrons find deplorable, only Blanca. So, as Blanca takes the approach that her access to service in a gay bar would engender a larger more communal ethos, a fellow Black patron rejects this ideology, promoting instead a kind of exclusivity because he can be the "right" kind of queer customer. The man at the bar conflates a trans identity he does not experience to that which is intolerable and therefore worthy of being erased from Boy Lounge. In fact, the Black patron is rewarded for his transphobic gestures when the bartender offers him a free drink.

When the writers of the Combahee River Collective Statement outline "Problems in Organizing Black Feminists" they express, "We are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions" (276). The layered nature of oppression is evident in Lulu's monologue as she states, "Everybody needs someone to make them feel superior. That line ends with us" ("Access" 23:35). Lulu locates trans women as being at, as Derrick Bell might put it, the bottom of the well. However, I want to expand Lulu's declaration as to make it plainer, because what happens if you are Black, gay, poor, and trans? In other words, seldom do the vectors of oppression neatly target one facet of identity, particularly if a subject is queer and racialized as non-white. If one does not have "racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon," where does one locate their strength to fight? (276). And here we see why Black feminists state that organizing can be challenging since Black women must tackle a range of issues to get at any one issue—all while having little social capital.

Though Blanca and Lulu are seemingly motivated by the antagonism directed at their gender, this hostility is also directed at their race and class. When Mitchell, Boy Lounge's manager, confirms Lulu's point that the tavern is for white gays, his assertion is backed up by the narrative within the scene itself: Blanca learning about the tavern via its best gay bar in Manhattan designation noted in *The Village Voice* and the lounge's reputation as not "serv[ing] our kind" as remarked by Lulu. Therefore, what makes the sisters stand out in the bar is not just their gender, but also their race and class as they sit among a sea of white men, some of whom are dressed in business casual attire. It can be deduced that the establishment attracts a particular class of subjects. This clientele would most likely not include Black and brown trans woman living in shabby Bronx apartments.

Represented on *Pose* are both the social pressures of embodying a minoritized identity and the issue of cohering around an organizing strategy to facilitate activism. More specifically, what gets highlighted through Boy Lounge is a split between Blanca and Lulu about what is and is not worth their fight. This is because the antagonism experienced by Lulu and Blanca not only severs them from a supposed queer/gay world (read as white and male), it also splits them along an intra-community line about how to respond when trans women experience such quotidian tumult. Lulu is not invested in a cultural mingling that seems to always lead to her being disregarded, whereas Blanca is insisting on her (and her children's) rights to belong in all spaces. Paralleling Cathy Cohen's thesis in "Punks," Blanca's desire for access into gay spaces in general can hopefully lead to a type of coalition building, highlighting for white gay men that they have more in common with trans women then they may think, since history shows they too are on the receiving end of systemic forms of homophobia. Again, *Pose's* Boy Lounge story arc is filmed within Julius's, the site of gay "sip ins," which utilized the organizing tactics of Black Southern civil rights leaders protesting anti-Blackness. In this way, white gay men, who are not new to the perils of homophobia, seem to actively choose to forget the devastating legacy of queer antagonism or neglect to see the irony in drawing inspiration from strategies to end racism while being racist themselves.

The notion that Black and brown trans people face similar oppression but have diverging strategies around tackling those issues is, and will always be, an organizing struggle. Further, differing ways of performing activism is not at all unique to trans people, including Blanca and Lulu. Blanca's challenges in getting Lulu to buy into her hopes of a coalitional politics is also evident with her former mother, Elektra Abundance, who bails her out of jail after the third

melee at Boy Lounge. Blanca expresses curiosity about her adversary's sudden kindness, asking, "Why did you help me out?" ("Access" 59:35). Elektra rejoins, "Why do you think?" (59:40).

> Blanca: Because you understand what I'm trying to do by getting into this bar.
>
> Elektra: Have you lost your mind? Did you not see me back there with that policeman? I can gain access to any bar or country club or department store in this city. Your struggle is not my struggle. My struggle is that I was defeated at the balls last week and because you're so distracted with this silliness I have remained in a temporary humiliation. You are not being beaten within an inch of your life in that jail because I need you to be at the ball tomorrow night so I can reclaim my honor. And you will be there, bitch.
>
> Blanca: So that's all that matters to you?
>
> Elektra: That is our place. Our community. The balls were created so we would have somewhere to matter. If you have any aspirations to become a legendary mother you'll get it in your skull that while there are many places for us to find love and adoration in the outside world, in this life, yes, the balls are all that matters (59:50).

The above conversation parallels the dialogue between Blanca and Dean St. Rogers about the centrality of ball culture to an eager and overzealous Damon. Blanca is usually the one stressing how the world of house and ballroom is lifegiving, yet here she seems to want more. In highlighting the riffs between Blanca and Lulu, and Blanca and Elektra respectively, as they negotiate the worlds within which they exist, I do not mean to imply judgement on any one of the women's particular response to hostility. And while the series wants the viewer to connect with Blanca since it is her story that gets the most narrative treatment, *Pose* still does not privilege her version of activism.

While Lulu theorizes and recognizes a trans woman's place via a kind of experienced social hierarchy, Elektra centers her world and concern only around the glitz of ballroom, and Blanca imagines something that is more future oriented, perhaps a Muñozian glance ahead to a coalitional community. Yet even as Blanca desires this inclusive otherwise world, *Pose's* lesson is that she (Blanca) can help create this ethos, it is all a matter of thinking and acting locally. While Blanca wants all of NYC to be a place where she and her family belong, it turns out this is exactly what she has been facilitating within her Bronx apartment in the House of Evangelista, a different world. In this way, by the end of season one, the 1980s house and ballroom scene becomes articulated as both a refuge from and replacement of the likes of Boy Lounge. And the message Elektra delivers when bailing Blanca out of jail is that trans people like them create ballroom to have community and "while there are many places for us to find love and adoration in the outside world, in this life, yes, the balls are all that matters" ("Access" 59:55). This stinging line is apropos for Elektra to deliver since, at this point in the series, she is sexually linked to a white man who ensures her financial stability while fetishizing her transness. When Elektra decides to pursue gender affirming surgery her suitor quickly moves on to the next trans woman, leaving Elektra deflated. And so, her point here is that while the outside world may contain patches of those who adore their transness, their power and influence (particularly hers) rests within the ballroom scene. That is, to Elektra ballroom means somewhere to reign and for Blanca the house and ball scene ultimately becomes the place to create the world she wants to see, and this is the House of Evangelista.

Blanca, Elektra, and Lulu all consider a facet of self-care in their ways of dealing with antagonism. That is, they each consider what is best for the lives they experience. Additionally, all three women deploy ways of knowing and being that constitute an audacity to be, or an

unapologetic existence, which is surely activism in a world that seeks their erasure. The existence of Blanca, Lulu, and Elektra as trans subjects of 1980s NYC is in and of itself revolutionary—whether choosing to watch TV at home, walking a ball, or refusing to leave a gay bar until given equal service. The experiences they share about surviving a world in which spite can be the norm is fleshed out by sista-talk where they offer each other life lessons, debate, and hash out ideas to explore similarities and differences, ultimately representing the 1980s as a decade in which trans women brought rich perspectives to the communities they engendered and were a part.

Revolutionary Acts

When *Pose's* season one introduced Damon, a Black dancer and small-town teenager to Ricky, a Black urban street kid from New York City, those who pay particular attention to popular culture found themselves rooting for the seemingly impossible—a Black gay love story. Writer Royce Dunmore at the viral news aggregate *Globalgrind* demonstrates this point:

> What makes Ricky's character so interesting is that he constantly went against expectation that society, and I myself, put on Black men. In his debut scene, I assumed he was just another masculine heartbreaker who was only there for eye candy and a steamy sex scene. However, throughout season one, he proved he had the discipline to not only walk in a House, but to also maintain a relationship with Damon. Despite their eventual breakup, it was refreshing to watch two Black gay men be in a committed relationship, which unfortunately is a rarity on T.V. (NP)

Dunmore's reaction is emotional but also rooted in data, since the majority of LGBTQ characters on television have been non-Black and the overwhelming number of same-sex couples onscreen

have been white or interracial.[17] Yet I contend that *Pose* provides a dynamic look at the late 1980s, in part, through the nurturance of Damon and Ricky Evangelista's budding romance, highlighting not only how HIV/AIDS impacts the teenagers, but also how Black gay love is present and sustainable within their worlds. This ethos within which Black (gay) love exists between men represents a radical politics of Black queer life. And while Dunmore's use of "committed" in the quote above may raise questions for some about respectability, I read his deployment of the term as less about relationship exclusivity and more about seeing two Black men continuously choosing each other in world ravaged by HIV/AIDS and a social scene in which whiteness is articulated as most desirable. Damon and Ricky's love story exemplifies part of Joseph Beam's maxim, "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 1980s," which I further expand on below (Beam).

An internet search for Beam's adage about Black men loving Black men returns a list of think pieces by scholar-activists like Charles Stephens and Darnell Moore, as well as reflections from Black staffers working within organizations like The San Francisco AIDS Project (NP). With continued scrolling even Pinterest boards are revealed, hosting contemporary and historical images of Black men warmly embracing each other. Beam's oft-cited term, written within the inaugural issue of *Black/ Out: The Magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays* (1986), was and remains for so many, a multifaceted clarion call.[18] And while at present, many interpret Beam's contention to only be about romantic partnerships, Beam was focused on

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[17] Angela Jorgensen conducted an analysis in 2012 finding that most same-sex couples on television were interracial: https://www.overthinkingit.com/2012/07/11/gender-race-homosexuality-television-statistics/
More recent reviews by Taylor Henderson note the increase in representation of Black LGBTQ people on television but not necessarily as couples: https://www.pride.com/tv/2019/7/30/31-tv-shows-excellent-black-lgbtq-characters#media-gallery-media-8

[18] Joseph Beam also used the phrase "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 1980s" in a 1985 issue of Boston's *Gay Community News.* Beam penned, "Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgement of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent. These days the nights are cold-blooded and the silence echoes with complicity."

Black and gay men doing their part to nurture community and practice self-care in the face of the 1980s AIDS epidemic.

According to Beam, Black people (men in particular) must continue demanding equitable services from public health organizations designed to address HIV. We must hold ourselves accountable through healthy living while simultaneously caring for those who may be ill, because "the State has never been concerned with the welfare of Black people" (Beam, 9). Beam's charge resonates today as State actors continue to deny personhood (refusing clean water, COVID health disparities) to Black subjects at the same time Black queers facilitate direct action to create networks of care hoping to fill the lacuna left by the purposeful destruction of social safety nets.

And for so many who are attuned to media and culture, another implied meaning of "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act…" is a call for a visual paradigm shift. That is, Beam's contention is not just understood to reference what Black men should do and need as it relates to physical health, it is also about the opportunities for Black gay men to see each other involved in love and care and what that act of seeing can do to engender community (Nero). While not a study concerned with audience reception, I want to conclude this chapter by considering how *Pose's* representation of Black gay men caring for and loving one another situates it within Beam's revolutionary potential, which is that Black gay love, in general, endures even through social strife. In what follows, I explore Damon and Ricky's pairing and then move to other ways Black gay men within the series work to educate each other about sex and HIV, all while health networks were under-resourced and cultural humility in delivering healthcare to Black gay men in particular was seldom considered.

Meeting late one evening after a ball, Ricky is intrigued by the Evangelista family and more specifically by its youngest member, Damon. He approaches the dancer as he sits atop a set of stairs outside of the ballroom where performances are held. Though reserved at first, Damon takes a liking to this new guy, mocking him for wearing too much cologne and indulging his stories about mopping (stealing) his tank top from Macy's. Ricky asks Damon out for a slice of pizza and a stroll. When Ricky saunters off to grab his belongings Damon expresses excitement about what is to come next. Like any curious parent, Blanca emerges and asks Damon about the conversation. Damon quips, "He asked me if I can go on a date. Can I go?" ("Access" 9:01). Blanca replies, "he looks like trouble. But they're always the ones I like, too" (9:02). With specific instructions to not do "anything stupid" and to be back at home by 3 A.M., Damon heads out with Ricky for their first date (9:05).

While out, Ricky and Damon sit at the Manhattan piers debating the hype around rising star Janet Jackson. Damon is pro-Janet, expressing admiration for her stepping outside of the Jackson family spotlight to pursue her own dreams, steps he hopes to follow. Damon jokes that in 20 years Ricky will recall the conversation and understand Damon being right about Janet's longevity. Ricky enjoys Damon's prediction, taking the opportunity to put his arm around his date. "You think we're gonna know each other in 20 years?" Ricky asks ("Access" 10:32). "I dunno. I hope," Damon replies (10:38). Damon cautiously lays his head on Ricky's shoulder, seemingly worried about who might be watching the pair. Ricky tells his date, "It's cool. We're with our people. No one's gonna do anything" (10:46). Ricky then rises slowly saying, "I want to show you something" (10:58). The two run off together into an abandoned warehouse located alongside the piers.

In the warehouse, Ricky plays hide-and-seek with Damon. The two find each other when Ricky lets out a loud "Boo!" ("Access" 11:46). Damon jumps and quickly finds himself wrapped in Ricky's arms preparing for a kiss. Nervous, Damon admits, "I don't know how to do this" (12:06). The dancer reveals that he has never intimately kissed someone. Ricky takes Damon's hands as they twirl around dancing. Damon's back is now against a wall with Ricky in front of him. When Damon suggests slowing things down, Ricky insists, "I'm in love with you…it's like I've known you my whole life…come on let's have some fun before you meet someone better" (12:49). Damon argues that he will not meet anyone better as Ricky insists the dancer is going to be famous one day. Damon tells Ricky he is unprepared for sex. Initially, Ricky seems offended by Damon's caution, thinking the dancer dislikes him. But the two agree to go on a second date, slow things down, an attempt to be more intentional about building a bond. *Pose* is careful to present Ricky's desire for Damon as multidimensional. The street kid seeks Damon's social companionship and his body, evidenced by Ricky being heartbroken when the second date at a pizza shop goes awry. In this way the series does not one-dimensionally portray Ricky as someone opposite to Damon's sexual naïveté and instead focuses on how the two have different priorities: Ricky wants to spend lots of time together as a couple while Damon privileges his dance artistry.

Blanca is awake when Damon returns home. The teen has stayed out past curfew and Blanca wishes to address his tardiness. She is also interested in hearing the details of his first date. Blanca expresses relief when she learns Damon and Ricky did not have sex. But the mother insists that she and Damon have the "sex talk" to prepare him for an obvious eventuality. In a jovial but informative manner, Blanca explains to Damon the logistics of being a sexual top or bottom. "Don't ever give away your gifts," Blanca warns her son, after educating him about HIV

transmission (“Access” 19:29). Her warning mirrors something more traditional, like a mother talking to a daughter about the pressures of teen sex, except here Blanca is focused on educating Damon about HIV. When Damon says that his father previously gave him an awkward sex speech about women, one can conclude that the discussion with Blanca may be the first time he has engaged with an older/parental figure about gay sex. In the end, the dialogue between Blanca and Damon highlights the lack of spaces for young Black gay men to discuss their sexuality with each other or adults who have the requisite knowledge and understanding of their sexual culture.

When the time comes for Ricky and Damon to meet again, a scheduling conflict arises. Helena St. Rogers, Damon’s dance teacher, invites him to the ballet on the same night he is to join Ricky for pizza. Damon choses to attend the performance, leaving Ricky frustrated and alone. By presenting Damon with the dilemma to either pursue his dreams or the man who tickles his interest, *Pose* presents the challenges of negotiating young infatuation with more rigid responsibility. For instance, Ricky is insecure about his self-worth, seeing any ebb in Damon’s attention as a sign he may be inferior, and Damon is walking a fine line between both adhering to Blanca’s house rules (which include prioritizing his education) and the spark that Ricky makes him feel. To resolve this tension, the series features Ricky accompanying Damon to the ballet for their second date, allowing their two worlds to cohere rather than collide. Eventually Damon approaches Blanca about considering Ricky as the fifth member of Evangelista. Blanca is hesitant because of Ricky’s proclivity toward stealing. The mother exclaims, “I’m not running a halfway home. We’re a family and I’m building a legacy. I’ll admit you got something special, but you’re cocky. Judges don’t want arrogance, they want confidence” (“Giving and Receiving” 8:08). When Blanca mentions judges Damon becomes excited because he knows this means

Blanca also sees Ricky's potential for winning trophies and therefore will agree to admit him to Evangelista, at least for a trial run. Ricky becomes Damon's love interest and house brother.

Later in the season Damon's health becomes an issue when he becomes feverish. Confused about his consistent high temperature, Damon approaches Ricky about HIV. Ricky has never been tested. He informs Damon of his sexual relations with around 50 people but insists the dancer not worry because he mostly plays the role of top and therefore is at low risk for HIV transmission. Blanca overhears Ricky's ill-informed logic and consults with Pray Tell regarding her thoughts about how to facilitate HIV education. But Blanca finds a different kind of discussion ensuing with Pray. When she suggests Ricky and Damon be tested so they protect both themselves and others, Pray Tell reveals that he stopped getting tested after his partner was diagnosed with AIDS and he saw firsthand the effects of AZT, an early medication for the treatment of HIV/AIDS. Blanca challenges Pray Tell's critiques of AZT, but Pray retorts, "I know that Ronald Reagan will not say the word 'AIDS.' Health insurance will not cover any treatments. The world wants us dead. They don't think this is a plague. They think it's some sort of divine justice or Darwin's answer for sodomy" ("The Fever" 31:14). However, Pray Tell later escorts Papi, Damon, and Ricky out for a meal, once around the table he notifies the group of his intention to bring them for HIV testing.

Though Damon's unknown sickness has subsided he expresses interest in HIV testing, believing the process will be less scary if all the men do it together. Papi informs the group that he has sexual relations with women and men, and Ricky asserts that he is not quite sure if he wants to know his status. Pray Tell creates anxiety around the table when he suggests that everyone responds differently to the disease, but once you have seroconverted you are on borrowed timed. Pray talks this way to convince the Evangelista children about the urgency of

testing. Pray Tell's attitude is more confident than a few days prior when he and Blanca talked, but here he is playing the role of older Black gay mentor since during the conversation described above, Blanca left him with an impression that testing does not mean the end.

After undergoing their initial HIV screening, the group reconvenes to learn their results. As their numbers are called Papi, Ricky, and Damon all find that their readings have come back negative. Pray Tell on the other hand learns that he is positive. When the nurse assures him they ran the test twice he is filled with emotion, having a breakdown in the exam room. Pray Tell informs the tester; this is the moment he has dreaded most. When Pray Tell returns to the Evangelista men waiting outside of the room he lies, informing them that he too is negative. Damon and Ricky leave the clinic with their arms fixed tightly around each other. Later, when Pray Tell reveals to Blanca that he is positive, the pair cry. Pray Tell is especially worried that he will be treated the same ways he has seen hospitals treat his partner and other friends who have contracted the disease. Blanca reminds him to focus on the present, suggesting he holds on to hope for a cure. Pray Tell insists, "Baby, they don't want to cure it" ("The Fever" 52:20). The two sit close with their heads touching as Pray utters that he is not ready to die.

If as Black gay progenitor Joseph Beam declared, Black men loving Black is the revolutionary act of the 1980s, then *Pose* represents a Black radical queerness manifested. The series does this in at least two ways. One is through the routineness with which it depicts Black men caring for one another. Within the world of *Pose*, Beam's popular contention gets mapped across not just romantic pairings but also within mentor/mentee relationships and close associations. This is most clearly demonstrated through Pray Tell's help navigating the young men, Damon and Ricky in particular, through the process of HIV testing and awareness. In showing how Black gay communities did much of their own educating regarding AIDS, *Pose*

allows the apathy of U.S. leadership in addressing the crisis to be named, highlighting Ronald Reagan as a major cause of decimated public health infrastructure. The spotlight on Reagan only happens because Black gay men are forced to become champions of their own collective health.

HIV/AIDS is carefully addressed within the series, allowing Ricky and Damon's relationship to not be marred by a kind of always-impending doom of seroconversion, while still paying attention to the realities of those who might be suffering. In fact, the series represents HIV awareness as part of Ricky and Damon's upbringing as Black gay men rather than as a central feature of their relationship. Instead, what is mostly depicted about their romance is the idealism of young Black gay love. Their nascent affection looks like a quarrel over the longevity of Janet Jackson's career, being stood up in a pizzeria, or the embarrassment of telling your "crush" you've never been kissed. Through the everyday ordinariness of Damon and Ricky's pairing, *Pose* provides much needed representation to Black gay men who seldom see themselves in intra-racial relationships within media.

Within the realm of its depictions, *Pose* locates Black gay communities as home to a host of subjects with a range of backgrounds. Damon and Ricky are but one example. The men are from differing worlds which underscores why Ricky repeatedly calls Damon "bougie." While Damon's nickname is jocular, and most likely aimed at his formal education and city-life naiveté, it works on *Pose* to present a point that Black gay pairings exist. *Pose's* character dimensionality allows viewers, me included, to experience a mediated version of the Black gay past that refuses to be monolithic. *Pose* presents the 1980s as a time when Black and brown queers, feminists, womanists, and revolutionaries of all stripes joined to address a host of community concerns. While HIV/AIDS was one specific motivating factor for coalition building,

it did not as a singularity supplant any of the work on community, love, and legacy; in fact the reality of disease made that work even more essential.

Conclusion

Pose demonstrates a radical articulation of Black gay (queer) life through the House of Evangelista and its focus on social positionality, the dialogic theorizing among Black and brown women, and how those formulations illuminate life's many lessons. And finally, through how the series showcases Black gay men expressing a quotidian love and care for one another, through both romantic and platonic attachments. These undercurrents lead me toward the chapter's goal, which is to reflect on and channel what Cathy Cohen might contend is a kind of palimpsestic Black feminist and gay past—one the scholar fears is fading under contemporary rewritings that locate the 1980s as a decade in which Blacks were preoccupied with only a fight against HIV/AIDS. *Pose*, to the contrary, shows Black feminists/womanists and gay communities, in all their "fullness, idealism, and ordinariness" acting as a mediated yet living memory for what is surely a complicated past worthy of sustained nuancing (Cohen 141).

CONCLUSION

In a recent article decrying Hollywood's dearth of Black queer love stories, Artel Great, a Black cinema historian offers, "One of the inherent powers of film and television productions is it allows for the expansion of broader horizons. These art forms allow us to occupy the subject position of another person" (Green NP). I take Great's rumination, that film and TV can broaden perspectives in a few ways, one is that (Black) representation can serve to facilitate audiences seeing the world in multitude, and hence filling in gaps left by a white and male dominated U.S. industry that often centers itself onscreen. Secondly, Great speaks to a particular opportunity for cultural studies scholars desiring to center their work on the possibilities inherent within media production. He is in many ways asserting that we must take film and television seriously. For me, this is both about recognizing the ways television offers us insight into sociopolitical content offscreen and also using media studies to push the bounds of what we consider critical scholarship and how we can use a reparative approach to ask what texts might be doing rather than striking them out for their representative limitations.

Black Queer TV: Reparative Viewing and the Sociopolitical Questions of Our Now is a dissertation concerned with Black representation, reparative readings, and the uptick in media content depicting the experiences of Black queer characters and subjects. I make the calculation that increased representation allows for a consideration of Black queer television that moves beyond whether a series offers positive or negative depictions. Chapter one traipses through the sophisticated and often broad realm of theory, to make the claim that Black southern queers confound what we know about futurity because of their racial, class, and geographic realities. Chapter two deep dives into neoliberalism's cultural residue, exploring the condition as a transformed cultural logic that sees family as transactional yet loving and Black authenticity as a

matter of proximity to poor urban populations. Neoliberalism is less of a disappearing phenomenon and more of a mutable force. Chapter three asks us to consider how a celebrated television series allows us to imagine fuller pasts, to see Black people as capable of simultaneity, since we at once mourned, survived, and resisted HIV and AIDS and crafted robust community and cultural production during the 1980s.

What's Up Next?

The reparative approach in this dissertation is not a way to evade tackling the realities of social antagonisms or to neutralize critical scholarship on Black queer representation to glorify a progressive narrative that we, Black gays, have made it on TV. Approaching this work through a reparative lens suggests recognition of a genealogy of scholarship that has come before, a scholarship that reckoned with a media industry in which Black queer representation was/is often contoured around the caricaturing of Black LGBTQ people. But in this moment, with a variety of Black queer experiences on TV, a reparative reading is a next step. It is one way to think beyond the perils of antiblackness to consider what other things media depictions of race, gender, class, and sexuality allow us to imagine. Can these discussions be had if they do not lead back to the problematic from which they spawned? What this study makes clear is that race is an always and already compounding factor, yet the reality of racism means that like our worlds offscreen, representation has also begun to center imagination, pushing boundaries, seeing Blackness as sources of inspiration rather than a feature of oppression. This reimagining of Blackness comes from mostly young people, who chant "Black Lives Matter" and call for public and private institutions to move beyond benevolent platitudes to take seriously the conditions of Black people.

While a reparative approach, by way of its name, is a kind of remaking of what has come prior, it also stands as a marker of possibility and of opening new futures. In this way, reparative readings glimpse what can be next on the horizon after a study like this. One way to peruse Black queer representation is to go behind the cameras to explore the nexuses between what is onscreen and who has put it there, beyond the logic of consumer demand. This is in some ways what Charles I. Nero was hinting at when he posed, "Why are gay ghettoes white?" Nero sees a bit of a revolving door with contemporary (societal) culture: representations in media take on the stereotypes of a population, while society takes on the stereotypes perpetuated via media. In the end, Black gay men are given the "shortest straw" as the group gets represented and stereotyped as imposters and left out of majoritarian queer worldmaking. The way out of this deleterious loop is not a matter of kneeling in prayer, but to see to it that those creating the stories and penning the histories are largely those who experience the fullness of a Black queer identity, those who have navigated social strife while also forging life-saving communal connections.

While my focus in this dissertation is concerned with what is onscreen there is something to be said about content creation. Why has this uptick in Black gay media representation happened? Is it about a changing viewership? A need to be more socially just? Black and brown queer directors being *en vogue*? While I continue to believe that "the moment of production is less salient than the vagaries of reception; that a work is a capitalist commodity or the creation of a male-dominated culture does not determine ahead of time what its meanings and effects will be," I still view the process of production as a feature just as illuminating as reception (Felski 511). What does it mean that *Pose* and *Empire* have queer producers and directors? While outside the scope of this study, these queries remain as a kind of mantle for other researchers to pick up and clarify.

Web Series

When I opened this conclusion, I spoke to scholar Artel Great's notion that film and TV can foster nascent ways to think via seeing someone else's story highlighted onscreen. Yet the *Guardian* article in which Great is quoted is another critique of the ways mainstream television and film continue to elide the love stories of Black queer people, despite Oscar winning movies like *Moonlight* and Emmy winning series like *Pose.* Filling in this lacuna are web series, which have taken on a life of their own, subject to smaller budgets, lack of studio backing, but created with the brilliance of everyday Black queer people who are inspired to tell culturally specific stories in their own voices. Research on web series are a next step after a study like this. These features have the potential to be reparative because they are often created with less concern for broad audience approval, allowing instead a kind of storytelling that unapologetically centers Black queer and trans experiences for viewers who hold those same identities.

Blackness is Fullness

In the end, what is at stake in a dissertation such as this is seeing and understanding Blackness in its multitude. It is being able to view television always and already with an understanding that your suspicion is one part of the many ways to interpret a story, whether you are casually viewing or looking to do more of an academic reading. Mixed in with this idea that there is an uptick in representations of Black queer subjects/characters on TV is also the notion that representations give us insights into the questions we ponder inside classrooms. All too often scholars have looked toward Blackness only to reckon with how televisual depictions fail or surface as limited. This dissertation takes a different approach, to imagine how a group of Black southern dancers trouble the theory we laud for its broad applicability via illuminating their own worldmaking, or how a television show featuring a Black wealthy family allows us to reinterpret

neoliberalism as a transformed cultural logic. And lastly, this study explores how a series set with a backdrop of the 1980s AIDS epidemic in Black communities, also helps us see the power of Black coalition building and Black trans worldmaking.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick mentions that "what we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture–even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (150-151). I would add that in addition to how a reparative praxis helps us discover new ideas within texts, there is also what we learn in doing the work, that is, in thinking "reparatively." I take the late scholar's point here, particularly as I see backlash to demands for intentional representation from Black activists and thinkers. Calls for diverse Black characters on TV are often met with attempts to mute race, sexuality, and gender experiences without recognition that dampening difference only reifies whiteness, maleness, and straightness as the norm. With that, there is my own intentionality in creating this dissertation, and that is to position my scholarship as work that strives to think beyond outlined possibilities by engaging locally and specifically. This dissertation intentionally pushes back on the idea that research must explore and account for all of Blackness to make a sophisticated claim. Race is vast and just highlighting a piece of media representation centering Blackness allows us to learn more about what we can do within cultural studies.

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