A Good Black Manhood Is Hard To Find: Toward More Transgressive Reading Practices

Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr.

ABSTRACT: The adage, “a good black man is hard to find,” has been a common refrain in black cultural communities for decades. Using this common saying as a departure point, this essay turns to a similar sentiment within scholarship and challenges readers of black men to move toward more transgressive reading practices. Using performative texts, this essay explores how we might develop new reading practices of a “complex black manhood,” moving beyond a good/bad binary. Jamal Joseph’s pastiche visual collection, Tupac Shakur Legacy and Tarrell Alvin McCraney’s play, The Brothers Size teaches us how to read black men’s bodies and practices of masculinity in new ways. This essay explores how both Joseph and McCraney activate a black radical imaginary that does not begin with damage, but tells an uneasy and complex narrative of black manhood through (re)presentations and resistance to the dominant gaze toward black male deviance. The authors of these texts encourage new reading practices—of “what might be” in black manhood—which move us away from canonical prejudices and reorients us toward new, complex (de)scripts for black men.
... the way our society is working now, only negative images of the black community are portrayed world wide, only those are put so that I can read em’!—Tupac Shakur, “Tupac Shakur Speaks”

Black males today live in a world that pays them the most attention when they are violently acting out. —bell hooks, We Real Cool

I am large, I contain multitudes. —Walt Whitman, “Song for Myself”

Everywhere—from the grocery store, on the train, at church, and even across holiday family dinners—I have heard black women (and some men) scream with great anxiety that, “a good black man is hard to find!” This has been a historic lament that articulates an absence of “descent, quality brothaz,”black men who are ready to treat their partners in ideal and respectable ways. These cadres of black men are those who “got it together,” “are on point,” “have it goin on,” or simply “take care of their responsibilities.” When presented with such concerns, I often return to the wisdom of my grandmother, who told my cousin, “you just ain’t looking in the right places, honey”—her own way of challenging these laments, while reminding my cousins that good black men do exist. My grandmother’s retort notes something most important about the claim that there is some lack of good black men: it is most contingent upon where he/she goes to find the black man of his/her dreams, as well as what the seeker understands as good. As much as I hate to contradict grandma’s theorization, I have to be the bad grandson and suggest that most of these evaluations of men are rendered as the result of bad reading practices. Thus, this essay suggests a modification to grandma’s emphasis on the location of looking, toward developing new reading practices for black men’s complex performances of manhood.

This dilemma, of locating the “good” in black men or ideas of manhood, is not one exclusive to those seeking relational partners. In fact, this conundrum is at the core of academic and popular discourse that explores the interplay of race and gender. How do we, in an age where blackness is always already demonized or made dangerous, carve a space for the “good” in blackness and black people? While the concerns of the academy have definitely shifted away from positivist constructions, there is a clear longing for redemption for the circulation of nebulous ideas about black men. While so much of popular discourse around finding “good black men” is one of ontological suspicion, it should be more aptly understood as a preoccupation with perceived ill action.

Today, in the age of President Barack Obama, much of what is understood as good in black men is shaped by ideas of exceptional acts. The surprise over Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign brought my attention to America’s lack of faith in black men’s possibilities. In addition, the continuous
construction of President Obama as exceptional affirmed that there is an ideological ghost that haunts black men—an archive of black men acting out. While this ideological move is not new in terms of America’s shaping of blackness more generally, today the actual roles of black men in these unprecedented positions are beginning to reinforce and uproot many age-old “exceptional” constructions. Here, black male figures that possess character and charisma identical to Barack Obama are considered exceptions within the larger pool of black men, who too often function within enigmatic cultural registers.2 Ironically, even in the esteemed position of president, Obama is still understood as always having a propensity toward “terror.” Hence, the seemingly ridiculous, but real, debate over his religious affiliation, which (in)advertently suggests he is a part of a “terrorist” lineage.

Together, the inability to see black men as “good,” and to disaggregate blackness from deviance, situates men who move outside the norm of demonized blackness into an “exceptional” category. As a result, we are always left with “typical vs. exceptional,” “hero vs. villain,” and “good vs. bad” frameworks that unnaturally situate black men in either/or existences rather than both/and positionalities. Indeed, media has enforced a racialized “script,” which forces black men to carry such singular fictions (Jackson, 2007, p. 22). This script has been not only adopted by dominant society, but also within marginalized groups in the form of racial doubt. What is established, in this oscillation between the good and the bad, is what Frank Rudy Cooper calls representations of “bipolar Black Masculinity.” Here, “a Bad Black Man… is crime-prone and hypersexual and a Good Black Man… distances himself from blackness and associates with white norms” (Cooper, 2005, p. 853). Consequently, how we read and (mis)understand black men becomes most relevant to this discussion. Rather than search or privilege some idealized version of the “good,” I would like to offer an alternative reading of black men as always already complex, multiple, and beyond “either/or.” It is imperative that as scholars and readers of gender we move beyond and against the “bipolar” black masculine representations.

This critical essay is largely a response to the anxieties of scholars and friends who often tire of having to assess what black men look like while “acting out,” but desire ways we may ever deem black men “good.” While the commitment here is not to create positive representations of black men, it is important that we challenge the rhetorical weight given to negative categorizations that are continuously coupled with black men and manhood. Thus, this is a rhetorical strategy that I argue could pose serious threats to the neatly packaged demonization that has discursively handcuffed the black masculine. If we commit to pushing “good” beyond the complimentary and toward the richly complex,
we are better equipped to deem some black male everyday performances, imagining, and lives as representative of a “good black manhood.” Rather than do what Patricia J. Williams (1995) has called “exceptionalizing those few blacks [society] acknowledges as good” (p. 241), I wish to draw attention to performances by black men that offer no easy resolution to society’s anxieties, while also moving away from reaffirming such angst.

In moving toward visual and dramatic performance, we are able to better see how reading practices can be both manufactured and mainstreamed. Performance, contrary to popular belief, depends on complex reading practices for its success and acts as a pedagogy for how reorientation acts to reconstitute (black male) subjects. Much of the excitement of performance can be found in the always anticipatory “what might be there” in the visual representation of things, individual characters, or the complex unfolding of the plot or narrative. The intentional exploration of “what might be there” in performance is instructive as we examine “what might be there” in black manhood, moving beyond historical and ideological assumptions that presently frame both our critique and common public imaginings of the black and masculine. If we move to a “what might be there” of black manhood, rather than “what is there,” we advance an ideological gaze that intentionally attempts to read more than is evident and available within “common” knowledge. My supposition here is that performance shows us a site where intentional choices are made to provoke and conjure particular reading practices. Such a manipulation of the gaze, in turn, may manufacture black male subjects that are understood with a richer complexity and defy common, mainstream perceptions of blackness and black manhood.

In essence, a “good black manhood” is a complex representation, which requires intentionally complex reading practices. Hence, it is a productive exercise to bring attention to “other” performances of black manhood that cannot be enveloped in the categories of bankruptcy and corruption that have become quite synonymous with the black and the masculine. Evelyn Tuck (2009) argues that a major problematic trend when dealing with “native communities, city communities, and other disenfranchised communities... is damage-centered research” (p. 409). In line with this thinking, it may be necessary—at least, for this project—to place a “moratorium on damage-centered research” (Tuck, 2009, p. 423). Rather than begin with a framework that assumes black men are broken or trapped, I believe it is more apt and appropriate to unpack the complex makeup of black male communities, which understands itself not as “hyper,” but pushes toward greater humanization. This humanizing framework—I am calling complex manhood—borrows from Avery Gordon’s (1997) notion of “complex personhood” where “all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and
recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (p. 4). Within this cultural framework, black men’s performances of masculinity are not inundated with any totalizing narrative or that of anomaly, but always imagined and understood as being multiple and socio-historically produced. Our assessments of black men from the “complex” vantage point always begins from the place of understanding masculinities as always troubled, but simultaneously potentially transgressive. Furthermore, this critical and necessary move demands that we not only recognize black men’s performances as complex and diverse, but also employ more transgressive reading practices of black male performances. In some senses my grandmother’s earlier response approximates a transgressive reading practice—as she offers a “critical generosity” that moves beyond quotidian readings of damaged masculinity toward a need to “acknowledge the ideological systems that promote canonical prejudice” (Roman, 1998, p. xxvi).

Such “canonical prejudice” is often inflected in the tradition of scholarship on black masculinity, as many understandably seek to critique black men’s subscription to patriarchal norms. Too often in academic engagements with black male subjectivity, there seems to be a reinforcement of the idea that black masculinity is a failing structure that unsuccessfully passes itself off as a working and wealthy performance of manhood. While there is some truth to this claim—as masculinity has been typically constructed in a way that produces damaging and dangerous effects—it is only partial, not whole. In contemporary black masculinity studies, the critical aims are often to deconstruct and begin a conversation of revising black masculine performances (Connor, 1995; Blount & Cunningham, 1999; Wallace, 2002; Harris, 2005; Hopkinson & Moore, 2006; Neal, 2006; Richardson, 2007). This work, while important and necessary on some fronts, is incomplete and insufficient. It seems that such important and necessary work always walks the fine line between attempting to not demonize black men through critique, while still doing so through re-presentation and reiteration of all that is troubling in constructions of black manhood. Indeed, this is the risk that we supposedly take in all critical scholarship. However, I am arguing that in the context of representing black men this is not always necessary and potentially harmful to the aim of moving closer to humanizing the black body within discourse.3 In this essay, my move toward discussing manhood—in lieu of masculinity’s loaded work—is a move toward a greater recognition of how men articulate gender as an everyday “practice of improvisation inside a scene of constraint” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Particularly, I am interested in how we might better approximate a reading of black male practices and performances, which are arguably more aligned with black men’s understanding of self within everyday life, rather than the reductive public imaginary.
Indeed, black queer studies have engaged discussions of masculinity through the highlighting of more transgressive potential for the black male body. This conversation, however, is generally forged to discuss black gay performances of masculinity, rather than a more generalizable understanding (Reid-Pharr, 2001; Johnson, 2003; McBride, 2005; Alexander, 2006). The lack of such conversations outside of LGBT contexts suggests something that I find uncomfortable and inaccurate: the only queer that can queer in the black context is an actual queer. As a member of the black queer community I do believe that black queer cultures do much to transgress artificial social boundaries, but I firmly believe that many queer experiences are present and performed daily by those whose sexual desire may not be articulated for same-sex. These men, who are black and straight-identified, simply don’t do straight the way straight may traditionally be done. If queer is a “destabilizing of norms,” when advancing notions of complex manhood, we must include black men who engage in a queer politic that potentially transforms common perceptions of themselves. Seeing the lack of complexity and richness given to public representations of black masculinity, it seems necessary to remark that any affirming or nuanced images of black men are themselves queer. While this essay is not about queering black men or manhood, it is about beginning to move beyond totalizing narratives of black men and seeing all of us as more complex subjects.

To illustrate how we may move in this direction, this essay turns to two texts—Jamal Joseph’s pastiche collection, *Tupac Shakur Legacy* and Tarrell Alvin McCraney’s play, *The Brothers Size*. My close reading of Tupac Shakur’s public image as a gangsta rapper looks closely at the characterization and contradictions present within actual representations in the media and his self-presentation in musical lyrics. Here, I illuminate how the “thug” script of Tupac over-determined the possibilities for his body in the context of hip-hop history and cultural space. In addition, I emphasize how his reverence amongst hip-hop constituents suggests very complex reading practices that move beyond dominant media portrayals and simplistic “gangsta rap” formulas. Secondly, I examine Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play, *The Brothers Size*, a story of two “brothas” and a friend, who all choose different paths in life. While each has his own purpose in the world that McCraney creates, it is clear that he intentionally disallows for the good guy/bad guy construction by viewers of the play. The “suspension of damage” in this play offers an example of how one can use the play script as a place to imagine a complex manhood, without apology or apprehension. In *The Brothers Size*, we witness contradiction, possibility, and “goodness,” within black men as a natural fact, rather than as an exception. Most importantly, this essay explores how both Joseph and McCraney activate a black radical imaginary that does not begin with
damage, but tells an uneasy and complex narrative of black manhood. Together, these two sites of black male performance offer a place where a “good black manhood” might be found. But, more importantly, the authors of these texts encourage new reading practices that move us away from canonical prejudices toward more complex personhood—challenging us to reorient ourselves toward new, complex (de)scripts for black men.

**TUPAC SHAKUR: THUG-LOVER-INTELLECTUAL PARADOX?**

In many ways, hip-hop has become the loudspeaker for what constitutes black masculinity worldwide. While it is clearly not the only source of black male representation, it has become a space that, for many, projects the ideals, realities, and complexities of black manhood. Almost 15 years after his death, Tupac Shakur remains a Christ-like figure within the world of hip-hop, forever offering an instructive narrative on the complexities of rap, representation, and racialized gender performance. Indeed, Tupac would be best framed as rapper, actor, poet, and activist—a fuller capsulation of his artistic genius, intellectual offerings, and living complexity. He was probably the most Janus-like figure in hip-hop during the nineties, illustrating multiple sides that often were congruent, contradictory, and controversial. Often labeled as a “gangsta rapper”—a title that overdetermined his career and his death—he proved to be so much more than this. Derek Imawoto (2003) suggests that Tupac molded a “gangster-thug image after being taunted as a kid about being ‘artsy’ and a ‘pretty boy’” (p. 45). I argue here that these features coexisted to construct Tupac’s appealing aesthetic. Rather than contradict or confuse his later performance of thugdom, it enhanced the thug-image. Here, I suggest that the “thug” that Tupac manufactured was informed by a complex manhood, which allowed for duality, multiplicity, and contradiction to live in one body. His version of a thug, while committed to a hardness that responded to “concrete jungles,” also needed a hug. Indeed, Tupac appropriated the term thug in ways that would give him commercial and cultural traction; however, his version of this iconographic “demon of the streets,” attempted to undo the simplistic descriptor and carve a new space for thugdom that moved beyond deviance and criminality. Still, as Charise Cheney (2005) suggests, “the transformation of gangsta rap...proved that this race/gender performance was a dangerous identity politic” (p. 289). Consequently, the advent of a certain style of gangster rap that was adorned with violence and virility, instead of its persistent cultural critique and outrage, reshaped the image and frame within which Tupac and others like him would be understood.
I do not make the previous supposition to suggest that Tupac did not participate in the evils in which he critiqued. However, I agree with what Robin Kelley (1994) so astutely recognizes as the complex participation of black men in problematic acts, guided by a (mis)understanding of manhood largely informed by what the larger society deems as the “price of being baad” (p. 187). Kelley calls back to the use of bad as being at once good and evil, popular and problematic. Unfortunately, the duality is often lost and flattened by the over-determined value and emphasis given to the construction of “gangsta rap” as quintessentially BAD. Reading with this lens—that of the viewer who understands gangster rap on singular terms—enables interpretations of Tupac as only a part of some deviant-thug genealogy. For example, Albert Watson’s (1991) portrait, Tupac Shakur, is often read as an image that encapsulates Tupac’s essence. This image, which was used to promote the “gangster film” Juice (1992), shows Tupac in a hooded jacket holding a small pistol while gazing directly at the camera. While I am not interested in doing a close reading here, I am interested in how the reading and treatment of this image has been given a default status that hinders complex interpretation. In other words, Watson’s portrait alone does not offer a complicated reading, but rather becomes a stand-alone representation that problematically converses with preconceived notions of Tupac as “gangster.” In his book, Constructing the Black Masculine, Maurice Wallace (2002) takes up this emblematic photograph as an example of Watson’s “photographic studies in fetishism” (p. 22). While I agree with this assessment, I also agree that the (mis)use of this photograph as a representative artifact also engages in a different sort of fetishism—the fascination of the reading public with unambiguous imaging. Consequently, Watson’s Tupac is what W. J. T. Mitchell (1995) calls the “metapicture... a representation of a representation” (p. 78), which seems to overdetermine what Tupac Shakur is and gets to be. This image of Watson—free-standing without any accompaniment—disallows for a reading of Tupac beyond the gaze of deviance, limiting the scope of “what might be there.”

No other record of Tupac’s legacy explored the complexity of his manhood more than Jamal Joseph’s collage-like book collection titled, Tupac Shakur Legacy (2006). This pastiche resists creating a “metapicture” or metanarrative, but commits to becoming a multi-genre rerouting of Tupac’s image and ideology. As I opened the text, I was almost overwhelmed by the removable reproductions of handwritten lyrics, notebook pages, and other personal memorabilia that often fell out as I turned from page to page. Images of Tupac as student at Baltimore School of the Arts, juxtaposed with images of him posed in masculine bravado on Baltimore streets. Tupac suited up, tattoo-exposed, and pre-adolescent in form. Diverse images intermixed, juxtaposed, and representative of not only his evolution,
but also his extremely complex subjectivity. What is most evident in this collection is that Joseph approached this creative project moving away from the damage-centered rhetoric that has historically accompanied Tupac Shakur and emphasized the rich tapestry that imbued his life and his meaning. In turn, he teaches us how to read his text for all that “might be there”—both within the collection and Tupac himself.

The first line in the *Tupac Shakur Legacy* collection begins, “Tupac was born in prison before he left the womb” (p. 6). Joseph, aware of how Tupac’s body had been treated historically, uses the truth of his birth as an apropos metaphor for the larger imprisoning discourse that would regulate his image and his life. Indeed, Joseph in his artistic craft moves away from such framing, giving us an opportunity to liberate through our gaze rather than imprison. Beginning the collection with a color photograph of a post-adolescent Tupac sitting outside the driver’s seat of a vehicle, while his mother/activist Afeni Shakur leans against the car while wrapping her arm around his shoulder, paints a more intimate picture. Tupac and his mother are captured smiling, indicative of mother-son love, posing an awareness of the significance of this familial representation. Here, we are introduced to an alternative to the “prison product” narrative. Rather than allowing the carceral structure of prison to determine meaning, Joseph uses Tupac to illustrate how desolate situations can produce multiple outcomes. It is his integral relationship to his mother that produced the song, “Dear Momma” (1995). In this song Tupac professed, “I finally understand for a woman it ain’t easy”—introducing what I arguably would call a feminist enlightening. While he always struggled through his own misogyny, there were clear signs that Tupac possessed a keen awareness of women’s struggle, potential, and body politics (“Brenda Had a Baby,” 1991). Joseph allows for the coexistence of these representations, in a way that fosters a more complex understanding of Tupac, as well as black manhood more generally.

One might presume that being born in the context of prison encouraged a certain bond between Tupac and Afeni, which made itself most evident within the aforementioned image. In fact, Joseph suggests in the juxtaposed written text that being a child of a revolutionary Black Panther Party member meant that Tupac, “came into the world fighting” (2006, p. 6). However, I would confer here with Kobena Mercer (1986) as he quipped, “Black masculinity is a key site of ideology,” where “a major contest of competing forces gets played out” (p. 164). Therefore, the black male subject is always fighting the history of discourses that precede him, surround him, and even exist posthumously. Yet, this fight in which Tupac and others are engaged is so much more than the turf wars of East Coast vs. West Coast—of which we became familiar in the 1990s—but rather, it is a battle
over representation, the gaze. Which Tupac would we see? Rapper? Poet? Son? Actor? Scholar? Joseph, through his medley-like homage in print, attempts to allow all of this to coexist without forcing a choice that would ultimately deplete Tupac’s life narrative of its richness.

Here, I would like to suggest that the crafting of Tupac’s image, the diversity of his body of texts/music constructed an exemplar of the rich fabric of black masculinity that I am suggesting is understated and too often misread. As I move through Jamal Joseph’s *Tupac Shakur Legacy*, we are encouraged to read and interpret many poses throughout the book. The photo-journal aspects alone chronicle Tupac’s development into superstardom and his development into his own versions of manhood. However, the development of these photographs pointed toward the idea of cool poses, rather than a singular cool pose. They show a range of affiliations, rather than an affiliation with one singular style of “thugdom.” By no means is Tupac sainted within Joseph’s text or this essay, but rather he is humanized—given multiple meanings that allow for multiple possibilities.

So often the looking-at of blackness has been understood as always preoccupied with “deviance.” Still, however, there is evidence that there are ways we can look that engage in what might be called an “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 1992, p. 116). I would like to suggest, through this turn to Jamal Joseph’s collection, that there are ways to confound the operative gaze, to give the familiar stereotypes or scripts a foreign look, which may discourage easy assessments. In other words, rather than allowing stereotypes to have gravitas to transform black men into problems, intentional structural arrangements in representation can problematize our viewing practices. As Joseph continues through the text we see him pushing us—the readers of the poems, images, and texts—to understand Tupac not only as a complex artist, but also as a complex person. Tupac’s story, in Joseph’s artistic articulation, is still unfolding through the discourses we construct. Joseph has carved a rich discourse in pastiche—allowing us to glimpse at the multiple “parts” of Tupac’s career. As quickly as one may wish to *mark* Tupac in this collection, the next page reminds us that those very markings are ephemeral, elastic, even dead.

Nonetheless, the metanarrative surrounding Tupac’s career is that of thug. However, what I wish to posit here is that it is a grave oversight to commit his other performances to periphery rather than central, or essential. If we change our reading practices—examining Tupac in his totality—we arrive at a richer meaning of his position both as performer and as hip-hop’s loved martyr. The success of Tupac and his esteemed position as one of the few princes of hip-hop signals something “good” about hip-hop culture that often goes unspoken.
While many have positioned hip-hop as a site of cultural debris—where privilege is given to the vile and the violent—the reverence of Tupac and others like him suggests something different. As a cultural space hip-hop does not simply valorize “black men acting out,” but recognizes hip-hop masculinity as a bricolage rather than as a singular bravado. Is it possible that the complexity, duality, and multifarious nature of performers give much of hip-hop traction? In lieu of technological advances—and the circulation of multiple narratives quickly—readers of images and performance have to enact greater distrust and scrutiny. While my conversation here hinges on the idea that black masculinity in representation suffers from grotesque reduction, it is as imperative to account for how understandings of public readership may also be ridden with trouble. Like Joseph’s arrangement, we must be willing to witness and celebrate the multi-layered spectacles that are black men in the public sphere and disallow for their write-offs as “bad black men.” While there may appear to be a dominant gaze that criminalizes and demonizes such men as Tupac, there are spectators who combat these narrow framings, acting as an already conscious-raising cadre who understands these men as more than the frame. As we begin to produce more complex constructions, commit to more complex reading, and care more about black men as wholes rather than parts, we better activate a critical gaze that can arrive at a good black manhood, “containing multitudes.”

**ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATE MASCULINE UNIVERSE**

Performance is a site where multiple bodies on stage can contest our spectatoral tendencies to have unifocal vision. In what he calls the “brother/sister plays,” Tarell Alvin McCraney chronicles contemporary black experiences, while drawing from elements of ancient West African tradition (Yoruba cosmology). Through a poetic, somewhat staccato tone and a highly minimalist aesthetic, he forces his readers to not only understand the beauty and complexity of blackness, but also allows them to craft their own imagining within the almost barren set on which he plants diverse black bodies. In one of his first plays to be publicly recognized, *The Brothers Size* (2007), he introduces the world of three black men—Ogun Size, Oshoosi (pronounced O-Choose-See) Size, and Elegba. In this play, McCraney carves out a space for rich, complex black masculinities through the use of new dramatic language, an emphasis on “brother-ness,” and a small-scale set that allows for spectator’s to activate their own imaginings. Like August Wilson, McCraney “decenters singular characters by dramatizing communities of black men to depict their various phases of
identity formation” (Clark, 2002, p. 101). This approach enables *The Brothers Size* to erect different reading practices for its audience—one where black men’s personal stories escape the metonymic trap, but rather act as filters to both the intersections of black men’s lives and their unique departures.

The *Brothers Size* introduces us to three “black” men. Ogun and Oshoosi are biological brothers and Elegba is Oshoosi’s “brother from another mother” whom he met in prison. In this play, from the beginning (as Elegba and Oshoosi have been released from prison and subjected to Ogun’s fatherly wisdom) to the end (where Oshoosi is set up by Elegba and disappears, with Ogun’s help), we see a struggle for freedom and independence. This play poses a challenge to contemporary constructions of black masculinity—always sustaining a tension between the conventionally good, bad, and ugly. It is this productive tension that makes McCraney’s *The Brothers Size* a compelling and instructive work for this project. All three men occupy complex positions, never conceding to easy constructions of any one character as good/evil. While McCraney clearly plays with our classic dramatic expectations of good vs. evil, he confounds us through his constant disallowing of these men to be offered as exceptional, ideal, or wholly anything. Together, they are brother sized up by American culture, who embodies the complex personhood that moves the spectator away from a damage-centered reading, toward richer readings of black men’s real lives and representations. McCraney, like Jamal Joseph’s Tupac collection, carves a space where he radically imagines black masculine bodies that not only operate in different ways, but also defy common expectation. For me and my interest here, through the dialogic performance—the exchange between the spectacle (play) and the spectator (us, the audience)—we experience something akin to a representation of the everyday. For what McCraney includes in *The Brothers Size* is familiar; what he does not include, we can gather within our imaginary or personal encounters.

One of the most unique elements of McCraney’s work is his construction of a new dramatic voice through which black male subjectivity is choreographed. In other words, he makes black men speak as poets, masters of linguistic twists and turns—which allows the spectator/reader to not only understand these men as creators of new language, but also the architects of a new world. Consequently, we as audience members have to spend time with the characters, figuring out their vernacular, in order to gain a fuller understanding of not only what they say, but also what McCraney is teaching us. For example, in the opening of *The Brothers Size*, “the lights come up on three men standing on stage. This is the opening invocation and should be repeated for as long as needed to complete the ritual” (McCraney, 2007, p. 11). Like a spiritual experience within many black communities, this invocation was a “coming together”—of people, ideas, and these three
brothers. Most importantly, here we witness a sort of ideological invocation about the “hardness” of black men’s realities:

**Ogun Size**
Ogun Size stands in the early morning.  
With a shovel in hand.  
He begins his work on the driveway, huh!

**Oshoosi Size**
Oshoosi Size is in his bed sleeping  
He stirs, dreaming,  
A very bad dream, mmm...

**Elegba**
Elegba enters, drifting like the moon  
Singing a Song.

**Ogun Size**
Sharp Breath Out.

**Elegba**
*This road is rough...*

**Oshoosi Size**
mmm...

**Ogun Size**
Huh!

**Elegba**
*This road is rough.*

**Oshoosi Size**
Huh!

**Elegba**
This road is rough and hard. (McCraney, 2001, pp. 11–12)

In the opening of *The Brothers Size*, McCraney shows us that these men aren’t necessarily hard, but the space of both work and masculinity is laboring—“rough and hard.” Each person makes his own introduction, a signature pattern within McCraney’s work; he draws attention to the self-awareness of each character, in terms of his role in a larger narrative. Unique to his dramatic voice, actors speak their own stage directions and even sometimes narrate their own emotions—illuminating both an organic storytelling tradition, while also drawing attention to (un)conscious choice. Ogun, an auto-mechanic named after the deity ironically known for ironwork, begins this opening with a shovel “working on the driveway.” Here, Ogun opens up the play, as the elder who opens up the path on which both Oshoosi and Elegba will travel. As they begin in song and verbal chant, we understand what James Baldwin reveals in *Fire Next Time*, “you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—with a very definite tendency to sound
truculent because you want no one to think you are soft” (1992, pp. 3–4). Rather
than allowing this moment of articulating the “rough and the hard” be the stand
alone representation for these men’s gender performance, McCraney uses the rest
of the play to show the very complexity Baldwin suggests within his quip to his
(historic) nephew. In addition, these unique stage directions spoken by the actor
himself, conscious-speak such as “Ogun smiles,” enables a reading of black men’s
acts as intentionally placed and having a politics of complexity. McCraney an-
nounces these men’s departures from customary black masculine rubric—easily
disable as “standard,” “hyper-masculine,” or even “gangster”—in order to
interrupt and reprimand conventional audience theatrical readings.
In contrast to the “rough and hard” opening, McCraney later shows us the love of Oshoosi and Elegba (cell mates in prison, “brothers from different
mothers”):

**Oshoosi Size**
Oshoosi size on lunch break,
Drinking a Coca Cola,
Singing a song.
(sings a song)

**Elegba**
Elegba enters, drifting like the moon...
Sang that song, nigga!

**Oshoosi Size**
Huh? Eh, Elegba.

**Oshoosi Size**
You crazy.

**Elegba**
It’s true brother!
Where you get a voice like that?
I been wondering since lock-up,
“How Oshoosi get his voice?”

**Oshoosi Size**
Ah, Elegba, you got a voice

**Elegba**
But my voice clear,
I know that, I was born a choirboy.
But you? You a siren

**Oshoosi Size**
What?

**Elegba**
You open up your mouth an’ everybody know where the
Pain at.
Your voice come out and say “the pain right here.
It’s here See it? See?”

**Oshoosi Size**
C’mon man.

**Elegba**
You don’t like nobody to brag on ya...

**Oshoosi Size**
Nah, man.

**Elegba**
That’s alright, I ain’t scared to.
Everybody needs someone to brag on him.
You like my brother, man... I ain’t scared to brag on you.
Ain’t embarrassed about my brother.
Nah, too cool to be embarrassed.

**Oshoosi Size**
My man Legba! (McCraney, 2007, pp. 20–21)

This scene maps the importance of improvisation in McCraney’s careful and committed carving of a space for the potential and possibility of a black masculine subject of rich complexity. First, McCraney opens this scene with Oshoosi’s improvisational singing. Oshoosi, as a deity who wonders/wanders, is perfect to embody improvisation. Improvisation, the performance that spontaneously erupts within a moment without warning, disrupts all that we may anticipate in any given moment. Here, Oshoosi bursts into song—sitting and singing solo in what is not a musical—foreshadowing the “tenderness” that would later be performed in the play. His act of tender singing not only calls the reader to understand him outside the “rough and hard,” but also calls forth his brother-friend Elegba. Because of the depth of his singing, his ability to sing so we “know where the pain is,” Elegba wanders into the space to be fixed by Oshoosi’s song. Elegba, the protector/trickster figure in Yoruba lore, gives attention to the musicality, richness, and magic of Oshoosi’s voice and clearly enlivens his spirit. Anaya McMurray (2008) refers to this as the “improvisation zone” (p. 75)—the space where Oshoosi and Elegba are allowed to find balance between cultural identity and individual creativity and complexity. While both have been given various scripts according to their names, aligned with Yoruba culture and practice, McCraney allows them to have greater fluidity. McCraney makes real what I propose throughout this essay. *The Brothers Size* allows for fluidity and flux to be the nature of things, rather than activating some static construction of these black male characters for the intelligibility of the viewing audience. As the average audience engages these bodies, in this moment of the unexpected, they are offered an opportunity to read these men as comfortably contradictory.
In this zone of improvisation, we also see a space where male-bonding is not predicated upon what Eve Sedgwick called the “erotic triangle”—the “use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds between men” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 25). This moment along with several like it does not erase, but rather offsets, all the other moments that would be recognized as “typical” or even misogynist performances of homosocial bonding predicated on female presences. This move, in many ways, is one that forces us outside of dominant modes of understanding black manhood in narrow ways, but offers alternative structurings of relationships gone overlooked. In this space, Marlon Riggs’s revolutionary quip is sound, “black men loving black men is the revolutionary act.” And as if McCraney is reading from this playbook, in an almost passing slippage, Elegba calls Oshoosi “a siren.” In this space of brotherly love enters the erotic and neither indicate a response to this pronouncement. Indeed, *The Brothers Size* uniquely conjures this love between brothers (Ogun and Oshoosi), while also calling forth a friend-lover dynamic (Elegba and Oshoosi). The absence of punishment for either subject for their homoerotic exchanges (within the play there is confirmation of in-prison sex and an extra-prison encounter), disallows the dramatic distractions of homo-panic, or some simplistic modern masculinity that has been over-enunciated as wholly homophobic. Instead, with Elegba and Oshoosi, McCraney unveils the raw potential of black male bonding, often untapped within the cacophony of discourses that are always dueling with black male humanity. McCraney writes for us a scene that can be staged to not only show love, but also layers of complexity in male-male relationships in the context of prison, poverty, and inner-struggle.

McCraney’s gift for tapping into the everyday lives of black men is most clear in his command of black male vernacular phrases and his attention to geo-spatial issues that black men face. The most memorable moment is where he illuminates what Rashad Shabazz (2009) has called the logics that emerge from carceral mis-en-scéne” (p. 278). In these spaces—where continuity between prison and urban space is salient—men often feel as if confinement is a built-in landscape. Prior to the following scene, Ogun, Oshoosi, and Elegba remarkably fill in each other’s sentences as they narrate their experiences with the sheriff of the town:

**Elegba**
He say “where you going Legba?”

**Oshoosi Size**
He remember your name?
Ogun Size
He call me size.
Oshoosi Size
Call me size too.
Ogun Size
Like we twins.
Oshoosi Size
Or the same person.

Ogun Size
Like it’s only one of us.
Oshoosi Size
Like we the same. (McCraney, 2007, pp. 62–63)

McCraney calls our attention to the easy ways that the sheriff reduces the Size brothers to be one-in-the-same, as if one size fit all. This representation on stage hails forth a history of police profiling within black communities, whereby mostly black men are targets of crime, without due reason. McCraney’s emphasis on this “one size fits all” formula connects to his previous telling of how predictive policing and surveillance is with the Size’s community. This coupling, tied with Oshoosi’s “like we the same,” not only draws our attention to the surveilling mechanisms of their neighborhood, but our own policing practices. The audience must now begin to recognize not so much how the Size brothers are alike (or like us)—the traditional identification questions—but how this creates visual signposts and illuminates difference. Here, The Brothers Size moves from a remark on last names, to a recognition of how black men are subjected to canonical prejudices that, like Tupac, pigeon-hole them into being made ready for incarceration. McCraney disallows for such easy marks and rather shows us the agency found not only through black men’s awareness of carceral structures, but also the rich treasure of realizing our own discourses of containment.

This scene particularly called me into the play in a visceral way. As I sat in the Studio Theatre in February 2008, I recalled being a graduate student and experiencing police interrogation over fourteen times in my first year, for “looking like a suspect” in random crimes. This experience was one that many of my black male friends and colleagues shared. This feeling of “being one of many” is the same sentiment I feel as folks discuss “no good black men.” Moving back to the discourse at grandmother’s table—I was a black man, who was somehow written out of a discussion that was all about me. As my grandmother advised the daughters of their scopic limitations, I was implicated in the conversation—as having the propensity for being “no good.” No good for what? And by whose interpretation? Unfortunately, such simple and reductive narratives for black men are not
bound to scripts or performance, but are active in everyday life. Indeed, Tupac Shakur was a real person—whose posthumous image is forever marked by how he died. His assassination, though often remarked as a turf battle, diminishes what died with him. Thus, Joseph’s pastiche in material form models how Tupac Shakur should be remembered in our memory and representation. The brothers in *The Brothers Size*, while part of a fictional play created by Tarell Alvin McCraney, actually speak to many experiences of black men worldwide—illustrating how a “one size fits all” paradigm is ineffective. Furthermore, *The Brothers Size* reminds us how the idea of black men made to fit deviance disallows for the promises of black men and retards their progress, as well as arrests our own development of a reading practice that unveils complex manhood.

As *The Brothers Size* ends, Elegba implicates Oshoosi in a drug crime that would resituate him within the confines of prison. Throughout the play, Oshoosi’s only focus has been on independence, freedom, and escape from carceral structures. His only escape, according to McCraney’s plot, is to travel to a world where no one knows him, or his brother(s)—where the name “size” disappears. As the police shall come for Oshoosi, Ogun says, “I will tell them there is only one size” (p. 109). Inadvertently, Ogun attempts to excise any problematic framing of Oshoosi by erasing his profile altogether. For Ogun, the only way to offer black men freedom is to disconnect them from “home” and to produce other opportunities. While this represents a strategy that works within the system, this essay has attempted to offer how we may begin to change the systemic and institutional strongholds on black men’s bodies—which relegate them to good or bad associations. To arrive at more transgressive reading practices requires a reorientation of sorts—where we commit to seeking new knowledge about black men, in ways that afford them to be multi-layered and multidimensional. Visual art and live performance illuminates not only complex subjects, but also offers us new ways of reading black men’s bodies for “what might be there.” More transgressive reading practices may require intentional suspension of our reading for deviance or damage, toward an active reading for more than may be imaginable using our kitchen table reading lens, or our everyday gaze. Here, I call forth the beginning of a new crop of scholarship that endeavors to not simply deconstruct and dissect black men’s articulation of gender, but reimagine how black men’s “complex personhood” can offer greater nuance and complexity to our renderings. Indeed, a “good black man” is hard to determine, but a good manhood does not have to be so hard to read.
NOTES

1. The quotations connote that these phrases have been collected during casual conversation, as well as in more public-formal settings such as talk-shows, relationship chats, and similar venues.

2. Here, I would like to suggest two anomalies: 1.) Obama as the democratic presidential nominee and Tiger (before marital affairs) as a competitive participant in the world of golf, two positions that historically have excluded black men and discounted their possibility. 2.) Both are mixed-race men, who identify with their multiple identities and are often framed in relation to not only their blackness, but their positions in their perspective fields. These two factors set them apart from dominant discursive formations around black men who live within more traditional frames.

3. Here, I am aware of the limitations of “served black people well,” as this is open to interpretation. However, I would argue that the idea of bringing black people closer to the rights of humanity—the liberty to being individually autonomous, while collectively mobile—would suffice in most quarters as starting ground for productive action.

4. As an actual “queer,” I am not engaging in some epithetical use of this term. But, I am riffing on the type of authenticity claims that can often be appropriated within queer theory and queer studies, as scholars attempt to revere non-normative performances in the lives of LGBT folk. I am suggesting that non-normativity is enlivened in LGBT and non-LGBT communities. And likewise, appeals to normativity exist within both domains.

5. Here, I place marks around race, as one figure is racially ambiguous but ridden with black scripts that brings our attention to McCraney’s larger notion of “one size seems not to fit all” working framework.

6. Later in the play, they, Ogun and Oshoosi, share in the singing of Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” as a symbolic moment of transitioning from a hard place in their sibling relationship to a softer, more endearing one.

7. Though I may suggest that the audience may already understand these characters as malleable; bringing to the performance a viewing practice that continues to remain underrepresented.

REFERENCES


