

Down For My [Queer] Niggaz: Claiming Black Queer Theatrical Culture

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my black queer community. To black queer people within the theatre and black queer people outside of the theatre. To those who are able to live openly and freely, and to those who are not quite ready to do so. Most importantly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the black queer people that have been forced into silence and who have been forced into living a life that is not their own. May my community feel seen, feel heard, and feel held by this work, and may you feel inspired to keep creating. For the culture.

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ABSTRACT

Non-black queer theatre-makers have asserted that a queer theatrical culture does not exist. This thesis resists this notion and seeks to claim a distinct black queer theatrical culture. Through a close reading of three scripts and a lens of black queer theory, this thesis marks the characteristics of a black queer theatrical culture. Additionally, in interrogating black studies and queer theory, I argue that a black queer theatrical is markedly distinct from both black theatre and queer theatre.

The field of black queer studies has grown tremendously within the past two decades. However, in most anthologies of black queer studies and the arts, there is nothing specifically dedicated to black queer theatre. In putting black queer studies in conversation with black queer theatre, this thesis hopes to expand the possibilities of black queer theatre within discussions of black queer studies as well as theatre-makers' understandings of black queerness. In highlighting and claiming a black queer theatrical culture, this thesis aims to highlight narratives of black queerness within the theatre that showcase the multiplicity and fluidity of black culture and queer culture.

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What's Tea?: An Introduction

In 2019, queer theatre artist Ezra Brain penned an essay for Howlround Theatre Commons. In the essay, Brain asked “How do you create a mainstream queer theatrical culture?”¹ Brain built upon their question and stated that even while queer representation in the theatre has been increasing in recent years, there does not seem to be a “uniquely queer theatrical culture,”² something that Brain defines as “a unique set of practices, aesthetics, and philosophies that are recognizable to an average audience member.”³ They assert that queer theatremakers need to have a separate queer theatrical culture, but in order to create this culture, queer theatremakers must decide what makes a play queer. Brain believes that just having queer-related content is not enough to queer a play. Instead, they argue that a queer play “is one that engages in a discourse about identity and all the political, social, and philosophical implications of said identity. Queer plays exist without a straight lens and give queer people agency within their own lives.”⁴ This is not to say that queer plays do not exist. But, as Brain states, many queer plays are experimental in nature, written by playwrights who are trying to create new theatrical styles and genres, and are only accessible to communities of experimental queer theatre artists in major cities. Therefore, Brain proposes a queer reclamation of the theatre,

1. Ezra Brain, “Towards a Queer Reclamation,” Howlround Theatre Commons, Emerson College, 04 Feb. 2019.

2. Brain, “Towards a Queer Reclamation.”

3. Brain, “Towards a Queer Reclamation.”

4. Brain, “Towards a Queer Reclamation.”

wherein “queer artists actively and intentionally retake theatrical genres and forms that are typically outside of the scope of ‘queer plays’”⁵ to construct a queer theatrical culture.

This thesis considers Brain’s idea of claiming a queer theatrical culture and goes a step further, asking: How does one define a *black queer* theatrical culture? While Brain asserts that a queer theatrical culture does not exist, this thesis asserts that a black queer theatrical culture does exist and that black queer theatrical pieces affectively engage in discourse about black queer identity and the various implications of said identity. This thesis examines the landscape of black queer theatrical culture in an effort to mark the field of black queer theatre and identify the characteristics of black queer theatrical culture. This culture exists at an intersection that is equally influenced by both black aesthetics in theatre, as well as queer aesthetics in theatre; one does not and cannot eclipse the other.

Both black theatrical culture and queer theatrical culture include harmful narratives that render black queer people and their narratives as erased. With its foundation coming from the Black Arts Movement, black theatrical culture has a history of perpetuating anti-queer biases;⁶ it comes as no surprise that playwrights Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, two known homophobic men, are considered the founders of black theatre as part of the Black Arts Movement. Meanwhile, both queer theatre, and queer theory, have a prolonged history intentionally centering white voices and excluding black

5. Brain, “Towards a Queer Reclamation.”

6. See Jon L. Clayborne, “Modern Black Drama and the Gay Image,” *College English* 36, no. 3 (1974): pg. 381. And Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971). And Dwight A. McBride, “Toward the New Black Queer Studies: Or Beyond the Old Race Man,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007). And *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.

perspectives.⁷ Thus, what becomes known as queer theatre are mainly narratives of white queerness.

There have been a number of debates amongst academics and theatre practitioners in the United States over what to call—and what I call—black theatre. Often, black theatre and African-American theatre are seen as synonymous, and other times they are seen as distinct styles.⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term black theatre to allow for an expansive definition of blackness within theatrical spaces; one that includes, but is not necessarily centered around African Americans, and as an acknowledgement of its roots in the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. By queer theatre, I am referencing theatrical works written by queer artists that center queer characters and narratives. Because of the history of queer theatre centering whiteness, my use of queer theatre denotes theatrical pieces written by white queer artists; only when queer theatre is qualified as black queer theatre does it denote theatrical pieces that center black queer culture and are written by black queer artists. For the sake of consistency and comprehension, it is important to note why both “*black*” and “*queer*” appear in lowercase letters here. In keeping both words as lowercase and not marking them as proper nouns, it is my hope to avoid giving the terms fixed definitions. This usage is meant to denote collective understandings of blackness and queerness, not understandings that are fixed to any one person’s interpretation. These two terms resist fixedness and should instead be

7. E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

8. Dominic Taylor, “Don’t Call African American Theatre Black Theatre: It’s Like Calling a Dog a Cat,” *The Massachusetts Review*, 12 Sep. 2019.

understood as two aspects of identity that are in a constant state of being constructed and reconstructed.

Methodology

Utilizing the framework of black queer theory as well as dramaturgical experience, I will conduct a close reading of three theatrical pieces written by playwrights whose identities inhabit a black queer space. This theoretical framework works to illuminate and center the black queer voices and perspectives that have been excluded from the broader framework of queer theory and the larger culture of queer theatre. In doing so, black queer theory allows for a more explicit understanding of the multiple identities that are present in black queer theatrical works.

To support the main argument of a distinct black queer theatrical culture, each chapter will highlight key markers of black queerness and analyze their purposes, effects, and implications. Specifically, I focus on language, perspectives on state-run institutions, health, and framings of community. Black queerness interacts with each of these markers in ways that are grounded in black queer cultural practices and in ways that are distinct from non-queer blackness and from non-black queerness. Each of the selected theatrical pieces highlight a different aspect of black queerness. The first piece is Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop: A Musical*. Michael R. Jackson is a black gay man, and *A Strange Loop* recently won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The musical's commercial success has marked it as the most well-known black queer musical. Jackson's musical highlights how a black queer person comes to understand their black queerness and how essential the body and knowing the body is in this journey. *BLKS* by Aziza Barnes

illustrates black queer community and its roots in black cultural traditions. This play was also selected due to the centering of black queer women, and because the play was written by a black non-binary person. Finally, *one in two*, a play by Donja R. Love, was selected due to its framing of HIV and AIDS. Many stories on HIV/AIDS center the perspectives of white gay men. However, while black queer communities have also been struggling with HIV/AIDS diagnoses, they have simultaneously been struggling with being excluded from HIV/AIDS narratives. In *one in two*, Love resituates common framings of HIV/AIDS and shifts the focus to black queer men.

In many ways, how black queerness interacts with these markers is site-specific—as blackness and queerness both look different in different locations. Due to the length of this thesis, arguments will specifically focus on the United States. Despite the vast amount of resources on queer theatre from Canadian scholars, all sources will either be written by U.S.-based-scholars or will specifically address theatre and theory in the United States. This thesis also focuses on the United States because of how I perceive blackness and queerness as a lifelong resident and citizen of the United States, and that may not translate to perceptions of blackness and queerness in other countries. Similar to the theatrical culture that I am identifying, my life has been informed by both black cultural practices and queer cultural practices. I am writing from the perspective of a young, black, openly queer, and non-binary person. I live my entire life as both black and queer. And while I believe that I have always been queer, my queerness was something that I had to discover, and it is something that I continue to discover. Up until age twenty, I lived life as a black woman. While I now identify as non-binary, my experiences with

black womanhood are foundational to my queerness and also inform much of my scholarship.

The Black Arts Movement, Black Theatre, and Black Studies

In many ways, the Black Arts Movement that emerged during the mid 1960s provided the foundation for much of the black theatre that audiences see today. The widely credited founder of the movement, author and playwright Amiri Baraka, states that the Black Arts Movement was largely influenced by the teaching of Malcolm X and the Black Power Movements;⁹ they are often referred to as sister movements. For Baraka, art could not be separated from politics. Art, he wrote, should relate to the reality of black history and black life and thus had to be a full expression of both body and soul;¹⁰ Baraka made it known that he wanted Black Art¹¹ that was easily identified as Afro-American, revolutionary and distinct from white art.¹² In order to fully realize his desires for the Black Arts Movement, Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater School, or BARTS, in 1965. Though BARTS was only open for a little over a year, during that time the school became an artistic and intellectual playground for emerging black artists like Ed Bullins and Sonia Sanchez.

While Amiri Baraka is a proven visionary in non-queer black theatre, his work also highlights the failures of the Black Arts Movement and black theatrical culture to be fully inclusive of all black people. A central tenet of Baraka's approach to art, one that he shared with Ed Bullins, was the acknowledgement that white audiences would not be

9. Amiri Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *SOS - Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, ed. John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), pg. 12.

10. Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," in *SOS - Calling All Black People*, pg. 13.

11. Black Art is capitalized in this context, to recognizably mark Baraka's use of the term as distinct.

12. Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," pg. 16-17.

placed at the center. Specifically, Baraka sought to “root out white ways from the hearts and minds of black people.”¹³ In Baraka’s world, homosexuality was considered to be a disease of white people that had permeated the black community and threatened black manhood and the black family structure in the United States.¹⁴ Despite wanting to appeal to a diverse community of black folk—mainly those that were not middle-class—Baraka’s view of art and his view of blackness could not include positive representations of black queerness. To include positive narratives of black queer people within the Black Arts Movement would go against Baraka’s principle of rooting out “white ways.”¹⁵

While Baraka laid the foundation for the Black Arts Movement, his peers and future black artists would each have their own unique takes on the movement and black aesthetics. Many scholars and theatre practitioners of the time can still trace their roots back to the politics of the Black Power Movement and agree that, as a collective, “The Black Arts as theater transformed abstract aesthetic into movement, [and] concept into politics.”¹⁶ Sonia Sanchez, a prominent poet and playwright of the Black Arts Movement, believed in “using art as change for community.”¹⁷ For Sanchez, the black aesthetic present in the movement was all about black people formulating ideas about ways to live, think, teach, and write in the United States that would benefit black people and eventually benefit the world.¹⁸ While this line of thinking initially seems to be more progressive than Baraka’s, Sanchez promoted the idea that black homosexuality negatively affected roles

13. W.D.E. Andrews, “Theater of Black Reality: The Blues Drama of Ed Bullins,” *Southwest Review* 65, no. 2 (1980): pg. 178.

14. Jon L. Clayborne, “Modern Black Drama and the Gay Image,” *College English* 36, no. 3 (1974).

15. Andrews, “Theater of Black Reality,” pg. 178.

16. La Donna L. Forsgren, *Sistuhs in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pg. 21.

17. Forsgren, *Sistuhs in the Struggle*, pg. 27.

18. Forsgren, *Sistuhs in the Struggle*, pg. 28.

of black womanhood and thus negatively impacted black manhood. In “Sister Son/ji,” Sanchez sought to portay an ideal black family structure. Her description of black women supporting their black men and sacrificing their own desires in order to take care of households, paints a picture of a black family structure that leaves no space for homosexuality or queerness. In this instance, queerness would invalidate the role of black women taking care of black men, ultimately threatening this idealized family structure.¹⁹ If black women are essential to the growth of black men, then homosexual relationships threaten future generations of black people. A romantic relationship between two black men may not yield children, but if it does and the couple has a son, there will be no black woman to build the boy up into the idealized black man. Within this hypothetical structure, the two black men would not be able to build the boy up into the idealized black man themselves because they do not fit the mold of an idealized black man. Similarly, a romantic relationship between two black women goes against nature because the role of the black woman is to build up the black man. Despite Sister Son/ji not naming a man as the love of her life later in the play, Sanchez’s work in black theatre reinforces many of the anti-queer narratives shared by her peers. In Ed Bullins’ *Clara’s Old Man*, written in 1965, Bullins depicts a lesbian relationship and queer household. In his staging of this relationship however, Bullins portrays the relationship as an abomination and suggests to the reader that something of this nature is highly unnatural; the play is meant to be a cautionary tale of the dangers of homosexuality and queerness.

Taking a position similar to that of Sanchez, Bullins, and Baraka, playwright Larry Neal states that the Black Arts Movement “is radically opposed to any concept of

19. Clayborne, “Modern Black Drama and the Gay Image,” pg. 383.

the artists that alienates him from his community,” and “envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.”²⁰ Neal shared Baraka’s ideas of homosexuality as a white disease and understood his community as a heterosexual black community. In this statement he suggests that queerness and homosexuality are concepts that alienate black queer artists from the heterosexual black community, thus, aligning these artists more with white America. Neal also states that the job of artists is to “confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man’s experience in the racist West.”²¹ While this statement appears to be more inclusive of the black community in America, Neal’s only concern with black theater and art as it relates to black America is that it does justice to the experiences of black *heterosexual* men. Similarly, Addison Gayle, Jr., a black author and literary critic who believed that black artists need to write their own stories because white representations of blackness will always be minstrelsy,²² states that black aesthetics present in theatre should transform a Negro into a man and should always aid in making men better than they are. While these beliefs are not outrightly homophobic in nature, we must take into account that black gay men are commonly stripped of their manhood and not considered to be men at all; thus, ostracizing them from the goals of black theatre according to Neal and Gayle. These ideas are present in Charles Gordone’s 1969 play *No Place To be Somebody*—the first play by an African American playwright to win a Pulitzer. Gordone paints black gay men as unnatural and as a threat to the heterosexual black community. While Gordone never explicitly states that the character of Melvin is gay, the character is coded with what were

20. Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., pg. 272.

21. Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., pg. 272.

22. Addison Gayle Jr., introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), pg. xvii.

considered common markers of homosexuality at the time; he is small in stature, sexually naïve, and wants to dance ballet. In the scene where Melvin explains why he has given up on his dreams, audiences learn that other male dancers—also implied to be homosexual—followed Melvin into the bathroom and took his clothes off without consent. This paints black gay males as sexual deviants and offenders and implies that one way to make someone a better man is to reject homosexuality.

A side effect of this centering of non-queer black men in black art aesthetics is that black queer people are often omitted from discussions of blackness and are separated from black ideas of home. Scholar Dwight McBride highlights this idea while trying to understand the heterosexist phenomena of black art aesthetics. According to McBride, home, which serves as a welcoming site in black culture, becomes weaponized against black queer people and turns into an idea that—in the minds of the scholars and artists previously discussed—can never be attained.²³ McBride places black respectability, as formed by the black middle class, at the heart of black queer studies and states that black queerness is created in opposition to ideologies of black respectability.²⁴ This is not to say that black queer folk cannot exist within the black middle class, but rather that the heterosexist narrative pushed by scholars in the Black Arts Movement has its roots in socioeconomic class status.

Black theatrical works are still heavily influenced by the legacy of the Black Arts Movement. While some of these plays do address black queerness and themes of black queerness, they do so in a way that mirrors the movement's anti-queer narratives. The

23. Dwight A. McBride, "Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

24. Dwight A. McBride, "Straight Black Studies."

concept of anti-queer narratives and their harmful ramifications was not holistically explored in academia until the growth of queer theory. While a specifically black queer theory took longer to emerge, queer theory served as a starting point for interrogating anti-queer narratives in art.

Queer Theatre and Theory

Queer theory emerged as a discipline in the 1990s, a couple of decades after the Black Arts Movement. Part of what made the new field so intriguing was that the word *queer* resisted definition and had broad applications.²⁵ One of the first to publish a work of queer theory was scholar Teresa de Lauretis. In her first use of queer theory, de Lauretis warns against conflating the academic with the more casual use of the word. For de Lauretis, the name *queer theory* is intended to convey an emphasis on both the conceptual and speculative work. She does not specify the exact boundaries and limitations of queer theory, but does suggest certain tenants, including the problematizing of lesbian and gay studies and critical engagements with feminism and race theory. Part of what marks queer theory as separate from lesbian and gay studies is this ongoing engagement with feminism and race theory and investigating how queerness changes based on other variables. This is what de Lauretis believes gives queer theory the capability to reconceptualize homosexuality as a resistant ideology.²⁶

Other scholars also define queer theory as a political field of study rather than a socially or sexuality-based field of study. Scholar Cherry Smith believes queer to be a

25. Erin J. Rand, "Staking a Claim on the Queer Frontier: The Debut and Proliferation of Queer Theory," in *Reclaiming Queer: Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance*, ed. Erin J. Rand, (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2014).

26. Rand, "Staking a Claim on the Queer Frontier."

radical questioning of all social and cultural norms,²⁷ and sociologist Michael Warner believes queer to be a political resistance to the heterosexist normal.²⁸ Queer theorists such as E. Patrick Johnson find that while queer theory does entail a disruption of dominant academic discourse,²⁹ it cannot adequately accommodate the issues of queer people of color. Johnson—along with queer scholar Gloria Anzaldúa—believes that using queer as a label can sometimes provide a false sense of unification and can homogenize the racial differences that make certain queer experiences distinct from one another.³⁰ To solve this problem, Johnson proposes what he calls “quare studies”—a strand of queer theory that distinguishes racial and class knowledges and is specifically of and for queer people of color.³¹ Editors of *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason had a related line of thinking in 1996 when they stated that people of color and trans people were underrepresented in queer theory texts and created an anthology to address this gap.³² All three of these scholars see the inclusion of queer people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds as creating a more interdisciplinary field of study and as bridging the gap between queer theory and queer practice.

27. Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.”

28. Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.”

29. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, introduction to *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

30. Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.”

31. Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.”

32. Genny Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

For Johnson and his collaborator Mae G. Henderson, bridging the gap between theory and practice is essential, as queer theory grew out of queer activism.³³ Scholars William Turner and Annamarie Jagose agree with this line of thinking. Both scholars argue that queer activism in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic led to an increase of queer theory in academic settings and helped the emerging field gain legitimacy due to its practical applications.³⁴ Queer studies scholar David Halperin concurs with these statements as well and seeks to “both theorize queerness and to queer [used as a verb] theory” in his work.³⁵

The centralization of whiteness in queer theory crossed over to queer theatre. When it comes to queer theatre, the most well-known plays are ones that depict the physical effects of HIV and AIDS on the body, such as Larry Kramer’s 1985 play *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner’s 1991 collection *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Lesser-known queer plays show these same effects, such as Rebecca Ranson’s 1984 play *Warren*. Many queer theatre scholars utilize queer plays such as these and apply them as examples of queer theory in action. In using plays as examples of queer theory scholarship, queer theatre artists and scholars are more clearly highlighting the link between queerness as theory and queerness as practice. However, the lack of positive queer representations in black theatre creates a gap in this link. This racialized gap further perpetuates the idea of queerness denoting whiteness within theatrical spaces while also encouraging the creation of positive black queer theatre to fill it.

33. Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.”

34. Rand, “Staking a Claim on the Queer Frontier.”

35. Rand, “Staking a Claim on the Queer Frontier.”

Significance

In seeking moments of recognition and moments of shared humanity, black queer theatrical culture, if given proper support, has the possibility to positively impact public perceptions of black queerness and highlight a new narrative—a narrative that shows the multiplicity and beauty of both black culture and queer culture. With violent attacks against black queer folk—especially trans folk—increasing, highlighting black queer theatrical culture has a practical application as well. Donja R. Love states that a major goal of his writing is simply to help eradicate stigma directed toward HIV-positive people.³⁶ Aziza Barnes has stated that they want just one moment for audience members to realize that “god damn, it might be fucked up to be you.”³⁷

The field of black queer studies has made tremendous progress within the past two decades. At the same time, in most anthologies of black queer studies, there is nothing specifically dedicated to black queer theatre; there are analyses that incorporate film and television studies, music theory, and visual art, but little-to-no theatre studies. Claiming a black queer theatrical culture will prompt more inclusion of theatre within larger conversations on black queer studies. This will not only allow the academic field to expand but will also allow the theatrical culture to expand as well.

While the field of black queer studies has expanded, there has also been an expansion of black queer narratives and playwrights in the theatre. These achievements, however, have not necessarily been mirrored in daily life. Outside of academia and theatre, black queer folk are still rendered invisible because of our blackness and

36. “Playwright Donja R. Love talks ‘One in Two’ and how he's using theatre to educate,” GLAAD, 23 Dec. 2019, video, 29:26.

37. “Aziza Barnes on BLKS,” Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 2. Nov. 2017, video, 4:31.

queerness. Theatre can often lead audience members to empathy and action. Therefore, in putting the theoretical frameworks of black queer studies in conversation with black queer theatre to carve out and mark a unique black queer theatrical culture, we can begin the work of expanding audiences' understandings of black queerness and work to make black queer people visible.

In claiming a black queer theatrical culture, black queer theatre can make itself visible and combat the unique oppression and discrimination that black queer people live through. The implications of queer theatre denoting a white queer theatre are dangerous in that they homogenize queerness and give non-queer people a false reality of black queerness. Black queer theatre artists claiming and nurturing black queer theatrical culture is what will lead to black queer theatre's ultimate survival.

Each of the following chapters highlight a theatrical work by a black queer theatre artist that nurtures and makes visible a black queer theatrical culture. The first chapter will be an in-depth analysis of *A Strange Loop: A Musical* by Michael R. Jackson. *A Strange Loop* highlights key markers of black queer theatre, including a critique on the healthcare system and an exploration into socioeconomics. In an additional attempt to highlight how black queerness influences ontological framings, my discussion focuses on the main character, Usher. Usher's understandings of his body, his blackness, and his queerness help him navigate the world and directly influence how he presents himself. *A Strange Loop* offers an introduction into how and why black queerness is distinct from non-queer blackness and non-black queerness. While a key aspect of Usher's queerness is him feeling exiled, for others, black queerness leads to community.

Chapter Two is an analysis of Aziza Barnes' *BLKS*. Through an exploration into the community that the characters have built, this chapter highlights how black queer people have combined black cultural traditions with black queer practices in order to survive. Essential to this survival is group finances, mutual aid, and an assertion of community policing rather than institutionalized and carceral policing. *BLKS* is the only play in this thesis that focuses on black queer womanhood and black queerness from the perspective of women. Chapter Three falls on the other side of this spectrum and focuses on black queerness from a more masculine perspective.

Chapter Three focuses on Donja R. Love's *one in two*. Distinct in style, *one in two* takes after the theatre of the absurd. Love's play is used to show how black queer people have a particularly unique framing of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and how this framing is vastly different from the more common portrayal of the epidemic in white queer theatre. Love also posits the HIV/AIDS crisis as multifaceted; one cannot discuss the crisis without also discussing the violence of the healthcare institution and the social and economic effects of the disease.

In 1968, theatre practitioner Barbara Ann Teer sent out a call for black artists to create black cultural centers for black audiences. Teer believed that black artists focusing on strictly black art would lead to "our ultimate survival as a people."³⁸ While she was speaking broadly for black people, Teer's thoughts can be specifically applied to black queer theatre—if we do not tell our stories, who will?³⁹ I conclude with a meditation on Teer's idea of survival and a brief discussion on the futurity of a black queer theatrical

38. Forsgren, *Sistuh's in the Struggle*, pg. 113.

39. Barbara Ann Teer, "We Can Be What We Were Born to Be," *New York Times* (New York), 7 July 1968, pg. 89-91.

culture. While the pieces I have chosen were all written within the past ten years, that is not to suggest that black queer theatre is a new phenomenon. Just as black queer people have always existed, black queer theatre has existed for as long as the theatrical arts have. After discussing what the discipline looks like in 2022, I discuss where the discipline is going and how these advancements will benefit black queer people.

Chapter 1: Knowing Oneself: An Analysis of Black Queer Ontological Formations

I'm just trying to show...what it's like
— Michael R. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*⁴⁰

Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop: A Musical* won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The musical, which takes place in “a loop within a loop within a loop inside a perception of one man's reality,”⁴¹ follows the story of Usher, a fat, black, gay man, as he navigates life as a writer in New York City. In this semi-autobiographical piece, Jackson provides a multi-layered study of how Usher's various identities influence how he sees himself and how others perceive him. Usher's ontological formations are equally informed by his fatness, blackness, and queerness. Through a close reading of the script, this chapter analyzes how the character of Usher views himself and his identities and how these identities construct Usher's worldview of blackness and queerness. The inextricable nature of Usher's blackness and queerness marks *A Strange Loop* as a work of black queer theatrical culture. In addition to contributing to his ontological formations, these two aspects of Usher's identity inform his language and his relationships with his family, the black church, with potential romantic partners, and with his health and healthcare institutions. Many of these aspects of the musical are also directly informed by an overarching black queer culture—one that exists outside of the theatre. In bringing these aspects of black queer culture to the theatre, Jackson highlights how black queer

40. Michael R. Jackson, *A Strange Loop: A Musical* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2020), pg. 100.

41. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 12.

theatrical culture works in tandem with non-theatrical black queer culture and how the two can directly inform one another.

Getting to Know Oneself

Michael R. Jackson describes Usher as “A fat American Black gay man of high intelligence, low self-image, and deep feelings. He writes stories and songs and wants desperately to be heard. A musical theater writer and Broadway usher.”⁴² From this description it becomes apparent that Usher’s name is reflective of his occupation. Thus, his job as an usher becomes innately tied to Usher’s identity and to how he orients himself in the world. While Jackson’s description of Usher is fairly general, Usher sees himself in a much more detailed manner. In the opening scene of the play, Usher describes himself as:

A young over-weight-to-obese homosexual and/or gay and/or queer, cisgender male, able-bodied, university-and-graduate-school-educated, musical-theater-writing, Disney-ushering, broke-ass middle-ass far-Left-leaning Black-identified-and-classified American descendant of slaves full of self-conscious femme energy and who thinks he’s probably a vers bottom but not totally certain of that.⁴³

Usher’s description of himself is far more detailed than the character description that Jackson provides and shows how multifaceted Usher is. The identities that Usher highlights in this description are the identities that he feels most connected to. For the purpose of this chapter, I will be focusing mainly on Usher’s sexual, racial, and weight-related identities. Usher’s racial and sexual identities immediately link *A Strange Loop* to black queer theatrical culture. His weight-related identity also does so in a less obvious

42. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 13.

43. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 17.

way. Usher's fatness impacts Usher's constructions of his blackness and queerness. This provides an opportunity to analyze black queerness through the lens of fat studies and discern how fatness and ideas of desirability impact constructions of black queerness and thus, of black queer theatrical culture.

Usher expresses the inseparability of his blackness and queerness throughout the show. The most notable example, however, is when Usher states that he is "in a fat, black queer body."⁴⁴ The lack of a comma between black and queer denotes that Usher's blackness and queerness are not separated and should be thought of together—Usher cannot cease being black just as he cannot cease being queer. In the same song, Usher sings that "he has to fight for his / right to live in a world / that chews up and spits / out black queers / on the daily."⁴⁵ This highlights how black queer people are often singled out and face oppression unique to their black queerness. This phrase also speaks to how black queer people have to act as their own advocates on a daily basis. Both of these ideas—a unique oppression due to black queerness and self-advocacy—are found throughout black queer theatrical culture. Throughout the musical, Usher is not connected to any true community and must advocate for himself, since he cannot rely on others, to help combat his discrimination. This is reminiscent of the self-advocacy performed by many black queer playwrights; due to the overall lack of diversity in theatre, black queer artists are often the primary people pushing to produce black queer works.

The rest of the cast is filled in with *The Thoughts*, a "spectrum of bodies that are Usher's perceptions of reality inside and out. They come in many shapes and sizes. But

44. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 19.

45. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 20.

they are all Black. And they are as individual as they are a unit.”⁴⁶ The Thoughts, while present throughout the show, are not a solid community, and while they are portrayed by black actors, the characters themselves often assume roles of people who are in conflict with Usher. The Thoughts act as Usher’s innermost negative thoughts, his homophobic family, harmful doctors, and as sexual partners. While not all of the characters portrayed by The Thoughts are intended to be black, by having a chorus of black actors on stage that are in constant opposition to Usher, Jackson exemplifies how Usher’s black queerness is in opposition to non-queer blackness. This opposition is pivotal in Usher’s ontological formations. Because Usher views black queerness as something that exists in opposition to both non-queer blackness and non-black queerness, he comes to understand *himself* as a tool of opposition and as someone who is perpetually Othered.

This opposition between black queerness and non-queer blackness is also highlighted in Usher’s interactions with his family and in Usher’s unwillingness to write for Tyler Perry. Usher’s parents repeatedly express that while they love their son, they do not condone gay sex and constantly assume that Usher has AIDS, and will die like his cousin Darnell, who was also gay. Usher’s father asks him, “You ain’t went and got AIDS have you?...that A-word is *real*. Remember your cousin Darnell?...You keep living that lifestyle and God will punish you with that–.”⁴⁷ In a similar fashion, Usher’s mother worries about Usher’s future and always prays for him, because she is wary of the “folks livin’ any which o’way”⁴⁸ in New York and “sticking they thangs up each other’s buttoles.”⁴⁹ In the eyes of Usher’s mother, being gay is not the right way to live. These

46. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 13.

47. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 65 (italics original).

48. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 80.

49. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 81.

interactions serve as constant reminders to Usher that his parents see his queerness as Other. Even though he is also black, Usher's queerness still marks him as the Other when dealing with non-queer black people and contribute to his feelings of exile within larger black spaces. Despite their homophobic viewpoints, Usher's parents contribute the argument of black queer theatrical culture. The ignorance of Usher's parents, while slightly comedic here, is pervasive amongst non-queer black people. The most prevalent representations of AIDS and black queerness in black theatre are negative representations that fall in line with the ignorance of Usher's parents. In juxtaposing Usher's bold black queerness with his parents' ignorance, Jackson is showcasing the need for a black queer theatrical culture and for more positive representations of black queerness in the theatre. If the negative representations present in black plays from playwrights like Tyler Perry can influence Usher's parents so heavily, then positive representations of black queerness in the theatre may be able to slowly reverse that damage.

The opposition between non-queer blackness and Usher's black queerness comes to a head when Usher is asked to ghostwrite for playwright and filmmaker, Tyler Perry. Because of Tyler Perry's popularity, he is no longer able to write his famous gospel plays himself, and Usher's agent brings Usher the opportunity. Prior to this, Usher's mother had been asking Usher to write plays similar to Tyler Perry since Tyler Perry writes *real* black plays.⁵⁰ What Usher's mother does not realize, however, is that black queer people have a unique relationship with Tyler Perry and his work, and more specifically with his gospel plays. In many of his gospel plays, Tyler Perry creates harmful queer narratives and often gives a character AIDS as a punishment for some moral wrongdoing. While

50. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 52-57.

AIDS is not specific to any gender or sexuality, non-queer black people often associate it with black gay people. This reinforces harmful narratives that people get AIDS because of a moral failing, like being gay. Usher's ontological understanding of his own black queerness allows him to see more harmful narratives in Tyler Perry's work that, like Usher's parents, render black queer people as Other. Usher states that "[Tyler Perry's] plays are worse for Black people than dia-fuckin-betes."⁵¹ Because Usher is both black and queer, he is able to see the the harmful nature of Tyler Perry's gospel plays in way that his non-queer black family cannot. These harmful narratives directly effect Usher and his life in a way that his non-queer black family will never experience.

Usher remains in conflict with religion and the gospel for the remainder of the musical. E. Patrick Johnson, a black gay man and gospel scholar, states that "as an institution, the black church historically has been the cornerstone of black thought, politics, spirituality, and morality in America."⁵² At the same time however, the black church has publicly condemned homosexuality and queerness. The black church contradicts itself in this condemnation however, as Johnson states that the black church relies on gay gospel singers and "exploits the creative talents of its gay members even as it condemns their gayness."⁵³ This is precisely the contradiction that Ushser's parents exemplify. Usher's parents berate Usher for his gayness the entire musical, yet still expect him to write a gospel play just for them. In asking this of their son, Usher's parents never stop to consider Usher's feelings as a gay black man who is condemned by the gospel. Jackson's critique of gospel plays and the black church mark *A Strange Loop*

51. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 57.

52. E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pg. 308.

53. Johnson, *Sweet Tea*, pg. 309.

as a piece of black queer theatrical culture. While gospel and the black church are not necessarily state-run institutions, they are—like E. Patrick Johnson stated—cornerstones of black thought and exist as institutions that cause harm to black queer people. In providing this critique on the black church, Jackson calls attention to how the institution has been weaponized against black queer people and how religious black queer people must grapple with and redefine their personal relationship with the black church.

While Usher’s blackness and queerness influence how he views the world, those two aspects of his identity also combine with his fatness to influence how the world views him. The combination of Usher’s fatness, blackness, and queerness, influence Usher’s sexual desirability and body image. Queer scholar Melissa Harris-Perry states that bodies are always being read by others—and that fat bodies specifically, are always being read by others. This is something that Usher is hyper-aware of. Usher ties his weight to his racial and sexual identity by naming himself as someone “in a fat, black queer body.”⁵⁴ Queer scholars often note how fatphobic gay male spaces are. It is not uncommon for the tagline “no fats, no femmes”⁵⁵ to be used in online dating profiles. When Usher “enters the sexual marketplace,”⁵⁶ he encounters comments such as “too Black. Too fat. Too feminine.”⁵⁷ Fatness has become feminized in many gay male spaces where men desire to be as masculine-presenting as possible. Being fat often comes with larger breasts and bigger hips, something that marks fat gay men as more feminine in gay male spaces.⁵⁸ This feminization of fatness often leads to “deeming fatness unattractive”

54. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 19.

55. Anderson, “‘No Fats, No Femmes’ documentary to explore the ‘politics of desirability,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 May 2016.

56. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 42.

57. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 44.

58. Melissa Harris-Perry, “Policing Fatness in Black Queer Bodies,” *The Takeaway*, 25 Aug. 2021, WNYC Studios.

and “relegating fat, femme, racialized queer people to the margins.”⁵⁹ For Usher, this shows up in his sexual life and in his “fuckability”⁶⁰—how possible sexual partners view him. This feminization of fatness and how it affects Usher’s understanding of himself also provides space to view black queerness from another perspective. In Usher’s case, his physical body has been marked as queer and as Other. Usher is always cognizant of his body and of how he is moving through space—something that is lacking in the other case studies. This perspective brings a sense of physical awareness to black queer theatrical culture. Additionally, this perspective highlights how black queerness can be formed and understood through one’s body and how fatness can influence ontological formations of black queerness.

Usher’s fuckability⁶¹ is discussed in the song “Inner White Girl.” Thought 5 notes that “I just wish the protagonist of *A Strange Loop* were someone I could imagine shagging because whether it’s the *Me Too* era or not, fuckability is still the lifeblood of the theater, darling. There shouldn’t be a limp dick or a dry pussy in the house when your lead takes his clothes off.”⁶² This comment suggests Usher’s lack of fuckability and his lack of fuckability contributes to many of Usher’s insecurities. While Usher recognizes that he is fat, he also grapples with the fact that his fatness is one of the challenges he faces when trying to date. This idea is reinforced during “Didn’t Want Nothin” when Usher has the following conversation with Thought 2 (a doctor):

59. Harris-Perry, “Policing Fatness in Black Queer Bodies.”.

60. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 38.

61. The term fuckability is used in the musical by Thought 5 to describe Usher’s desirability, or lack thereof. The term is also used by fat scholars, such as Da’Shaun L. Harrison, to take the idea of desirability a step further. While someone can be deemed desirable, that does not necessarily mean that people want to have sexual relations with said person. Fuckability is used to describe desirability *and* the degree to which someone is deemed as “fuckable”. See Da’Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), pg. 18-19.

62. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 37-8 (italics original).

Usher: I average about one penetration once a year so my next one is bound to be any day now; that's just math.

Thought 2: Pathetic. Even at the height of AIDS I was bouncing on every dick I could get my hands on, so what's your excuse?

Usher: Snagging a man is like finding affordable housing in this town—there's a long wait list and the landlords discriminate okay? I'll just stick to porn in the meanwhile.

Thought 2: Usher, as your doctor, I'm warning you that you absolutely must be getting sex more than once a year or you're putting yourself at risk.

Usher: At risk for what?

Thought 2: At risk for not keeping up. You're a young gay living in the big city. This is your time! Too many beautiful men gave up their lives for you to not be getting plowed and bred regularly.⁶³

This conversation is followed by the song "Exile in Gayville" that explains all of Usher's insecurities when it comes to sex and being desired. Usher states that he is too black, his penis is too small, he is too fat, and that he is too feminine. These are all characteristics that the doctor is unable to relate to. Thus, the doctor, despite his black queerness, passes judgement onto Usher and shames him for not having sex on a regular basis.

Usher then goes on the subway to find Joshlet, an attractive, white gay male.

Joshlet and Usher flirt, and when Usher calls Joshlet sexy, Joshlet says that he does not mind the compliment. Usher quickly realizes, however, that Joshlet is a figment of his imagination and does not actually exist. The imaginary Joshlet then goes on to verbalize some of Usher's insecurities:

Usher, what I like about you is how you're not afraid to let your sloppiness all hang out. And the fact that you would allow yourself even a moment of weakness to fantasize about a dick appointment with a Sean-Cody adjacent spawn of Satan like me when you should probably just kill yourself? Well, that's a testament to the awesome power of the white gaytriarchy.⁶⁴

63. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 41.

64. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 49.

Joshlet equates Usher's weight to sloppiness, marks it as unattractive, and as a moral failure. The creation of Joshlet speaks to Usher's sexual insecurities and his own thinking that he will not find someone who is genuinely sexually attracted to him.

The creation of Joshlet also serve as an introduction to Usher's shame associated with sex. The two people that Usher sexually desires in this musical are white. Jackson uses the race of Usher's sexual interests to show how white gay men often fetishize black gay men, all while being racist. Joshlet states that "we're all just niggers when the lights go out anyway."⁶⁵ This statement implies that Usher was sexually attracted to a man, albeit a fictional man, that was racist; however, this is also the first person in the musical to show any kind of sexual interest in Usher. While Usher does not seem proud of this fact, Thought 1 declares that "as supervisor of [Usher's] sexual ambivalence I'm fighting as valiantly as I can but I don't know how much longer we can protect your precious butthole from the colonizers!"⁶⁶ The breaking down of Usher's will to resist sex with colonizers, or white gay men, is broken when he meets up with Inwood Daddy in the next scene. Inwood Daddy loudly and proudly fetishizes Usher and sings: "It's my guarantee you'll have the time of your life, bro / wanna give out some dick I don't even give to my wife so / all blacks and latinos / to the front of the line / if you gimme that fat bubble butt, / I'll treat it just like a shrine."⁶⁷

During sex, Inwood Daddy calls Usher a nigger and Kunte Kente, while calling himself Massa.⁶⁸ Usher seems to immediately feel shame from this encounter; he sings "Am I wrong to be attracted to / the white male indifference / crossed with fetishization? /

65. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 49.

66. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 70.

67. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 72.

68. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 75.

which is easy to do when / you're feeling such / desperation,"⁶⁹ and asks himself why he participated in that sexual encounter and what his boundaries are. The Thoughts respond to Usher by telling him that he should do what Inwood Daddy says because "at least someone wants you."⁷⁰ Usher's encounters with Joshlet and Inwood Daddy speak to queer fat scholar Da'Shaun L. Harrison's idea that "fuckability does not mean that all bodies deemed fuckable are humanized, nor does it mean that every person who has sex with the Black fat sees them as living beings deserving of care."⁷¹ Black queer theatrical culture clearly does not shy away from conversations on sex and sexuality. Outside of the theatre it is extremely common for black queer folk to find romantic partnership with white queer people. In utilizing theatre to highlight these phenomena, Jackson shows how black queer theatrical culture can directly speak to cultural happenings in black queer culture outside of theatrical spaces. Black queer theatrical culture is thus, not something that is separate from a non-theatre-based black queer culture but is always in conversation with it.

Usher finally has a breakthrough when his father asks, again, if Usher wants to have sex with him since Usher is attracted to men. Usher performs a monologue that highlights why he turns to white men for sexual desire.

...on the rare occasions I do end up taking my clothes off in front of someone, it's usually for some raggedy-ass white man who gets to nut all over me even though all *I* really want is to be with a Black man who rides for me as much as I ride for him. Especially when the anti-Black world we live in gets so strung out on this colorblind 'love is love' bullshit, forgetting that 'love is love' will never be true until *Black* love matters and *Black* lust matters and *Black* queers can *finally* stop using white men to flatter or elevate their fucking *class status* and start buying into how sexy

69. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 74.

70. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 74.

71. Da'Shaun L. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), pg. 18-19.

and liberating it could be to *just be with each other*. But sadly those Black queers are as stuck social-climbing as I'm stuck licking up whatever stale white crumbs I can get my hands on which is why now is a great time to explain to you that *every* time you drunkenly ask me if I'm attracted to you because I'm a man and you're a man, I get infuriated not by how ignorant that question is, but by how much it actually bothers me to know that I probably *am* too fat and too Black and too ugly and too feminine to be a nigga you would even *theoretically* wanna dick down if you were gay and not my blood. Which is just how starved for Black affirmation and affection I am.⁷²

In the monologue, Usher notes how the anti-blackness of the world negatively affects his queer relationships—even queer relationships with other black men. When Usher cites his various identities at the end of the monologue, he once again references how his ontological framing of himself impacts how he navigates the world and how the world views him. Because he is fat, black, and feminine, black gay men do not view him as a sexual being which leads to ostracization from black gay spaces. When this ostracization is coupled with Usher's ostracization from non-queer black spaces and non-black gay spaces, it becomes alarmingly apparent why Usher's outlook on life may be seen as cynical and why he is uber-aware of his body. In analyzing how Usher sees himself and how others see Usher, it becomes apparent that Usher's various identities affect how he shows up in various spaces. Harrison argues that many fat black people internalize a false belief that "if we are insecure, then we are weak incapable, or ugly and that all of those things are bad things to be."⁷³ However, Harrison goes on to say that insecurities are worth embracing because they are more of an indictment on society than they are a personal indictment. In embracing and highlighting his insecurities, Usher's character critiques society for perpetuating anti-fat biases that cause insecurities.

72. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 85.

73. Harrison, *Belly of the Beast*, pg. 13.

Fat Black Queerness, AIDS, and Harmful Healthcare

A Strange Loop also provides commentary on how people engage with AIDS and how the American healthcare system engages with fat people. When Usher meets with Thought 2 as the doctor, they have the following conversation:

Thought 2: Alright, big guy, what am I going to say?

Usher: That my blood pressure is through the roof, my cholesterol is a disaster, and that I need to lose weight.

Thought 2: Every year, it's the same notes but you don't seem to be getting it. You have such a cute face. Why on earth are you hiding it underneath all of this hideous blubber?⁷⁴

This conversation is similar to scholar Dr. Jason Whitesel's observations that doctors feel compelled to lecture fat people about their weight, even when fat people go to the doctor for non-weight related issues.⁷⁵ The routine nature of Usher's doctor visit implies that Usher is used to getting this information. In addition to telling Usher to lose weight, the doctor also infantilizes and shames him, using words such as cute and calling his body "hideous blubber."⁷⁶ This further contributes to the insecurity that surrounds Usher and his body.

The doctor visit also introduces conversations about AIDS. Despite the fact that Usher does not have sex often, the doctor recommends Truvada as PrEP against HIV/AIDS. Usher feels as though he does not need PrEP because he is rarely sexually active with other people. Usher sees himself as an undesirable person, and therefore as someone who does not need PrEP. Usher is also avoidant of PrEP due to his family's relationship with AIDS. Throughout the musical, both of Usher's parents continually ask him if he has gotten AIDS yet. When Usher claims that he does not have AIDS, his

74. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 40-41.

75. Harris-Perry, "Policing Fatness in Black Queer Bodies."

76. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 40-41.

family assumes that he is lying and keeping it secret. In Usher's reluctance to start PrEP, Jackson is implying that if Usher were to start PrEP, that would make the possibility of getting AIDS real and that by actively trying to protect himself against AIDS, Usher would be acknowledging his parents' belief that AIDS is a gay disease. Usher reveals his feat of affirming his parent's beliefs in the second-to-last song of the musical where he states that "I realized then and there that the only thing worse than dying of AIDS would be living with it and hearing the people you loved say, 'I told you so, I told you so, I told you so.'"⁷⁷

While *A Strange Loop* should not be considered an AIDS play like *one in two*, it does provide a unique perspective for viewing how black queer theatrical culture engages with the AIDS epidemic. None of the characters in the musical are ever diagnosed with AIDS. However, because AIDS affects such a large percentage of black gay men, the fear of a positive diagnosis is ever-present in black queer culture and thus makes its way over to black queer theatrical culture. In addition to the looming threat of AIDS, conversations on socioeconomic class status are also shared between black queer culture and black queer theatrical culture.

Broke-Ass Black Queerness

Another aspect of Usher's identity is tied to his financial status. Usher states numerous times throughout the musical that he is broke. A frequently repeated line is "I am a Disney usher / I'm barely scraping by."⁷⁸ This line, along with Thought 6's line "(À la Wendy Williams) How U doin'? It's your Financial Faggotry and ooh chile, do you

77. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 91.

78. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 25.

have a second to chat about this situation with *Shittybank Student Loans?*⁷⁹ set up Usher's poor identity from the beginning of the musical. Usher's mother also constantly reminds him that she and his father took a financial hit to send Usher to New York University (NYU) and that loan officers keep calling their phone to look for Usher.

While Usher embraces his poorness, his parents, namely his mother, use Usher's precarious financial situation to guilt and victimize him. In pointing out that Usher does not make a lot of money as an usher and as a musical theater writer, Usher's parents contribute to his low self-esteem and worldview. What is unique about Usher's identity as a poor person is that, unlike his blackness and queerness, Usher has some kind of control over his financial situation, though it is still impacted by his black queerness. This is why Usher chooses not to write the Tyler Perry gospel play. Usher could have easily written a gospel play for Tyler Perry, gotten a big paycheck, and started paying off his loans and paying his parents back. However, Usher seems to find a sense of pride in his occupation and thus in his financial status and also refuses to compromise his black queerness to write from a non-queer black perspective. In this sense, Usher's financial identity becomes something that he is capable of changing, but refuses to change.

Conclusion

Jackson's musical *A Strange Loop* proves to be a rich site for examining how blackness and queerness influence one's way of being and knowing themselves, and how that affects one's orientation within the world. For Usher, his black queerness influences various aspects of his life including his relationship with religion, his familial

79. Jackson, *A Strange Loop*, pg. 26 (italics original).

relationships, and his financial status. This musical also highlights the interconnectedness of black queer theatrical culture with a black queer culture that exists outside of theatrical spaces. Central components of both queer studies and Africana and black studies are giving back to and being accessible to the communities that the disciplines are intended to serve. In bringing black queer culture to the stage, Jackson is doing just that.

While Usher grapples with ontological framings in isolation, exiled from any community, the following chapter presents how black queer people may operate within a community. *BLKS* investigates how black queer communities are sustained and how black queer communities interact with the world and those outside of their community.

Chapter 2: For The Girls

Live and belong are two different things.

— Aziza Barnes, *BLKS*⁸⁰

Aziza Barnes is a black queer poet, author, and playwright. Their theatrical debut, *BLKS*, premiered in 2017 at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, and was shortly followed with a New York premiere at MCC Theater in 2019. Barnes' play follows a day-in-the-life of three black queer women in Brooklyn as they navigate relationships, a health scare, death, and love.

Through a close reading and analysis of black queer community, this chapter seeks to position *BLKS* within the larger canon of black queer theatre. Unlike the other two plays in the circumjacent chapters, *BLKS* is not necessarily *about* queerness. It is instead, more about the complexities of blackness. That being said, queer sexualities and ideologies permeate every aspect of Barnes' play. These queer ideologies are informed by black cultural practices of community, kinship, and mutual aid, and thus mark the queerness of the play as a notably black queerness. *BLKS* presents audiences with an understanding of community as a mutually beneficial fellowship that is curated and nurtured by the people within it over time. The queerness informed by blackness within the community, marks Barnes' show as black queer theatre, due to the inextricable nature of the two ideas. In addition to an analysis on the portrayals of community, this chapter will investigate how the curated community utilizes language to strengthen communal ties and how it interacts with the prison industrial complex and economic status. By

80. Aziza Barnes, *BLKS* (New York: Dramatists Play Services, Inc., 2020), pg. 18.

highlighting the community's engagement with these factors, I seek to highlight a trend in how black queer theatre as a whole engages with these topics; black queer theatre promotes the creation of curated communities, but is extremely critical of economic structures and state-run institutions.

Blackness, Queerness, and Community

BLKS is a day-in-the-life of three friends—Octavia, Imani, and June—living and surviving together in New York City. After Octavia wakes up to a health scare, Imani and June rally around her and embark on a quest for joy and search for something to lift their collective spirits. Throughout the day, the three women travel around New York City and encounter a host of other characters that make the women's quest for joy more difficult than originally anticipated.

The title of the play, an homage to Chicago poet Avery R. Young, who coined the word *BLKS*, is quite ironic. While the title allows audience members to assume that the show will have something to do with blackness, Young coined the term to represent a people, rather than a color. But in addition to the title, Barnes uses words and language to create a specifically black world. The play is written in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and more specifically—a New York dialect of AAVE. The dialect immediately creates in-groups and out-groups within the audience. If you are in, then you are a black person who understands the nuances of AAVE, and—if you are out—you are a non-black person who will most likely be able to follow along, but will miss certain cultural nuances present in the language.

The characters in the play use language to define their own in-groups and out-groups and to solidify their community. Specifically, characters use “G” and “breh” throughout the duration of the play.⁸¹ Black people understand these words as terms of endearment in certain moments, but can also recognize slight tonal shifts that indicate a more combative tone. For non-black people—those in the out-group—this shift in tone may not be as obvious. Octavia jokingly tells Imani “I don’t think you’re using that word correctly, G,”⁸² after Imani incorrectly mentions irony. In this case, the innocent use of G between Octavia and Imani clarifies that Octavia and Imani belong in the same community; it is a friendly use. Similarly, Imani tells June, “Yea, G. That’s an incendiary ass word,”⁸³ in response to June calling someone a “cunt bucket.”⁸⁴ Even though Imani is chastising June in this moment, the use of G ensures that June still knows that she is part of the community, and that Imani is criticizing her out of love. In a similar fashion, Ry uses breh to signify when someone is a part of her community; she most often uses breh when speaking with Olivia. However, her use of breh shifts when talking to That Bitch on the Couch. Ry tells That Bitch “Breh, I just met you tho,”⁸⁵ when That Bitch asks if she and Ry can hang out the next day. In this case, Ry uses breh as a way to distance herself from this character and exclude That Bitch rather than include her; there is no sense of community or comradery. The use of a black linguistic style not only creates an in-group community within the audience, but it also works to demarcate the characters’ communities within the play.

81. Barnes, *BLKS*.

82. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 12.

83. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 13.

84. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 13.

85. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 20.

The play's focus on blackness is also apparent in the detailed character descriptions in the script. Because of how detailed these character descriptions are, they are worth quoting at length.

OCTAVIA: Is a deeply awkward, weird, introvert, super dork blk girl. Queer. Blk. Mixed blk. ½ blk. Whatever. Blk with a white dad from Cornwall, England, who don't get it. 22. Aspiring writer of movies. Dates Ry. Drinks too much and can't hold it as well as Imani. No filter. Speaks thoughts as they exist in her head because the world is her head. Nerdy white boys build shrines to her for her genuine love of Japanese anime, *Harry Potter*, and Octavia Butler, the woman after whom she is named. Her adoration of *Star Trek* is astounding and she can quote Blaxploitation movies offhand. She loves other worlds, would rather live in them than this one. She's beautiful and makeup confuses her. Her uniform is sweatpants paired with large chunky heels or boots, for her love of comfort and hatred of being short. She hasn't told her parents that she's queer.

IMANI: Haitian. Very Haitian. Matter fact, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone more Haitian. No accent, but can turn it on when she wants for emphasis. 23. A budding alcoholic by American standards. Does a first-rate impression of Eddie Murphy from his *RAW* stand-up/movie and is always striving to perfect it. Single. Constantly gets fired from the same job at Nuyorican Poets Cafe on E. 3rd Street between Avenue A and B for jumping on the mike [sic] in the middle of her bartending shift and doing her Eddie Murphy impression. Her dad passed away three months ago. Pancreatic cancer. *RAW* is what they watched on repeat together when he was in the hospital. The last days.

JUNE: Dates a dude name Jamal, has dated a dude named Jamal for years, since she and Octavia were in high school together in Los Angeles, their city of birth. Octavia is June's ace boon and roll dogg. Don't leave the house without her. 22. June is the only responsible drinker among the three roommates. Knows how to hack into databases of collegiate universities to access free JSTOR accounts. Plays a lot of *Call of Duty*. Is most at home in front of a screen. She is studying to be an accountant. She sells weed and is very professional about it. She comes from bougie blk folk who have had money in the family for two generations. Did Jack and Jill, LINKS, the whole nine. Jamal was her date to cotillion. Light skin blk girl. Hair always straight and long without weave. She is very proud of this. A prude, in a way. Cold, sometimes. Nah. Cold often. Usually unemotional, repressing. Makes pancakes for her roommates' hangovers.⁸⁶

86. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 6.

While all of this information is not necessary to understand the action of the play—audience members are most likely just fine not knowing that Octavia’s father is from Cornwall—the descriptions are so particular that they conjure up very distinct stereotypes of black people for the in-group; the mixed black, the Afro-Caribbean, and the bougie black. These stereotypes show the multiplicity present in blackness and reinforce black queer scholar E. Patrick Johnson’s idea that “Blackness, like performance, often defies categorization.”⁸⁷ Even though these stereotypes present an inherent categorization, each character defies certain aspects of their respective stereotype, showing the limitations in attempts to categorize blackness. Octavia represents the mixed black person; this stereotype is most often associated with people with both black and white lineage. The mixed black person is often perceived by black people as being racially confused and as not belonging to one race or the other and thus overcompensating when it comes to trying to be perceived as black.⁸⁸ Octavia, however, never has moments where she questions her blackness in the play—defying a common trope and showing that not every mixed black person is racially confused. Imani represents the Afro-Caribbean. Black people in the United States stereotype Afro-Caribbeans as hard-working people who have an extreme focus on education. They are perceived as being proud of their heritage and dedicated to their family.⁸⁹ While there is no doubt that Imani is highly dedicated to her father, her inconsistent employment status distances her character from the stereotypical hard-working Afro-Caribbean. Finally, June represent the bougie black. The bougie black is

87. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) pg. 2.

88. “The Loneliness of Being Mixed Race in America,” Vox, 18 Jan. 2021.

89. Michael Blanding, “Different Kinds of Black,” Tufts Now. Tufts University. 2 Jul. 2014, And Jennifer V. Jackson and Mary E. Cothran. “Black Versus Black: The Relationships Among African, African American, and African Caribbean Persons,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 5 (2003).

predominantly classified as an affluent lightskin woman with straight hair that is often not self-aware and can at times closely align herself with whiteness.⁹⁰ This matches with June quite well, but June's character also rejects this stereotype by engaging in activities that are understood as being below the bougie black; smoking and selling weed, as well as regularly playing video games, sets June apart from most bougie blacks. The performance of blackness within the play allows those within the in-group to witness the performance of blackness in a genuine way. For those same audience members, blackness is a "material way of knowing,"⁹¹ and can be easily recognized when performed; this recognition also strengthens the idea of community amongst the in-group of black audience members.

Just as these characters are sites through which to explore blackness, they are also sites to explore queerness. Octavia's character description bluntly states that she is queer, though she has not told her parents. Imani's character description does not provide the same information, but her attraction and somewhat flirtatious encounter with That Bitch on the Couch signals her queerness. Through character's sexuality, queerness informs the show in a fashion similar to blackness. However, Barnes has stated that their play is about "three queer black women."⁹² June's sexuality in the play reads as heterosexual—she has been in a relationship with a cisgender man for years—so where does Barnes get this notion of queerness?

While June's sexuality may not be queer—Barnes states that, "One of them is straight, but like, who is really straight"⁹³—her way of living is undoubtedly queer. In

90. Karen Chalamilla, "At last, an analysis of the black and bougie screen queen," Gal-dem, 22 Oct. 2020.

91. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, pg. 8.

92. "Aziza Barnes on BLKS," Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 2. Nov. 2017, video, 4:31.

93. "Aziza Barnes on BLKS," Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

this situation, it is helpful to understand queer as a verb. June, along with Octavia and Imani, is actively defying heteronormative understandings of relationships, community, and living. As previously stated, *BLKS* is not necessarily about being queer, despite queer sex scenes and the sexuality of two out of three of the main characters. Queer ideologies, however, permeate every part of the play and the queerness of the play becomes less about sexuality and more about queered understandings of community.

In *BLKS*, Octavia, Imani, and June have created a type of kinship structure unique to their personalities and their needs. For centuries, black people have queered the white, heteronormative idea of the nuclear family, and have relied on extended family and close friends for various types of support. Black queer people have also created an elaborate kinship structure in ballroom and house culture. Ballroom houses are intended to be safe spaces for those who have been ostracized from both white queer spaces and straight black spaces; they become domestic sites created for survival. According to black queer theorist Marlon M. Bailey and HIV researcher Emily A. Arnold, ballroom culture has been a “viable alternative to the biological family from which they [black queer people] have been excluded.”⁹⁴ Ballroom culture became widely known to non-black and non-queer people in the 1990 film, *Paris is Burning*, a documentary on the ballroom scene in New York City. House mother Dorian Corey explains in the film, that “[houses are] families, for a lot of people don’t have families. But this is a new meaning of family...It’s a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond.”⁹⁵

94. Emily A. Arnold and Marlon M Bailey, “Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21, no. 2-3 (2009): pg. 3.

95. Dorian Corey, *Paris Is Burning*, Santa Monica, California: Lionsgate, 2012.

While I do not mean to suggest that the characters in *BLKS* have created a ballroom house of their own, I do mean to suggest that their domestic structure does mirror ballroom houses in certain ways. E. Patrick Johnson explains that in addition to being domestic sites, “houses are also sites of creativity, imagination, performance, and liminality in which identity is affirmed and yet is also still in process.”⁹⁶ Octavia, Imani, and June are able to use their home as a site of creativity in various ways; Octavia needs to be home to find inspiration for her film, Imani uses the home to perfect her Eddie Murphy impersonation, and June utilizes the home for centering and grounding.

The three characters also lean into the idea of the home as a safe space. Many black queer youth are pushed into ballroom houses because it is unsafe for them to live in white queer spaces or straight black spaces; they may physically live in those spaces for a time, but are ultimately pushed out because of the dangers of not belonging in those spaces. As Octavia states in the play, “live and belong are two different things.”⁹⁷ The characters embody this idea in a different way. Octavia, Imani, and June are all able to code-switch and have the luxury of being able to exist around white queer people and around non-queer black people. However, it is when the characters are around these people from different backgrounds that they encounter conflict that pushes them back to their home and to each other. At the beginning of the play, June returns to the home after going to her cishet boyfriend, Jamal’s house, where she discovered that he has been cheating on her. When she returns to the home to tell Octavia and Imani the news, she tells her friends how she also got into a verbal altercation with the woman Jamal was cheating with. Later, Octavia reveals that this is the eleventh time Jamal has cheated on

96. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, pg. 83.

97. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 18.

June this year (that she knows of). June's conflict with Jamal seems to always go unresolved as he continues to cheat. This continually pushes June back into her home and her community. After That Bitch on the Couch touches Imani's hair and sends her money, the two experience a conflict of their own. Imani states that That Bitch touching her hair feels weird and That Bitch assumes that sending money will fix the issue. After verbal quarrels, Imani and That Bitch both leave each other, pissed off, and without resolution. After facing this conflict, Imani finds her way back home to receive comfort from Octavia and June.

Ballroom houses and queered kinship relationships do more than provide safe spaces; they can also be seen as sites of mutual aid. Queer lawyer and activist Dean Spade defines mutual aid as "radical collective care."⁹⁸ Mutual aid is a form of political participation that builds "new social relations that are more survivable"⁹⁹ than other forms of political participation, as people face various political, social, and environmental crises. Essentially, mutual aid is characterized by providing for others and working within community to survive; scholar bell hooks succinctly states that "mutual giving strengthens community."¹⁰⁰ The spirit of mutual giving is present in how Barnes presents the function of money in relation to community. Octavia and Imani make a joke about being the most-fired people of 2015. Octavia is currently jobless, and Imani works off-and-on at a café. June, on the other hand, comes from two generations of money, makes money selling weed, and, at the end of the play, reveals that her new job at Deloitte

98. Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): pg. 131.

99. Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity," pg. 136.

100. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, First Perennial edition, (New York: Perennial, 2001), pg. 126.

comes with a salary of \$100,000. Despite the unstable nature of Octavia and Imani's employment status, they seem to be able to financially support themselves. While Barnes never explains exactly how Octavia and Imani are able to pay their share of rent and pay for other living expenses, it is implied that this may be a communal effort. In Scene 1 after the trio makes a toast, Imani states that they need another bottle of Maker's Mark whisky. June states that she is not buying it, Octavia states that she does not want to go outside, and so Imani caves in and says that she will buy the new bottle. This interaction highlights how the three women share resources within their community. Despite the characters' varying levels of financial stability, they are all able to live together and make sure that no one struggles too severely, and that each person's needs are met.

Mutual aid is a historied practice in black queer communities, and in the United States, can be traced back to slavery. In 1787, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two freemen in Philadelphia, founded the first black mutual aid society in Philadelphia and the first documented mutual aid society in the United States.¹⁰¹ Free African Society was a mutual aid society for free black people with a mission "to provide fellowship, a place of worship, and support for members and their families in case of sickness or death."¹⁰² Because free black people did not have an abundance of wealth, Free African Society was a space to provide financial and emotional support, especially for widows and impoverished people.

In 1835, abolitionists Robert Brown, William Johnston, David Ruggles, George R. Barker, and J. W. Higgins created the New York Committee of Vigilance (NYCV)—a mutual aid-based safety organization—"for the purpose of adopting measures to

101. Gerald D. Jaynes, "Free African Society," in *Encyclopedia of African American Society*, 2005.

102. Gerald D. Jaynes, "Free African Society."

ascertain, if possible, the extent to which the cruel practice of kidnapping men, women, and children, is carried on in this city, and to aid such unfortunate persons as may be in danger of being *reduced to slavery*.”¹⁰³ During the antebellum era, New York City was a dangerous place for black people, even if they were free. People, children especially, were often kidnapped and either killed or forced back into slavery. During the 1830s, numerous organizations centered around vigilance and self-defense for black people formed, which was—and in many cases still is—a radical act of community empowerment. The NYCV relied on mutual aid in numerous ways. Founding member David Ruggles was known for going above and beyond in his efforts of protection and would board ships in the New York harbor and search for signs of illegal slavery. He also published a list of white people who he believed to be aiding in the kidnapping of free black people, assisted fugitives to safety in Canada, and organized for the Underground Railroad. He was only able to accomplish these feats by the on-the-ground informants that financially supported the NYCV and who would take note of any suspicious activity that they saw while going about their days.¹⁰⁴ During their first year, the NYCV raised \$840—roughly \$26,836 in 2022—from their supporters and were able to use these funds for lawyer fees, food, clothing, shelter, and to recover black people who had been detained in the south.¹⁰⁵

The success of the NYCV paved the way for many other mutual aid organizations, including the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension

103. *The First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance, for the Year 1837, Together with Important Facts Relative to Their Proceedings ... Pub. by Direction of the Committee* (New York: Piercy & Reed, 1837), pg. 3. Italics original.

104. Jamila Shabazz Brathwaite, “The Black Vigilance Movement in Nineteenth Century New York City,” (M.F.A. thesis, City College of the City University of New York, 2011), pg. 24.

105. Brathwaite, “The Black Vigilance Movement in Nineteenth Century New York City,” pg. 32.

Association, created by Tennessee-natives Callie House and Isaiah Dickerson in 1898. Callie House was a young black woman who was widowed at an early age with six children. After pensions for ex-slaves were voted down in Congress, House and Dickerson decided to form their organization for ex-slaves who lacked resources for health care and funerals. The duo established chapters of the organization across the country which combined mutual aid with medical insurance and burial assistance. Members gave the organization ten cents a month, and by the end of 1899, they had over 34,000 members. However, the success and proliferation of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association sparked a fear that would later inspire the federal prosecution of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP)—possibly the most well-known mutual aid organizations in the United States. In both cases, the success of their mutual aid efforts undermined the notion that the United States government was adequately providing for citizens; therefore, the United States government marked them as dangerous organizations and tried to destroy their operations. Eventually, both Dickerson and House were prosecuted and indicted on trumped up charges of fraud. While the charges were false, people at the time believed them to be true. The duo was harassed by white people around the country and by wealthier black people who were convinced that Dickerson and House had been stealing people's money.

After Dickerson and House's charges, the persecution of mutual aid organizations was only exacerbated. The Black Panther Party (BPP), in operation from 1966 to 1982, was created by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale at Merritt College in Oakland, California. The BPP was intended to be "a direct, active, communal response to the ways

in which Black people have been disenfranchised in American society.”¹⁰⁶ The BPP saw mutual aid as a necessary tool for self-determination and liberation and had a host of programs such as People’s Free Community Employment Program, Free Commissary for Prisoners Program, and People’s Cooperative Housing Program.¹⁰⁷ One of their most successful programs, however, was their Free Breakfast Program which started in 1969 and provided free and healthy breakfast food to local youth. Nik Heynen, a scholar of urban politics, states that “the historic importance of the BPP’s Breakfast Program rests both in the fact that it was imperative for the social reproduction of many inner-city communities and that it was both the model for, and impetus behind, all federally funded school breakfast programs currently in existence within the United States.”¹⁰⁸ The Free Breakfast Program and other mutual aid efforts were heavily criticized by the United States government, and contributed to the BPP’s increased persecution. While the original BPP is no longer active today, its spirit of mutual aid and community care is still present.

While a highly politicized understanding of mutual aid is not present in *BLKS*, the idea of community care and love inspired by the spirit of mutual aid is present. As Dean Spade states, “providing for one another through coordinated collective care is radical and generative.”¹⁰⁹ This holds true even when providing entails emotional support rather than financial support. In her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, author and scholar bell hooks queers common understandings of community. While community is often

106. “Panthers,” People's Kitchen Collective, Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.

107. “Panthers,” People's Kitchen Collective.

108. Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party’s Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 2 (2009): pg. 406.

109. Spade, “Solidarity Not Charity,” pg. 136.

understood as a stagnant feature of society that people just happen to fall into, hooks argues that communities are vital to human survival everywhere and are aspects of society that individuals curate for themselves. hooks states that “communities sustain life—not nuclear families, or the ‘couple,’ and clearly not the rugged individualist.”¹¹⁰ Octavia, Imani, and June are sustained through their queered understanding of community and their adventures in *BLKS* provide clear examples of hook’s thoughts on community.

One of the most rewarding ways to build community is through friendship. hooks states:

Since we choose our friends, many of us, from childhood on into our adulthood, have looked to friends for the care, respect, knowledge, and all-around nurturance of our growth that we did not find in the family... Loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected.¹¹¹

hooks asserts the idea that when people are unable to find care in family, they turn to friendships for that care. Because people choose their own friends, friendships can lead to communities based on shared love and care. Octavia’s character description states that her dad does not “get it”¹¹² and that she has not told her parents that she is queer. Octavia’s inability to tell her parents of her queerness shows a disconnect between Octavia and her family. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Octavia looks to her friendships with Imani and June for care, and they allow Octavia to fully express her queerness. In the opening scene, Octavia finds a mole on her clitoris. She asks her lover Ry to look at it, and when Ry refuses Octavia kicks her out of the home. When Ry leaves,

110. hooks, *All About Love*, pg. 114.

111. hooks, *All About Love*, pg. 118.

112. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 6.

Octavia instantly goes to Imani, who has just returned from the store with band aids. In the conversation that follows, Imani cares for Octavia in their own way (with shots of alcohol) while also holding Octavia accountable for some of her more erratic behavior (like kicking Ry out and then calling Ry her romantic partner). Whenever Octavia is faced with conflict in the play, she turns to Imani and June for comfort and honesty.

hooks also warns that while humans are conditioned to find love through romantic connections and relationships, “friendship is the place in which a majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community.”¹¹³ This idea is most apparent in June and her relationships. June has been in a relationship with her boyfriend Jamal for five years. Despite their relationship however, Jamal cheats on June quite frequently.

While June is aware of his infidelities, she discloses her routine with Ry.

I’m gonna go to Jamal’s house and hear him out and bring coffee and stay sprung cuz once he made me feel fucking beautiful. In this dress. When I was seventeen. Like all the lights went out in the room except me. And every time he fucks up, I put on this fucking dress and I stay. Cuz who else is gonna make all the lights go out?¹¹⁴

Octavia also states that “[June’s] always gonna be with that nigga, always gonna go back, she’s just like, fucking stuck, you know?”¹¹⁵ June has been conditioned to stay in a love that causes her harm because of the emphasis society places on romantic connections.

This does not mean that her friendships with Octavia and Imani are conflict free—June tells Ry that she’s angry that no one ever asks about her life, and Octavia and June get into a physical altercation. However, June has the opportunity to speak and openly communicate with Octavia and Imani. One of the foundations of friendship, according to

113. hooks, *All About Love*, pg. 119.

114. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 37.

115. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 34.

hooks, is honest and critical feedback. In their times of conflict, the friends give each other raw, unfiltered feedback. And while it may seem harsh at times, their honesty pushes their friendship further.

By the end of the play, the friends are seemingly right where they started; another instigating event has begun and their home is in chaos. But the events of the play show a personal growth within each character. More importantly, despite their differences and conflicts, Barnes' characters curated a communal space that allows each of them to fully embrace their platonic relationships with each other and provide a space of belonging.

Community and Violence, Community and Intervention

In *BLKS*, Barnes creates a severe critique of the prison industrial complex within the United States. What makes Barnes' critique unique, however, is their illustration of how community intervention reminiscent of the black cultural tradition of mutual aid can serve as a viable alternative to police. Black queer theatre often features a critique of violent state institutions, specifically institutions that target black queer people. Octavia, Imani, and June act as stand-ins for how larger black queer communities engage with the prison industrial complex and show the violence and harm that comes from interacting with the institution.

In Scene 2, the trio sees a Drunk White Woman with an Ethnically Ambiguous Dude. The stage directions read that “the white woman is very obviously drunk and unable to consent. The ethnically ambiguous dude looks suspect as hell, grabbing up on obviously drunk white woman and further cornering her, telling her to shut up.”¹¹⁶ June

116. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 15.

intervenes, and Drunk White Woman is able to get away from Ethnically Ambiguous Dude and call a cab. Ethnically Ambiguous Dude then turns on June and assaults her; Octavia and Imani intervene to try and stop him. June eventually spits in the man's face and he slaps her and then runs off when Imani states that she is calling the police. The police are unable to send anyone to help because all of the cars are already dispatched. When she gets off the phone Imani says "They really wanted to know if he was Mexican, Muslim, or Black. They actually said Muslim too, like that shit was a [sic] ethnic group."¹¹⁷ While Imani was on the phone, Octavia put herself at risk by running after Ethnically Ambiguous Dude. When she returns to the group, she grows angry at the fact that the police were unable to send a car out.

Octavia: So, that's it?

Imani: 'Tavia. Chill.

Octavia: SO THAT'S IT? THAT'S ALL Y'ALL CAN DO?

Imani: 'Tavia for real just drop it.

Octavia: Seems like all y'all want us to do is twerk and die!

Imani: Let's fucking go.

Octavia: Fucked up. I can't do this shit no more.¹¹⁸

Imani goes on to state that the women "don't belong out here,"¹¹⁹ which reignites Octavia's frustration. Octavia states that the police do not see them as people and asks June if she wanted Drunk White Woman to care that they were helping her. June states that she did want Drunk White Woman to care because it would have given her hope.

Barnes provides a harsh commentary on the prison industrial complex in this scene. The lack of action from police reinforces common critiques that the police do not

117. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 17.

118. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 17.

119. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 18.

actually prevent crime, rather they show up (or don't show up) after a crime has already been committed. In this case, the police are either unwilling or unable to send help after a physical assault and two attempted sexual assaults. While the police failed to prevent and respond to these crimes, Octavia, Imani, and June managed to prevent Drunk White Woman from being assaulted while also (somewhat) successfully defending themselves. The trio's community intervention was more impactful than the police's inaction and speaks to the benefits of queer constructions of community. June's foundation in community and community care prompted her to intervene on behalf of Drunk White Woman, and Octavia and Imani's care for June resulted in a community-wide confrontation. While June did experience violence, the community intervention was still successful, as they stopped two attempts of sexual assault.

Barnes juxtaposes this early case of police inaction with a case of police prejudice later in the play. At the end of Scene 5, June looks at her phone and this dialogue follows:

June: Another one. Today. Third they shot this week. Can we even sit in our cars anymore? And it's like—just like—we didn't do nothing!

Anything! Not a nothing!

Imani: Do anything—shit, I ain't even from here!

June: From here? You think I wanted to be from here?! I ain't ask for all that.

Imani: Shit. What do we do?

Silence.

June: Roll another one.

Imani: Yea.¹²⁰

June is referncing another black person that has been shot by police. While this is never spoken aloud, the tone of the conversation is one familiar to those within the audience's in-group and, therefore, does not have to be explicitly stated. June and Imani's response

120. Barnes, *BLKS*, pg. 40.

to this news, rolling another blunt, is part of their daily routine and illustrates how mundane police violence has become to them. The contrast between when the police choose to be inactive versus when they choose to be active offers a weighted critique on the function of the prison industrial complex as a whole. Barnes argues that police are unreliable in times of crisis and are only active when they are the ones causing the harm.

Conclusion

Overall, *BLKS* is a rich site for analyzing a black queer theatrical culture because of the historied cultural traditions that inform the structure of the show and its portrayals of community. While the characters do not stray too far from or ever leave their community, Barnes illustrates how the trio's community interacts with contrasting communities and larger societal systems.

While Barnes' play focuses on the presentness of black queer communities, the next chapter focuses on the futurity of black queer communities. Donja R. Love's *one in two* takes the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic and provides a targeted social commentary on how this epidemic may harm the formation of black queer communities and what a lack of recognition may mean for the future of black queer communities.

Chapter 3: Hidden States of Emergency

It's like there are so many stories of people dying from AIDS, but not living with HIV. I just...I wanted to tell that story. Ya know?

— Donja R. Love, *one in two*¹²¹

When audiences walk into the theatre to see a play, they bring a certain set of expectations with them. One of these expectations is that, at some point, the play will end. However, for playwright Donja R. Love and his play *one in two*, there is no end; both in the literal and figurative senses. Literally, Love writes “the play may seem over, but it’s not...Since The Numbers continue to grow, we have no reason to applaud. Until this statistic ends, there is no curtain call.”¹²² Figuratively, Love’s play speaks to the futurity, or perhaps the lack of futurity, of black queer communities. This chapter seeks to situate *one in two* within the larger canon of black queer theatre through a close reading of Love’s script and through analyzing the framings of HIV and dystopian gestures. The centering of HIV in the play is one of the factors that highlight the inseparability of blackness and queerness within the work and mark the work as distinctly black and queer.

one in two is focused on a statistic from a 2016 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “one in two Black gay men will be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetime.”¹²³ While this is the main portion of the statistic that Love chooses to focus on, the study also states that one in eleven white gay or bisexual men will be diagnosed

121. Donja R. Love, *one in two* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc.), pg. 78.

122. Love, *one in two*, pg. 83.

123. Love, *one in two*, pg. 84.

with HIV in their lifetime.¹²⁴ The extreme disparities in these two statistics exemplify just how specific this story is to black gay men. Within the world of the play, a giant ticker hovers above the set—a sterile, all-white waiting room. The ticker starts at the number zero and gradually increases for the remainder of the show. During moments when the actors appear to break the rules of the show, the numbers increase rapidly and seem to cause harm to the actors. At the end of the show, the numbers are still increasing. The statistic is also referenced before the show begins. As a pre-show activity, audience members are directed to take a number from a ticket dispenser, which dispenses tickets with either the number one, two, or three. These numbers represent the numbers associated with the actors on stage. Eventually, the audience members learn that #1/Donté is HIV-positive, and come to realize that the randomness with which audience members were dispensed numbers mirrors the unpredictability of HIV.

The play follows the journey of a black gay man, #1/Donté, as he learns to live with a positive HIV diagnosis. Donté takes audiences through his journey of navigating medication, attending support groups, dealing with a worrisome mother, and using sex and substances to cope. The show features three actors—all gay, all black, all male, some may be HIV-positive themselves—and falls within the genre of theatre of the absurd. After audience members have taken their numbers and gotten settled into the theatre, the three men enter the stage and propose a game. In this game, the audience chooses the roles that each man will play—#1/Donté, #2, or #3. Love states that this game plays into

124. “Half of black gay men and a quarter of Latino gay men projected to be diagnosed within their lifetime,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 23 Feb. 2016.

the absurd nature of the piece and showcases the uncertainty of living with HIV as a black gay man.¹²⁵

The language that the characters use contributes to the space that Love creates. The play is written using AAVE while also incorporating words and phrases coined by black queer communities such as “*trade*.” The beginning of the play features a moment where the three men are deciding a safe word. #3 suggests that the safe word should be nigga, and a brief disagreement ensues:

#3: The safe word is...’niggaaaaaaa.’

#1: Nigga?

#3: No.

#2: But you just said ‘nigga.’

#3: No I didn’t.

#1: Yes, you did.

#3: No, I said...niggaaaaaaa. Seven ‘A’s.’

...

#2: But we say that word so much. What if, what if we get confused?

#3: Please. We know the beautiful nuances of nigga. So we won’t, my nigga.¹²⁶

For those within black queer communities, the language immediately signifies that *one in two* will center people who identify as black and queer. Similar to the use of AAVE in *A Strange Loop* and *BLKS*, the use of AAVE in *one in two* makes it impossible to separate blackness and queerness in this play. The specific use of language creates an in-group within the audience of black and queer people who understand the nuances of the language.

Dystopian Gestures and Theatre of the Absurd

125. Dan Meyer, “Donja R. Love’s *one in two* Is the Urgent, Black, Queer Play for This Moment,” Playbill, 10 Jun. 2020.

126. Love, *one in two*, pg. 28-29.

The gestures of queer dystopianism present in *one in two* mark the play as a work of black queer theatrical culture. Queer utopian scholar, José Esteban Muñoz states that queerness itself is a utopia: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”¹²⁷ Queerness manifests itself as hopes and desires and, in that sense, becomes something that we are always in search of—a utopia. While Muñoz’s studies focus primarily on the utopic, scholars such as Dragan Klaić, Alex Mangold, and Scott C. Knowles understand utopia and dystopia as being two sides of the same coin. Imagining the two concepts through this lens, Knowles comes to understand utopianism as being an umbrella term that encompasses both utopia and dystopia.¹²⁸ These scholars, along with Lyman Tower Sargent, understand the dystopian nature of utopia. Klaić states that “dystopian imagery asserts utopian impulses by disguising them in a negative mold.”¹²⁹ Essentially, dystopia is used to express ideas of utopia, as the hope of utopia will exist in the background of the dystopia’s devastation. Sargent affirms Klaić’s line of thinking and suggests the term critical dystopia—a dystopia that suggests the possibility of a utopia.¹³⁰ Mangold and Fraser reinforce certain characteristics of dystopias within the theatre. Fraser understands theatrical manifestation of dystopia within the works of Samuel Beckett, and comes to characterize dystopia as satirical, absurd, and as a failure to decide—an environment where “thought attempts to give meaning both directly and intangibly whilst also expressing the absence of

127. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 22.

128. Scott C. Knowles, “Dystopian performatives: Negative affect/emotion in the work of Sarah Kane,” (dissertation, University of Kansas, 2016), pp. 203.

129. Dragan Klaić, “Utopia Sustained,” *Theater (New Haven, Conn.)* 26, no. 1 and 2 (1995): pp. 61.

130. Lyman Tower Sargent, “Do Dystopias Matter?” in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fatima Vieira (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013), pp. 11.

meaning.”¹³¹ Mangold also uses a playwright’s body of work to visualize his thoughts of dystopia. In the work of Sarah Kane, Mangold argues that the severe negativity and the characters’ inability to connect with one another and succeed in any successful way manifests as a dystopia. He also states, however, that the dystopias present in Kane’s works call for an emancipated spectator as they encourage the audience to become actively engaged and question the tragedies that they witness.

Love’s play takes its structure after the theater of the absurd, and this structure plays into Fraser’s understanding of dystopian theatre. The play is cyclical in nature and, as Love tells us, does not end. The characters have performed this piece before and will be forced to keep performing the piece until the numbers stop. In this way, the absurdity is reminiscent of the works of Samuel Beckett, and the sheer hopelessness in never being able to escape this cycle is a dystopian gesture. The characters are stuck in the present, with seemingly no sign of escape. The closest that the characters get to escaping their current condition is when #1/Donté and #2 decide to write their own narratives and decide their own destinies, but still, the numbers never stop. The characters’ fixed position exemplifies Muñoz’s belief that “the present is not enough.”¹³² The distress that the characters are in in their present moment compels the audience to think of ways to change this distress and invites them to activism to put an end to this ever-increasing number and never-ending cycle. Jorgensen states that:

The presence of individuals with HIV/AIDS on stage in plays written while the pandemic rages on is just that...present. And when viewed as

131. Ian Fraser, “A Negative Utopia? Adorno on Beckett’s *Endgame*,” in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, ed. Fatima Vieira (Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013), pp. 284.

132. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, pp. 48.

acts of activism, these plays are not coyly slipping those with AIDS into the historical narrative, they catapult them there in real-time.¹³³

In encouraging his audience towards acts of activism to achieve a queer utopia, Love does not ask how we may catapult those with AIDS into the historical narrative, but how we might catapult black, queer, HIV-positive men into the future. Love invites audiences to question how we might break this cycle so that the characters we watch can leave the theatre with us and move forward to hope for a queer utopia.

Signifiers of Black Queer Theatrical Culture

Donja R. Love is a playwright that is “Black, Queer, HIV-positive, and thriving.”¹³⁴ According to a feature from the Lark, “his work examines the forced absurdity of life for those who identify as Black, Queer, and HIV-positive.”¹³⁵ The writing process for *one in two* began around four years ago in 2018, when Love was coming up on the tenth anniversary of his HIV diagnosis. Love states that he was still struggling to come to terms with his health status, and his semi-autobiographical piece came from an attempt to accept and make peace with his HIV-positive status. Love makes his objective in writing extremely clear—his work centers black queer stories and people. In an interview with the queer publication *them*, Love states that while *one in two* is part of his own personal testimony, the story itself is not his. Rather, the story is shared with all other people that can relate to it and that may gain something from it. Because of the communal impact of this story, Love states that he didn’t want to write a sad story,

133. Eric Matthew Jorgensen, “Reacquired: I, Thou and the American AIDS Play,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2019), pg. 31.

134. “Featured Playwrights: Donja R. Love,” The Lark, 24 Aug. 2020.

135. “Featured Playwrights: Donja R. Love,” The Lark.

but one that blended darkness with comedy so that communities could see a different narrative than the one that is usually shown in plays such as *Warren* or *The Normal Heart*.¹³⁶ The idea of writing a story for a specific community and wanting that story to benefit the community is a central tenet of both queer theory and Africana theory. In both fields, while work can physically be done outside of a particular community, work is only considered *for* a black or queer community if it is accessible to the intended community and is beneficial to the community. In clarifying that he did not want to write a sad story for the benefit of black queer communities, Love embraces common practices of both Africana and queer theory.

AIDS plays have been associated with queer theatre since Robert Chesley's 1984 play, *Night Sweat*—the first play to center the disease. According to theatre scholar Eric Matthew Jorgensen, there are approximately four distinct generations of AIDS plays. The first generation (1984-1990) featured notable works such as *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer and *As Is* by William H. Hoffman. Because the playwrights of this generation were mainly white gay men, the plays of this generation asserted the idea that white gay men were the most affected by AIDS and largely contributed “to an accepted narrative about the disease that eventually needed to be deconstructed in favor of more inclusive epidemiological evidence”¹³⁷—a narrative that had to be reconstructed so that it could properly include the impact of AIDS on non-white gay men. This was the first generation that truly felt the magnitude of the AIDS pandemic and as a result, many of these plays

136. Michelle Kim, “Afro-Queer Playwright Donja R. Love Is One of Theatre’s Boldest New Voices,” *them*, 20 Jan. 2020.

137. Jorgensen, “Reacquired,” pg. 73.

center either someone suffering from AIDS-related illness or the immediate effects of a character dying from AIDS.

The second generation of AIDS plays (1991-2002) featured works such as *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, *Rent* by Jonathan Larson, *AIDS! The Musical!* by Robert Berg, Wendell Jones, and David Stanley, as well as *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project. Plays during this era “represented a new American understanding of the pandemic.”¹³⁸ The activist work of this generation slowly started to center black and latinx HIV/AIDS diagnoses and the demographics of who was writing these plays expanded. This shift from the first-generation plays was largely due to a new understanding of the pandemic as a whole. At this time, Africa, rather than New York City, was seen as the epicenter of AIDS and the Clinton presidential administration had introduced HIV/AIDS policy to help combat the proliferation of the disease. Many of these plays also began to explore genres outside of realism, and playwrights began to shift the representations of characters with HIV/AIDS as well. Rather than having white gay men make up the majority of characters with HIV/AIDS, playwrights would introduce a character from a more racially or ethnically diverse background that had HIV/AIDS and would have them share the stage with a white gay man who also had the disease.

The third generation (2003-2014) experienced a decline in new theatre, and instead is best characterized by film adaptations of popular AIDS plays such as *Angels in America* (HBO), *Rent*, *For Colored Girls*,¹³⁹ and *The Normal Heart* (HBO). This era is

138. Jorgensen, “Reacquired,” pg. 108.

139. This adaptation was based on Ntozake Shange’s play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. When the play premiered in 1976, there was no mention of AIDS. AIDS was introduced in the film adaptation in 2010.

focused mainly on the preservation of these stories, and the plays from this time that do include HIV/AIDS in their narratives tend to incorporate the disease and references to the disease into storylines that do not focus on the pandemic. The fourth generation started in 2015 and continues into the present. At the time of his writing, Jorgensen implies that there have been no major plays about HIV/AIDS. That being said, he also acknowledges that it is impossible to characterize and stylize this fourth generation because it is so new.

However, Jorgensen does state that:

the newest American AIDS plays present a theater of inclusion, in which AIDS is no longer the topic of the play, but rather HIV/AIDS is included in order to illuminate other universal issues. This theater of inclusion is also indicative of a theater of complacency. The invisibility and livability of HIV/AIDS ostensibly led directly to a withdrawal of AIDS as a topic in the American play.¹⁴⁰

It is important to keep in mind that Jorgensen's research concluded in 2018. That being said, *one in two* presents a clear diversion from this theater of inclusion. Recent plays of the fourth generation provide an intersectional approach to HIV/AIDS-centered storytelling. While Jorgensen insinuates that it may be dangerous to bury the depictions of AIDS within a story and within conversations on other issues, I disagree. He states that we are in a post-AIDS setting, something I would argue is patently false; and while I disagree that society is *post* AIDS, I would argue that a majority of American theatregoers are all too familiar with what AIDS may look like because of the abundance of shocking HIV/AIDS-related imagery in the theatre. Because of this, it is no longer necessary—and it might be argued that it was never necessary—to show how people's bodies may deteriorate while battling AIDS. I believe that the fourth generation of AIDS plays will come to be represented by black queer theatrical culture as defined throughout

140. Jorgensen, "Reacquired," pg. 198.

this thesis. And while black queer theatrical culture may be described as Jorgensen's theater of inclusion, I would argue that it does not become indicative of a theater of complacency. Black queer theatrical culture does not necessarily focus on the physical effects of HIV/AIDS, but this does not make the theatre complacent. Rather, black queer theatrical culture is able to frame HIV/AIDS in a way that highlights the mental, social, and psychological effects of the epidemic that are not always represented in the theatre.

Framings of HIV

David Román, author of *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, states that “performance has participated in shaping our understanding and experience of AIDS.”¹⁴¹ Modern advancements in medicine in the United States are at a point now where most people who have HIV will not go on to develop AIDS.¹⁴² That being said, HIV and AIDS are still largely discussed in tandem. While *one in two* primarily focuses on depictions of HIV, the fear of AIDS looms in the background and thus makes it an AIDS play. Because AIDS is also the late stage of HIV infection, AIDS plays inherently involve HIV.

Román asserts that all aspects of the production process in theatre are performances and have the opportunity to impact audience understandings of HIV/AIDS.¹⁴³ Love embraces this idea with his specificity in casting. In the rules of the play, Love states:

This one isn't a rule. It's more of an earnest request. Please cast someone HIV positive in this play. Please. I know this request is incredibly tricky

141. David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pg. xiii.

142. “What Are HIV and AIDS?” HIV.gov, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

143. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 8.

and sensitive, due to such things as shame and stigmatization, but how affirming would it be to have an HIV positive person in one of the roles. Or two? Or all three?¹⁴⁴

In this earnest request, Love is actively attempting to shift who is on stage representing HIV. Love goes beyond playwrights of the second generation of AIDS plays, and rather than introducing an HIV-positive character with a racially or ethnically diverse background to exist alongside a white gay male with HIV, Love centers three black gay men. The specificity in casting radically shifts audience perceptions, as white gay men become decentralized in Love's story. In requesting at least one HIV-positive actor, Love also seeks to shift how HIV-positive bodies and their capabilities are viewed. It is unclear whether or not the actors' personal statuses would be readily available to audience members, but if this information were disclosed to audience members, it would shift the more common performances of HIV/AIDS. At the time his book was published, Román observed that it was common practice for directors and casting agents to hire actors whose sexuality and HIV status was unmarked to act the role of a person with AIDS. He argues that "these choices tend to exploit the spectator's reflexive identification with the representation of the person with AIDS."¹⁴⁵ In an analysis of gay male solo performance, Román finds that gay male solo performers use their bodies to enter into the spectacle of AIDS and "expand the representational possibilities of the male homosexual body on stage."¹⁴⁶ In utilizing their bodies, gay male solo performers, who are typically more open about their HIV status, "unsettle the comforts of both transitive and reflexive models of

144. Love, *one in two*, pg. 3.

145. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 127.

146. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 125.

identification and...expand the field in which AIDS is constructed and understood in the national public sphere.”¹⁴⁷

one in two is by no means a solo performance, but Román’s analysis of the body in gay male solo performance is extremely relevant. The opening scene calls attention to the performer’s bodies. In the opening scene, the three actors are trapped in a pristine and sterile waiting room while wearing only pants. The minimalism of this set draws focus to the men’s bodies. As we sit in this moment, we sit with these men’s bodies. As we sit with these men’s bodies, we realize that these are three healthy men that are not depicted as frail subjects suffering from an incurable disease. Historically, Román believes that “the spectacle of AIDS serves to secure a larger erasure of the gay male subject,”¹⁴⁸ and implies a history where gay men will only be remembered as sites of plague and contagion. In forcing audiences to sit in this opening moment, Love is rewriting how black gay men will be remembered within the larger world of AIDS plays; they will be remembered not as sites of contagion, but as sites of health and livelihood.

Scholars Román and Douglas Crimp, author of *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, both agree that AIDS plays and performances of AIDS are centered on sufferings and loss. Crimp states that the arts have two main ways of treating AIDS, “by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express the human suffering and loss.”¹⁴⁹ Román agrees with this statement but offers more critique on works that focus on suffering and loss. He argues that these representations do serve important social functions in the fight against AIDS, but

147. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 127.

148. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 125.

149. Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.” In *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (First MIT Press Edition. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 3.

ultimately “fail to imagine the arts in proactive terms.”¹⁵⁰ This is the exact point that Love makes in *one in two*. #1 states “It’s like there are so many stories of people dying from AIDS, but not living with HIV. I just...I wanted to tell that story. Ya know?”¹⁵¹ While the play does touch on suffering, Love does not show audiences how the body suffers, rather he shows audiences psychological suffering that will be discussed later in the chapter. But what is most important here is that Love chooses not to focus on loss and death.

However, Love still addresses these topics. At the beginning of the show, #3 tells #1/Donté that he will have to kill himself when they are done with their game. From this point on, the audience is braced for this moment. While #1/Donté’s journey continues, however, the impending suicide slips from central focus. Finally, in the latter half of the script, #1/Donté leaves his mother a distressing voicemail, takes an entire bottle of pills, and gets in a full bathtub. Audiences anticipate that this is the suicide they were warned of, but then #1/Donté yells the safe word and gets out of the bath. #3 insists that #1/Donté has to follow the rules. #1/Donté and #2 begin to change the rules and suggest that #1/Donté can get married instead and suggest that they can create their own destiny. #3 is in disbelief at the thought that they can change the narrative and go against the rules. #2 asks “What’s stopping us?” to which #3 replies, “Life. Circumstances. Reality. No matter how much we may want it to, this story is not going to change.”¹⁵² #3 goes on to say:

This is a story. Donté’s story, that we *have* to tell. You don’t think I get tired of having to go through this story over and over again? I do it because us telling this story, letting them see *this* reality that maybe it won’t have to be our reality anymore. That maybe those numbers can stop growing. (*pointing to The Audience*) We’re here because of them. They

150. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, pg. 40.

151. Love, *one in two*, pg. 78.

152. Love, *one in two*, pg. 73.

came to see a story. A story that has a beginning, a middle, and an END!
An end to Donté's life. They like shit like that. Black Death gets through
to them.¹⁵³

#1/Donté does not commit suicide, and when #3 tries to force #1/Donté to kill himself, he is outnumbered and forced to leave the space.

Love portrays a beautiful and challenging portrayal of survival at this moment. He plays on the audience's expectation of death in plays related to HIV—that death is one of the rules of AIDS plays. #1/Donté and #2 become Love's voices in their quest to write their own destinies and change their fates. At this moment, Love is speaking not to the immediate audience, but to black, queer, HIV-positive men and says that there are more options than what they are constantly shown. They do not have to be placed into a box where their future is predetermined, rather they can break out of this box and determine their own life.

While Love does not portray death in this show, he does portray suffering and some of the other side effects of HIV/AIDS that are not physical; he portrays the social and psychological effects of HIV. This portrayal gives audiences a more well-rounded understanding of the disease. Instead of just presenting how HIV/AIDS affects the body, Love presents how HIV/AIDS can affect one's entire livelihood. #1/Donté has a host of unhealthy coping mechanism, including sex and substance abuse. The play jumps five years in time because #1/Donté suffers from alcoholism and lost up to five years of memory after his diagnosis. #1/Donté even asks incredulously, "And all I've done, for five years, was drink?"¹⁵⁴ His nurse calls him out about his substance abuse as well. #3/Nurse states, "it's just...whenever you do come, you're usually...you're usually

153. Love, *one in two*, pg. 74.

154. Love, *one in two*, pg. 45.

drunk.”¹⁵⁵ #1/Donté corrects the nurse by saying that the last time he was with the nurse, he was actually high from marijuana. In the moments when #1/Donté comes out of his five-year drunken haze, he immediately starts contacting booty calls looking for a hookup, and eventually goes on an app and settles for TRADEHUNGLIKEAHORSE_99/#2. TRADEHUNGLIKEAHORSE_99/#2 has no emotional connection with #1/Donté, and when he asks if #1/Donté is clean (HIV-negative), #1/Donté lies and says yes. TRADEHUNGLIKEAHORSE_99/#2 is unwilling to have any meaningful conversation with #1/Donté and refuses to see him again after the two have sex. While searching for some form of connection, #1/Donté settles for a man that he feels he must lie to and who is unwilling to see #1/Donté for anything other than his body.

The use of sex as a coping mechanism is likely tied to #1/Donté’s abandonment issues caused by his ex-boyfriend. The loneliness that accompanies this abandonment signifies an additional social side effect of HIV diagnoses. After notifying his ex-boyfriend of his positive status, #1/Donté states that his ex-boyfriend reassured him and held him all night, only to leave him the next day. Not only did this contribute to #1/Donté’s loneliness—something that people often feel after being diagnosed—but the abandonment also left #1/Donté questioning parts of his own sanity. He states:

When I called him later that day because I really needed to hear his voice, he didn’t answer. When I texted him, he never responded. I haven’t seen him since I told him. I actually kinda wonder if I even did see him then, if I just made it all up.¹⁵⁶

155. Love, *one in two*, pg. 54.

156. Love, *one in two*, pg. 42.

Older American AIDS plays promoted the idea that community is essential and necessary for trying to navigate a positive diagnosis in a healthy way. The above quote showcases how a lack of community may lead people to cope with a positive diagnosis in negative ways; without a community, #1/Donté begins to unravel.

Love, however, makes sure that #1/Donté is not unraveling for the entirety of the play. Love provides a middle ground in the relationships that stay intact or are formed after #1/Donté's diagnosis. #1/Donté is able to form relationships with people that attend the community support group, and because everyone there is also HIV-positive, there is no abandonment, no shame, and no obsession. When it comes to relationships with people who are not HIV-positive, #1/Donté's mother is a key character. While this relationship is not one of abandonment, it does shift in unhealthy ways. The relationship between #1/Donté and his mother is the only relationship that remained intact after his positive diagnosis. #1/Donté's mother's initial reaction to her son's diagnosis is one of concern, frustration, and shame. She says: "I always told you to be careful,"¹⁵⁷ and later, "You keep this to yourself. You hear me, Donté?"¹⁵⁸ Their relationship has become unhealthy as #1/Donté's mother seems to blame #1/Donté for his positive diagnosis. Later in the play, his mother becomes more accepting and has no shame in letting others know that her son is HIV-positive. However, this shift is also characterized by #1/Donté's mother becoming fixated on trying to reduce some of the side effects of AIDS through various medicinal fads. In her concentrated efforts to try and alleviate some of #1/Donté's pain, his mother causes him more stress. At one point, #1/Donté states, "You just keep going on and on and on, talking about some miracle water that was on sale and

157. Love, *one in two*, pg. 37.

158. Love, *one in two*, pg. 38.

some guy who died of AIDS. That's not what I need right now, Mom. I just need...I just need all this to fucking stop."¹⁵⁹ Between #1/Donté's ex-boyfriend and his mother, Love provides two relationships on opposite sides of the spectrum, and both are influenced by the diagnosis; complete abandonment and shame turned to loving obsession.

In these framings of HIV and in the social side effects of HIV, Love rewrites narratives from significantly older American AIDS plays and provides a fresh perspective that does highlight emotional suffering, but veers away from loss and death.

Healthcare and Socioeconomic Status

An additional marker of black queer theatrical culture in *one in two* is present in how Love portrays the healthcare system. Older American AIDS plays like *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America* were more forward in their connection to healthcare systems by directly setting scenes in hospitals, while *one in two* is more subtle in its connection. In older American AIDS plays, healthcare systems were, by and large, supported and their portrayals advocated for more funding and more research. These portrayals come from white gay men, as they were the most supported by the American healthcare system during the Initial AIDS pandemic.¹⁶⁰ For black queer people, however, the healthcare system was not as welcoming, and the portrayal of HIV/AIDS as a disease that mainly affects white gay men, still harms black queer communities today, by rendering the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on black queer communities invisible.

159. Love, *one in two*, pg. 57.

160. This is not to say that white gay men did not face challenges within the American healthcare system at the onset of the AIDS pandemic — they most definitely did. This is to suggest, however, that white gay men found more support in the system than their racially diverse peers.

With this background in mind, black queer people, and thus black queer theatrical culture, are more critical of the American healthcare system.

In *The Normal Heart*, Dr. Brookner's character shows audiences how doctors tried to come up with non-conventional ideas to try and decrease the number of positive diagnoses. In *Angels in America*, the character Belize shows audiences of the resilience and determination of nurses during the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Belize is an intriguing conduit for this portrayal, however. Contemporary audiences overwhelmingly see Belize as black, although this is not specified in the script. While operating as a positive portrayal of the healthcare system, Belize is also critical of it and does not shy away from sharing how difficult it can be to access AZT, an anti-HIV drug. Viewing Belize through a contemporary lens reveals the character as a canonically black queer character providing a critique on the system as a whole. In the cases of these two classic American AIDS plays, they both acknowledge that the AIDS pandemic was poorly handled, but the respective authors use relatable characters to persuade audiences that the system as a whole is not bad and is capable of redemption.

In *one in two*, Love does not explicitly criticize the system, but he does subvert the common function of the nurse character within AIDS plays. The nurse in the play does not reassure audiences of the good nature of the healthcare system, and the language used to describe #1/Donté's interactions with the system hints at a strained relationship. Love frames the nurse in the show as well as the healthcare system as an untrustworthy entity. When #1/Donté receives his diagnosis, the nurse states that "this is no longer a death sentence. There are some meds where you only have to take one pill a day."¹⁶¹ The

161. Love, *one in two*, pg. 31.

Nurse then attempts to set an appointment with a doctor but has to schedule a meeting weeks in advance because all of the doctors are booked. Upon noticing #1/Donté's discomfort and uneasiness, the Nurse compares his positive diagnosis to her own diabetes diagnosis; in response to this, #1/Donté appears to defiantly and solemnly state "but this isn't diabetes."¹⁶² The inability to meet with a doctor in the days directly following his positive diagnosis shows how #1/Donté may feel abandoned by the system. The Nurse is only able to provide him with a pamphlet and a recommendation to go to their community support group; other than that, #1/Donté has been giving a life-altering diagnosis with little-to-no medical guidance.

In the following pages, #1/Donté decides to attend the community support group and reveals how his medicine has been making him feel:

The medicine my doctor gave me doesn't help. It makes me feel like shit. So I stopped taking it. And I know you're probably thinking, 'you have to take your meds or you'll die.' But my meds actually made my ankle swell two times larger than this ankle. No one tells you shit like that might happen. They just tell you, 'Take your meds!' So I did. And it became incredibly hard to walk, which caused major problems because another side effect of my meds was constantly having to shit. But it hurts like hell just walking a few feet to the bathroom.¹⁶³

#1/Donté has been given the bare minimum from his doctors. Yes, he has been given the medication he needs, but he makes it a point to note that he was not told of any of the possible side effects of the medication. It also becomes apparent that #1/Donté does not have access to any form of medical assistance, despite the fact that he can barely walk.

Later, #1/Donté's mother makes it known that the first doctor actually blamed #1/Donté for the side effects of his first medication.

162. Love, *one in two*, pg. 32.

163. Love, *one in two*, pg. 42.

And now that your new doctor prescribed you meds that don't give you those horrible side effects. My God. I get so upset just thinking about when you first started to take your medicine and how that pill you would take made your ankles swell up so bad you could hardly walk. I'm still so upset by that. You missed a month of work. Ya dad and I had to dip into our savings to help you make it through. And all the while, your old doctor kept saying that it was probably something you were doing, something you were taking with the meds. Not the meds itself, but you.¹⁶⁴

The mother's statements here highlight two issues. One is that, oftentimes, patients are left to advocate for themselves and are often blamed for their own medical issues. The second, in highlighting the financial consequences of this doctor's refusal to change #1/Donté's medication, Love shows how medical issues cannot be looked at as existing inside a vacuum.

An final marker of black queer theatrical culture in *one in two* is the socioeconomic status of #1/Donté. Similar to Usher's financial struggles in *A Strange Loop*, the medication debacle in *one in two* highlights how many black queer people have a financial barrier to proper medicine and medical care; #1/Donté simply did not have the funds to handle this situation and had to lean on his parents for support. Thus, mistreatment in the healthcare system impacts multiple aspects of one's life and way of living. Love keeps the focus here on the old doctor, and not on the new doctor that fixed the medication issue, in order to avoid negating his own critique of the healthcare system. Because this is a more nuanced issue in the play, the doctors and nurses are substitutes for the overall system; in focusing on their negligence, Love is able to sustain a holistic critique of the system.

164. Love, *one in two*, pg. 56.

Conclusion: “They Got *Your* Story Instead”¹⁶⁵

Donja R. Love describes the current HIV crisis as a “hidden state of emergency.”¹⁶⁶ He says that it is hidden because the majority of people impacted by the crisis are both black and queer, and that American society does not care about black queer people. Love asserts that two of the biggest challenges in making people aware of the ongoing nature of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are social perceptions of HIV and social stigma. In order to get people to care, eradicating stigma is necessary.

In *one in two* Love shines a light on this hidden emergency and actively subverts the prevailing notions of HIV/AIDS that have been dominant in the theatre since the earliest AIDS plays. In a compelling play that invites compassion and empathy, Love combats the negative stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and asks audiences not to witness death, but rather to imagine the endless possibilities of life with HIV.

165. Love, *one in two*, pg. 82.

166. “Playwright Donja R. Love talks 'One in Two' and how he's using theatre to educate.”

Conclusion: Considering the Future of Black Queer Theatrical Culture

In naming and claiming a black queer theatrical culture, my hope is that this thesis can contribute to furthering both the field of black queer studies as well as the practice of black queer theatre-making and work to make black queer theatrical culture more visible. While the plays outlined in this thesis portray various unique perspectives of black queer cultural traditions, there is still much that has not been addressed within the theatre. Black queer theatremakers and playwrights are usually forced to advocate for their own work and are typically one of very few black queer people on production teams. In order to nurture black queer theatrical culture and ensure its survival, the larger institution of theatre needs to diversify production rooms and advocate for black queer theatrical culture alongside the playwrights. Black queer theatrical culture will be unable to survive if black queer theatremakers are not present to nourish it. Through nourishing a black queer theatrical culture, black queer theatremakers will feel more empowered to keep creating which will lead to an abundance of black queer theatrical content. My hope is that an abundance of theatrical content will invite black queer audience members who have felt ostracized, back to theatre so that they may assume the role of theatre critic and join black queer theatre practitioners in helping to shape the future of this culture. With the exception of performance reviews, there is not an abundance of people engaging with black queer theatre in critical ways. In outlining a black queer theatrical culture, the hope is that black queer theatre practitioners feel acknowledged and that they feel their work is worthy of critical engagement and analysis from black queer audience members and theatrical peers.

In considering a future for black queer theatrical culture, one must consider the ways in which society shifts over time. The markers of black queer theatrical culture presented here are specific to this time period and are a culmination of cultural traditions from the beginning of the Black Arts Movement up until now. As black queer theatrical culture moves into the future it is hard to say exactly what it may look like. One can hope that the circumstances for black queer people will improve and, if that is the case, there may be less critiques on state institutions and more celebrations of them. Ultimately, black queer theatrical culture seeks to be in dialogue with the black queer people that engage with it. To this end, black queer theatre practitioners, scholars, and audience members are invited to mold the shape of black queer theatrical culture; the people centered in this culture should be the ones to determine what the future of this culture looks like.

What will remain constant in black queer theatrical culture, however, is the need for defining and claiming the culture. This thesis claims several tenants of black queer theatrical culture: the use of African American Vernacular English, ontological framings, critiques of state-run institutions such as the healthcare system and the prison industrial complex, conversations on class status, the promotion of queered understandings of community, and a reframing of HIV/AIDS. In claiming and marking the boundaries of a black queer theatrical culture, scholars and theatremakers can more easily track *what* stories are being told, *when* stories are being told, *how* stories are being told, and *who* is telling stories. Claiming a culture provides a foundation for future generations to build upon and showcases the longevity of a culture that is often seen as fleeting.

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