

# From Shadows to Spotlight: Exploring Black Queer Aesthetics and Politics in the Works of Lil Nas X and Danez Smith

GLENN SMITH AND MATHIEU PERROT

“I am informed by who I was at 16 and am no longer that bitch—I was a straight football player. Look how far I’ve come! You see these heels?” (Danez Smith, qtd. In Wilbekin)

In a photo shoot that stands in contrast to one conducted for *T Magazine* four years earlier and which featured a group of Black male writers clad in suits, the more recent project, overseen by Shikeith and styled by Ian Bradley, welcomed a varied representation of Black masculinity. It offered a platform for artists “who embodied more effeminate traits or who blurred the lines in [their] depiction of Black masculinities” to wear dresses and unconventional attire—a choice described as “marvelous” by the award-winning poet Danez Smith during a 2022 interview with Emil Wilbekin.

And yet, for a long time, self-loathing cast a shadow over the realization of self-love and acceptance, as captured vividly by the poet in “i didn’t like you when i met you:”

i didn’t know when i thought, i don’t like that hoe, it was just

MATHIEU PERROT, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Lafayette College whose research in comparative literature focuses on poetry and anthropology. He has published several articles on African American and Caribbean literatures, including on the Harlem Renaissance’s jazz poetry and Aimé Césaire’s poetics. In his current research, he is exploring the concepts of Afrotopia and Afrofuturism. He can be reached at [perrotm@lafayette.edu](mailto:perrotm@lafayette.edu).

GLENN SMITH, Assistant Director of the Berkley achievement Scholarship program at NYU Stern School of Business and a dedicated advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), holds a Master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from NYU, focusing on diversity in higher education. Raised in Brooklyn, he brings a deep commitment to supporting underrepresented students across the USA, leveraging his background in Political Science from Bloomsburg University and East Stroudsburg University. Smith’s work at NYU Stern embodies his passion for DEI, driving efforts to foster social awareness and empower students to articulate their values, reflecting his dedication to creating a more inclusive educational environment. He can be reached at [gjs11@stern.nyu.edu](mailto:gjs11@stern.nyu.edu).

*Popular Culture Studies Journal*

Volume 12, Issue 1

© 2024

my reflection i couldn't stand. i saw it. the way you would break me  
 into a better me. i ran from it. like any child, i saw my medicine  
 & it looked so sharp, so exact, a blade fit to the curve of my name.  
 what a shame. i was slow to you.

The repetition of the word “saw” echoes and reinforces the words “know” and “hoe,” creating a persistent and negative perception of oneself through the association of visual observation with the derogatory term. Moreover, the word “saw” possesses a dual nature, functioning as both a verb (to see) and a noun (a saw), thus amalgamating the action of observation with the reflection itself. This ambiguity suggests that the act of observing oneself is akin to simultaneously “saw-ing” (in) the self, metaphorically cutting the poet’s identity in two. This poem resonates with Marlon Riggs’s 1989 documentary, *Tongues Untied*, where a Black man is filmed walking on the street of Castro, the gay district of San Francisco. He sees another Black man walking in his direction and they both immediately look away. A voiceover explains that there was a fear and discomfort to look at oneself, being Black in this gay Mecca, where Black was invisible or caricatured.

Danez Smith reveals internal conflicts caused by societal constructs in this poem. Meanwhile, Montero Lamar Hill, better known as the performer Lil Nas X, deals with external tensions in tweets that echo similar sentiments:

y'all hate yourselves so much. Y'all live your lives trying your best to appease straight ppl. Y'all are uncomfortable with what I do because y'all are afraid they will be uncomfortable with you. work on yourselves, I love who I am and whatever I decide to do. Get there. (29 June 2021, 12:48 a.m.)

You're right I am insecure about my sexuality. I still have a long way to go. I've never denied that. When you're conditioned by society to hate yourself your entire life it takes a lot of unlearning. Which is exactly why I do what I do. (29 June 2021, 2:23 a.m.)

These revelations show the deeply rooted societal conditioning that has historically marginalized Black and queer individuals. To fully understand the significance of such a confession, one must examine the enduring cultural narratives that shape it. The hip-hop industry has long been a platform where artists address societal issues, challenge stereotypes, and express personal narratives. Yet, the representation of queer identities within this genre often encounters backlash, revealing the deeply entrenched prejudices that persist. Lil

Nas X's rise to prominence not only signifies a new era of openly queer artists in hip-hop but also underscores the double standards that exist in the industry's reception of queer narratives. Lil Nas X's candid tweet highlights this stark dichotomy. After releasing a series of sexually expressive videos and lyrics, he was met with criticism that his straight counterparts seldom face:

y'all be silent as hell when niggas<sup>1</sup> dedicate their entire music catalogue to rapping about sleeping with multiple women. But when I do anything remotely sexual I'm 'being sexually irresponsible' & 'causing more men to die from aids' y'all hate gay ppl and don't hide it. (25 July 2021, 11:10am)

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate intersections of Black and queer identities, illuminating the challenges posed by societal labels, faith-based criticisms, and solitude. Danez Smith's and Lil Nas X's artistry not only challenges societal norms but also stands as a testament to resilience and self-affirmation in the face of systemic oppression.

### Beyond Labels: Intersectionality and the Quest for Visibility in the Black Queer Community

"I am informed by who I was at 16 and am no longer that bitch—I was a straight football player. Look how far I've come! You see these heels?" (Danez Smith, qtd. In Wilbekin)

The Black gay journalist and writer Emil Wilbekin gathered a group of Black queer artists in 2022 to talk about what it feels like to be a young, queer artist of color today, and what it means to live in "an era when one's own identity can feel so easily marketed, consumed, erased and, much like [Marlon] Riggs's art, legislated against" (Wilbekin). During the interview, conceptual and visual artist Adam Pendleton pointed out the paradox of being adjectivized as Black and queer:

To announce ourselves to the world as Black and queer is also a problem. And I think it's important to acknowledge that and to articulate why it's a problem, because what, of course, will happen is: "Oh, look at them," you

---

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will use the iterations of the n-word, b-word, f-word, and other derogatory terms in direct quotes of song lyrics, tweets, and interviews only to preserve the words of quoted persons.

know? And the “them” is the problem, because how can you really see what one person does, what one person contributes, when it’s a collective? Actor Ato Blankson-Wood agrees: “We all get the same headline: ‘This Black [Gay Man] Is Challenging Black Masculinity.’ [...] We’re making so many different kinds of things and we just get boxed in, and it’s so frustrating” (Wilbekin). The labeling of Black and queer artists targets an audience that neither sees nor understands them, contrasting with the artists’ true desire to connect with those who relate with their work on a visceral level.

Building on the conversation, Danez Smith emphasized a “lack of nourishment” in the Black queer community, referring to a lack of connection and visibility. For Smith, the risk of disappearing as an individual does not come from the community in which one strives, but rather from “the stagnant nature of these identity markers,” in other words, in the labeling itself. Indeed, the poet explains: “I don’t want my work to be seen as Black queer objects, unless I’m telling you that’s how to look at it.” Balancing individual identity within larger social constructs requires a careful navigation between not being lost within a universal, color-and-gender-blind ideology, while simultaneously avoiding the erasure of unique identity by overly generalized categorizations of social groups. In the interview, Pendleton asserts, “I don’t want to be Black in abstraction; I want to be abstraction.” The artist envisions a form of equality where labels—whether Black or White, straight or queer—no longer dictate or constrain. To achieve this, championing the distinctiveness of Black queer voices becomes crucial—a form of resistance, where one can embrace ethnic specificities without getting caught up in the idea of a static identity. Stephanie Dunning has also referred to this nuanced stance in the hip-hop world, especially among Black gay artists, as “negotiated nationalism” (Dunning 39).

### Bridging Intersections: HIV and The Quest for Black Queer Visibility

“You are many things within a person. Don’t try to arrange a hierarchy of things that are virtuous in your character and say ‘This is more important than that.’ Realize that both are equally important; they both inform your character” (Marlon Riggs, qtd. by Simmons 190)

Many Black queer artists prioritize their Black identity, both linguistically and symbolically. Danez Smith's reflections on identity, however, provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between various facets of oneself. While recognizing the deep resonance of their Blackness, Smith also emphasizes the significance of their queerness, HIV status, American nationality, and Minnesotan roots. Each dimension, in Smith's perspective, comes with its unique experiences and insights, enriching their overall identity narrative:

Black is the thing that comes to mind that I get the most information from and feel the most possibility inside. But I am also queer, poz, American, Minnesotan, all of these things. When folks think about me in relation to those things, sometimes they have been a wealth, sometimes they have been a target. Sometimes they have been prisons or fields. Sometimes they have been useful. And sometimes I didn't find no use in them. But they were all information that I tried to pull from. (Wilbekin)

Smith's work delves deeply into the effects of HIV on the Black and gay community. They highlight a startling 2016 CDC statistic in their poem "1 in 2," reporting that "1 in 2 black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime" (*Don't Call Us* 61). Their writings frequently confront the disease, giving it character through terms like "gay cancer" (*Homie* 60), "queer bacteria" (*Don't Call Us* "strange dowry" 78), "red shadow" ("elegy with pixels & cum (for Javier 'Kid Chocolate' Bravo)" 48) and "the bloodprison" ("recklessly" 41). In "seroconversion," Smith transforms the moment of infection into an allegory, narrating a tale where two young men evolve from humans to mythological beings and, finally, deities – the "god of shovels" and "the god of soil" (*Don't Call Us* 38) – hinting at their inevitable fate. In "all the good dick lives in Brooklyn Park," Danez Smith provides an unapologetic glimpse into the linguistic codes, behaviors, and stereotypes prevalent within the Black queer community. The poem confronts societal stereotypes head-on:

when i roll up on dude house & ain't seen  
no grocery store in miles & there's  
a liquor store next to a liquor store next to  
a little caesars i know the dick gon be bomb  
there's a stereotype there – mandingo myth  
slave quarter bathhouse, animal animal  
experiencing need & so down for whatever. (*Homie* 54)

Danez Smith's poem delves into the impact of the "mandingo" stereotype, purportedly derived from the Mandinka tribe of West Africa, a harmful, yet frequent construct underscoring the hypersexualization of Black men. This is further emphasized by the mention of "slave quarter bathhouses," and the repeated use of "animal," both reducing individuals to mere objects of desire, spotlighting the dehumanizing and objectifying elements of such stereotypes. The allure of these stereotypes may hint at a subconscious internalization of devaluation and societal contempt, reflecting a struggle with self-perception and societal representation. This internalization indicates a painful acceptance, morphing societal contempt into self-contempt. However, Smith offers a nuanced lens, intertwining such stereotypes with a thoughtful understanding of the socio-economic disparities and humanity behind these characters, thereby transforming the narrative from mere objectification to empathetic realization. The abundance of liquor stores and fast-food chains ("Little Caesars") over grocery stores portrays a community riddled with economic hardship and limited access to basic needs. This portrayal, in turn, brings forth a humanizing layer to the seemingly objectified figures, showing a yearning not only for intimacy but also for societal acceptance and connection, as highlighted in "experiencing needs & so down for whatever." In conclusion, Smith juxtaposes passionate intensity with deep empathy, especially evident in: "buddy who rocks me best gets thinner by the day. he can't afford the pills that keep me round & blood quiet." This blend of passion and empathy illustrates a journey from self-contempt to self-acceptance amidst societal adversities, recontextualizing desires in a manner that recognizes and respects the multifaceted humanity of the individuals within these stereotyped communities.

Smith embraces their intersectionality when they write: "queerness and Blackness both speak to an approach to humanity and to art that is best when borderless, best when we use that queer key to question what is outside of the norm. When something feels special, we feel powerful" (Wilbekin). By championing a borderless approach, Smith does not advocate for integration into the mainstream, but for an entire paradigm shift where identities can be expansive and transformative. Scholars such as Robert Reid-Pharr and James Smalls, visualize the Black queer identity as a boundless realm of change and yearning, showcasing its intricate nature (Smalls 284). By framing the Black queer body as an endless space of transition, they highlight the inherent resistance to

categorization of identities, as not merely reactive or shaped in opposition to heteronormative or racial biases, but as possessing their own evolving narrative.

Drawing inspiration from Michel Pêcheux, Pratibha Parmar underscores the potent resilience against marginalization (Gever 5), reminding us that the Black queer identity, while rooted in a history of resistance, is also an active participant in shaping its own future. Rather than solely forming a defensive barrier, the strength derived from resisting marginalization serves as a proactive force that shapes culture, narratives, and art. Black queer identity here is postmodern: it challenges historical narratives, resists simplistic categorization, and posits a dynamic, ever-evolving future. This multifaceted perspective does not merely offer a lens to understand the Black queer experience; it serves as a beacon for all identities navigating the complex interplay of history, society, and self-definition.

### Against the Current: The Black Queer Struggle with Faith, Society, and Solitude

“i need no church but my niggas’ arms / i need no savior but their love” (*Homie “my nig”* 67)

Historically, religion has been intricately woven into the fabric of Black communities in the U.S., acting as a sanctuary and a source of pride and belonging, particularly amidst the racial adversities. It has been the cornerstone of many civil rights movements, providing a platform for the message of equality and a call to action for equal rights. However, the very same religion that empowered movements for racial equality has paradoxically acted as an instrument of oppression, creating realms of exclusion and discrimination against Black queer individuals.

Lil Nas X’s music video “Call Me By Your Name” paints a vivid portrayal of this paradox, illustrating the internal tumult between the artist and societal and religious norms surrounding his sexuality. This artistic piece delves deep into the role of religion in molding self-perceptions and highlights the inherent obstacles faced by queer individuals in communities of color, where religious doctrines are deeply entrenched. In the video, Lil Nas X’s reinterpretation of religious figures like Adam and the devil, characters that he himself portrays, engages in activities that challenge the existing religious dogmas, symbolizing defiance against prescribed norms. His depiction of Adam’s temptation and consequent expulsion

from the Garden of Eden sets the stage for a confrontation with societal norms, culminating in a trial scene that showcases the conflict between religiously influenced societal norms and queer identity. Lil Nas X then descends into hell where he seduces, dethrones, and defeats the devil, claiming the devil's throne while simultaneously reclaiming his identity, lost after his exile from Eden. Despite sparking backlash, the video has often been misinterpreted as merely provocative, rather than recognized as a deeply personal depiction of religious rejection and emotional estrangement.<sup>2</sup>

Smith's representation of Eden differs from Lil Nas X's vision, as they transform paradise into a haunting Jim Crow landscape of fear and oppression as described in the poem "summer, somewhere":

dear dear  
 my most distant love –  
 [...] if you were here, we could play  
 Eden all day, but fruit here  
 grows strange, I know before me  
 here lived something treacherous. (*Don't Call Us* "summer, somewhere"  
 15)

The line "fruit here grows strange" evokes Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," referencing the racial violence during the Jim Crow era. Here, "strange" underscores the transformation of trees from symbols of life to agents of death and oppression. The historical trauma might also be intertwined with the derogatory slang for queer individuals ("fruity"), highlighting the layered oppressions faced by Black queer people.<sup>3</sup> The poet's recurring themes of faith and oppression emerge even stronger in their poem "dear white america," where they challenge conventional religious beliefs against the backdrop of racial injustice:

---

<sup>2</sup> On September 18, 2021, at 9:24am, Lil Nas X tweeted: "i love joking but on a serious note making this album was therapy for me. i began healing many unchecked wounds, facing skeletons [*sic*] in my closet i never wanted to, fighting internally every day and crying persistently, MONTERO is truly my baby. thanks for the love."

<sup>3</sup> In the poem "undetactable," the word "fruit" appears at the end and carries a double meaning. It can refer to both the actual fruit and also serve as a slang term for queer or gay: "one dead boy makes the whole forest / a grave. & he's in there, in me, in the middle / of all that green. you probably thought / he was fruit" (*Homie* 53).



i do not trust the God you have given us. [...] take your God back. though his songs are beautiful, his miracles are inconsistent. i want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their ghost re-gifted flesh & blood.  
(*Don't Call Us* 25)

The poet references Lazarus to express a desire for divine intervention, hoping for the resurrection of the listed victims. Many of these names are common in the African American community and carry biblical significance. “Trayvon,”<sup>4</sup> the African American teenager who was fatally shot in 2012, evokes racial injustice and systemic violence. By comparing the act of “taking back” their god to returning an unwanted gift, the poet reduces the deity’s spiritual or supernatural authority. This desacralization implies that the god has been stripped of its divine significance and reduced to the level of a weapon used to perpetrate violence against innocent black and brown individuals. As the list of victims grows longer each year, the command “take your god back” carries an almost ritualistic quality, resembling a spell or incantation aimed at dispelling the influence of this weaponized deity and asserting control over one’s own spiritual destiny.

In their pursuit of self-expression, Black artists from the 1970s leaned heavily into pan-Africanist ideals, employing African motifs as tools to reclaim and uplift their identity. During the same era, figures in Black queer theory began a rigorous interrogation of prevailing views, especially the depiction of queer sexuality as a “white disease,” an idea famously rejected by Bobby Seales,<sup>5</sup> but strongly endorsed by Black nationalists like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver. To these nationalists, effeminization was a perceived threat, seen as a White imposition, and thus they cautioned Black men against it while also dissuading them from interracial same-sex relationships. This stance, to an extent, mirrored a broader sentiment: in the face of racial biases that threatened to emasculate Black men in society, some may have found a semblance of regained power by ostracizing and belittling queer individuals.

---

<sup>4</sup> The names Trayvon and Sean are also mentioned in the poem “summer, somewhere”: “that boy was Trayvon, now called *RainKing*. / that man Sean named himself *i do, i do*” (*Don't Call Us Dead* 4).

<sup>5</sup> In August 1970, Huey Newton wrote in the Black Panthers’ paper “A letter to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation” (*Gay Flames Pamphlet*, No. 7, 1970).

Addressing a still widespread misconception, Lil Nas X illuminates the reality of homosexuality's existence in African cultures, effectively challenging a commonly accepted historical oversight. Through his tweet (June 27, 2021, 8:17 p.m.) "y'all really like to pretend homosexuality didn't exist in african culture?," Lil Nas X prompts a reevaluation of notions surrounding cultural purity, urging a deeper, more authentic exploration of history.<sup>6</sup> One month later, this theme was once again apparent when a critic commented on Lil Nas X's music video for "Industry Baby." The tweet argued that the video emasculated Black men by portraying them as "extra feminine" in a prison setting, while a white man was shown in a traditional masculine role. Responding to the critique, Lil Nas X tweeted:

the truth is there is no attack. You view femininity as a weakness. You don't like gay black men because you are afraid of black men, as a whole, being viewed as weak. You cling on to your masculinity because without it you have nothing else going for yourself. (24 July 2021, 1 a.m.)

Lil Nas X's response unpacks societal attitudes towards Black gay men, illuminating how an ingrained fear of perceived weakness fosters prejudice against them. In his song "Late to Da Party," released in 2022, Lil Nas X goes on to criticize the Black Entertainment Television network for perpetuating homophobia within the Black community<sup>7</sup>. The track opens with the refrain "Fuck BET," followed by Lil Nas X asserting that he doesn't need awards to validate his talent. Despite winning a Grammy, he expressed frustration at not receiving any nominations from BET that year. Lil Nas X has been vocal on social media about his disappointment with BET's lack of recognition for LGBTQ+ artists, accusing the network of attempting to render them "invisible." In June of that year, the rapper wrote in a now deleted tweet: "i just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs try to pretend we

---

<sup>6</sup> Ancient Egyptian art and literature depict same-sex relationships, while the Zande of Central Africa recognized *azande* relationships and the Mende of Sierra Leone acknowledged lesbian bonds within their *sande* society. Additionally, the Ndebele of South Africa acknowledged *skesana*, effeminate males embodying both genders. To know more about the presence of homosexuality in diverse African cultures throughout history, read *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, Edited by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, New York: Palgrave, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough analysis, also see Lauron Kehrer's article in the present volume, especially on how he uses ludonarrativity to express his thoughts about the perceived homophobia of the TV network.

are invisible” (qtd. by Pop Crave 2 June 2022, 1:31 a.m.). Lil Nas X’s reactions in his tweets and song demonstrate how being gay as a black man is perceived as a sign of weakness, while revealing the extent to which a network such as BET that caters to black audiences would go to silence gay black men.

Historically, various societal discourses have framed the Black community as more homophobic than its White counterpart. This is not necessarily because Black people are intrinsically more antigay, but rather because they have been imagined as such while equally homophobic White religious subgroups do not impact the perception of white homophobia as a whole (Martin 2). Much of this mischaracterization stems from an overemphasis on the religious beliefs of African Americans, which erroneously lumps the entire community into a monolithic group, failing to acknowledge the diversity of thought and opinion within. This constructed image of heightened Black homophobia presents real challenges for Black queer artists like Lil Nas X, who navigate the dual intersections of race and sexuality.

In June 2022, in response to another critique of his performance on Twitter, the rapper reacted: “Ok cool, I suck, my music is terrible, bad nas. Now answer the question “are queer men more respected when they do less feminine things” yes or no?” (7 June 2022, 6:29 p.m.). Lil Nas X’s question cuts to the heart of the broader issue: the intricate relationship between perceived masculinity, respect, and acceptance within both Black and White communities. By confronting these perceptions head-on, he challenges the prevailing narratives and calls for introspection on how society, irrespective of race, values and judges expressions of queer identity.

*A Lonely World.* The intricate interplay of loneliness within intersectional identities, particularly being Black and queer, resonates deeply within the works of both Danez Smith and Lil Nas X. In their poem “on faggotness,” Smith captures this sentiment, asserting that what defines “a fag” is not just the physical aspect of intimacy but the profound “emptiness; a void you didn’t know existed until someone stopped it up” (*Homie* 27). The phrase “particular lonely” (*Homie* 28) encapsulates a unique solitude stemming from this duality of identity, further highlighted by the lines, “it’s been a while since a body was inside my body...so much depends on sex...only the little ruins follow” (*Homie* 27). This theme of solitude is reverberated in “self-portrait as ’90 R&B video,” where Smith confesses, “my man is all in my head / & it’s a bad head” (*Homie* 31).

In the song “Sun Goes Down,” Lil Nas X tackles the difficulties he experiences as a Black gay individual living in a society marred by racism and homophobia. He confronts these challenges head-on in his lyrics, revealing the often-silent struggle against these dual prejudices:

Since ten, I been feeling lonely  
 Had friends but they was picking on me  
 Always thinking why my lips so big  
 Was I too dark? Can they sense my fears?  
 These gay thoughts would always haunt me  
 I prayed God would take it from me  
 It’s hard for you when you’re fightin’  
 And nobody knows it when you’re silent

He further explores the suicidal thoughts he confronted while struggling with his gay identity and religious background: “I don’t want to deceive, I don’t want to live / Send me a gun and I’ll witness the sunrise.” His song received a mixed reception from audiences and critics. While many praised it for its vulnerability and its contribution to destigmatizing discussions around mental health and LGBTQ+ identity, others expressed backlash and criticism on social media and conservative news outlets. In the song “That’s What I Want,” released the same year, Lil Nas X expresses his yearning for companionship in the chorus: “Need a boy who can cuddle with me all night / Keep me warm, love me long, be my sunlight.”

Danez Smith’s work, too, illuminates a poignant struggle between self-deprecation and self-love, a testament to the enduring spirit amidst internalized racism and discrimination within digital platforms. When, in the poem “a note on the phone app that tells me how far i am from other men’s mouths,” Smith writes “headless horsehung horsemen gallop to my gate / dressed in pictures stolen off Google / men of every tribe mark their doors in blood / *No Fats, No Fems, No Blacks, Sorry, Just A Preference*” (*Don’t Call Us* 32), the lines reveal a stark depiction of how one sexual preference can be used as a device to reinforce ingrained prejudices. This discrimination not only reflects societal biases but also penetrates the psyche of individuals within the Black community, manifesting as internalized racism and resulting in tragic self-deprecation, as echoed in the subsequent poem, titled “& even the black guy’s profile reads sorry, no black guys” (*Don’t Call Us* 33). Yet, in this bleak landscape of self-loathing, Smith juxtaposes a resilient affirmation of self-love and intrinsic worth: “if no one

has told you, you are beautiful & lovable & black & enough & so – you pretty you – am i.” While the three adjectives are shown as equivalent, implying that being Black is inherently beautiful and worthy of love, the last part of the line (“& so – you pretty you – am i”) suggests both self-reflection and mutual recognition. This conclusion does not merely serve as a counter to the pain but transforms it, reshaping internal narratives, and embracing the beauty and value inherent in Black identity.

Having denounced the internalized biases within dating app profiles, Smith also illuminates the insidious nature of learned prejudices in the broader world, stating that

dogs aren’t racist but they can be  
trained to be as can the water as  
can the trees as can gravity as can  
anything marked by a pale hand (*Homie* “dogs!” 20)

Smith conveys the compelling argument that racism is not an inherent characteristic but rather a learned behavior, a product of societal conditioning deeply embedded within the structures and environments that shape our beliefs and actions. Smith’s choice of analogy with dogs – trained by extremists to harbor and exhibit aggression toward Black individuals as was the case, for instance, during the Birmingham campaign – is deliberate, serving as a metaphor for acquired prejudice and animosity. It illustrates the profound impact of conditioning and environmental influences in converting impartiality into antagonism where it naturally would not occur. Furthermore, the references to water, trees, and gravity may seem abstract initially, considering these elements do not have inherent capacities for racial bias. However, Smith probes how control over and access to natural resources and the freedom to traverse are skewed along racial lines when dominated by oppressive entities, symbolized by “pale hands.” While water and trees are universal symbols of life and sustenance, Smith draws attention to the disparities in accessibility to these resources, highlighting broader issues of environmental justice and racial inequalities in resource distribution. Lastly, gravity, typically a representation of an unalterable universal law, could be read as a subtle nod to aviation. It exemplifies the racial imbalances present in the freedom of movement and travel, portraying how seemingly impartial elements can be molded to mirror and perpetuate existing racial biases and restrictions. By addressing these elements, Smith sheds light on the varied ways in which racism infiltrates multiple facets of existence, moving

beyond blatant acts of violence to more subtle, but equally harmful, manifestations of racial disparities and limitations.

### Crafting Resistance: Politics, Language, and Humor Intertwined

Drawing attention to the demarcation between crafting metaphors and actual activism “in the streets,” Danez Smith argues for recognizing art as a potential catalyst for change, not a substitute for direct action:

As [someone] who is often put into the “Danez’s poetry is activism” box, I hate that. I think I can have a political mind. I think I can have a politics to my work. And I don’t think that necessarily makes me an activist, because my activism costs \$16.99. My activism is free from the library. It’s free when it’s published online, but it’s not in the streets. It could be an *inspiration* for activism. One of my active hopes is that my work is a fuel for people who desire to make change. But me making a metaphor is not activism — it’s a craft, it’s work. (qtd. in Wilbekin)

While they may reject the label of activism for their written creations, in “my poems,” Danez Smith turns the word “poem” into a verb, allowing it to fulfill its intended action as suggested by its etymology: “i poem ten police a day / i poem the mayor with my bare hands. [...] / i poem a racist woman into a whistle & feel only a little bad” (*Homie* 64). This alignment with Aimé Césaire’s idea of words as “miraculous weapons,” stemming from the title of his 1946 poetry collection, suggests that, even if Smith resists their work being pigeonholed as activism, they are aware of its potential as an agent of resistance and transformation.

my poems are fed up & getting violent  
 i whisper to them *tender tender bridge bridge* but they say *bitch ain’t no time, make me a weapon!*  
 i hold a poem to a judge’s neck until he’s not a judge anymore.  
 i tuck a poem next to my dick, sneak it on the plane. (*Homie* 64)

The vivid imagery of a poem as a tool of intimidation and rebellion – holding it “to a judge’s neck” or sneaking it onto a plane like a weapon – accentuates the tension between the inherent power of the poem and the societal structures it challenges. Even if not explicitly activist, the poems are charged with a revolutionary spirit, striving to destabilize norms and confront oppressive systems.

In the poem “C.R.E.A.M.,” an acronym for “Cash Rules Everything Around Me” – a title borrowed from a Wu-Tang Clan song – Danez Smith offers a critique of the intersection of economic inequality and race in the United States. The poet accentuates the prevalent correlation between being Black and experiencing economic hardship, illustrating how these socio-economic conditions affect their community:

sometimes i pay the weed man before i pay the light bill  
 sometimes is a synonym for often  
 i just want a rich white sugar daddy & i’ll be straight  
 i feel most colored when i’m looking at my bank account

[...]

what’s a blacker tax than blackness?

[...]

what cost more than being poor?

my aunt can’t hold on to a dollar, a job, her mind

[...]

imma print my own money & be my own god & live forever in a green  
 frame

[...]

the b in debt is a silent black trapped (*Homie* 57-8)

The poem delves deep into the economic and social struggles experienced by Black individuals, offering a glimpse into the difficult decisions they must sometimes make. Prioritizing the weed man over the light bill not only speaks to immediate needs and coping mechanisms but hints at the deeper darkness – perhaps a pervasive hopelessness – that might exist. The recurring theme of economic hardship is evident with the line “sometimes is a synonym for often,” suggesting that these struggles are not occasional but persistent. The desire for a “rich sugar daddy” underscores a yearning for financial stability, yet the phrase “i’ll be straight” cleverly introduces ambiguity. It suggests that achieving this stability might come at a personal cost or compromise, possibly alluding to the complexities of navigating relationships based on financial dependence. The portrayal of the aunt’s struggles offers a reflection on the cyclical nature of poverty and its mental toll, linking financial instability, job insecurity, and mental well-being. The fantasy of printing one’s own money could be seen as a desire to take control of one’s financial destiny. It represents a temptation to resort to counterfeiting as a form of rebellion against an unfair society. The aspiration to

“live forever in a green frame” is a metaphor for the dollar bill. It alludes to ending one’s life, suggesting a desire to gain posthumous recognition or to leave a lasting legacy as a means of coping with current sufferings, possibly feeling it is preferable to the continued endurance of present hardships. It conveys a sense of the ubiquity and timelessness of economic struggle within a symbol that represents wealth and prosperity, yet is so elusive to many. The acknowledgment of this irony heightens the impact of the poet’s message. The poem’s closing line, referring to the silent “b” in debt, serves as a symbol for Black individuals who are rendered invisible and voiceless by systemic oppression – trapped in silence. Here, the “b,” reminiscent of the verb “to be,” represents the stifled existence and unrealized potential of those ensnared in economic adversity, highlighting their struggle against suppression and for visibility in a system marked by inequality. The silent “b” is the symbol of the Black individual who refuses to forge their own path and is complacent with(in) a system that disfranchises them.

### From Insults to Empowerment: The Linguistic Revolution of Black Queer Artists

“I got this problem: i was born / black & faggoty”  
(*Don’t Call Us* “every day is a funeral & a miracle” 66)

Danez Smith explores challenging aspects of language as they recontextualize and reclaim words that have historically been used as slurs, including the b-word, the f-word, and the n-word. This act is more than mere linguistic play; it is a powerful strategy to take back control and transform words into affirmations of identity and community.

Smith frequently incorporates the n-word in their work, including in the poem titled “nigga.”<sup>8</sup> “i know the word is complicated,” Danez Smith wrote in “shout out to my niggas in Mexico,” “but it’s my favorite word! [...] / & yes. yes, it’s intentional. / they were never invited” (39). Danez Smith envisions a dream where they extend an invitation to all the individuals who identify as “niggas” worldwide. The word refers to anyone who identifies as underrepresented and oppressed, including those who are Black, Brown, Arab, Hispanic, Native

---

<sup>8</sup> “i love the smell of nigga on the tongue / & how it means that which is me” (*Homie* 4).



American... – “friends their browns a different brown than mine,” who have experienced oppression and racism, as the poet wrote in “what was said at the bus stop” (*Homie* 41). This inclusive gathering would bring together people from the Caribbean, Mexico, Asia, and even Antarctica, uniting them in a grand celebration of their shared identity. As an epigram of their collection of poems, Danez Smith wrote a “note on the title” in which they explain that “this book was titled *homie* because [they] don’t want non-black people to say *my nig* out loud. this book is really titled *my nig*.” The intention behind their poem “...nigga” is precisely to address and prevent the scenario they depict, wherein they imagine a White boy daring to say the word “nigga” repeatedly, as if testing its impact (*Don’t Call Us* 35).

The recurring use of terms such as the n-word and the b-word serves to explore, challenge, and reclaim historically derogatory labels, using them as platforms for deeper commentary on identity, community, and systemic oppression. In the poem “my bitch!,” Smith does not just reclaim the word “bitch” but employs it as a term of affection and unity:

let’s get together & paint our faces the color  
of our mothers if our mothers were sad men  
only soft in bad lights. let’s swirl the deep grape  
& coffee pencils until we look like odd planets  
on our way to looking like the daughters  
we secretly were. caked & cakes hairy  
just short of grace. we look terrible  
when we’re the most beautiful girls in the world.  
bitch my world. bitch my brother. bitch my rich trust.  
i’ll miss you most when they kill us. (*Homie* 32)

The poet explores how identity can be flexible, showing both gentle and tough sides, and how it often sits between what society expects and what one truly feels. The line “we look terrible when we’re the most beautiful girls in the world” underscores the tension between society’s beauty standards and the poet’s own perceptions of beauty and self-worth. Beauty exerts its influence in ways that are both awe-inspiring and unsettling. The reference to looking like “odd planets” emphasizes the uniqueness and queerness of their identities, while suggesting that they experienced alienation, just like extraterrestrial beings who seem unfamiliar or from another world. The poem closes with a sobering reflection on the dangers faced by those who defy normative expectations, yet in the face of potential

tragedy, there remains a fierce loyalty and bond: “i’ll miss you most when they kill us.” Through this, Smith stresses the necessity of community and kinship in the face of external threats, solidifying the poem’s political undertones and its resonance in the broader discourse on Black and queer identities.

As the poet interrogates society’s narrow definitions of beauty, they similarly delve into the transformative potential of another contentious word: “faggot.” The poem “on faggotness” delves into the intricate complexities of the term. In this poem, Danez Smith reflects upon “what makes a fag a fag. [...] a particular strangeness” (*Homie* 27), of which they list the particularities:

particular walk. particular wrist. particular speech. particular clothes.  
 particular piercing. particular knowledge. particular ways of eating  
 particular things. [...] . particular eyes. particular fear. [...] particular  
 shame. particular milk. particular beast. particular cage. particular  
 freedoms. [...] particular gods. particular beliefs. particular hells. particular  
 economies. particular arrangements. particular secrets. particular shade.  
 particular bliss. particular deeds. particular punishments. particular lonely.  
 particular grief.

Through listing specific traits, Smith highlights the diverse experiences and identities captured by a single label, while drawing attention to the ways in which people are often singled out or marginalized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The repetition of “particular” thus serves as a series of exclusions or exceptions. At the same time, contrasting pairs such as “particular freedoms” and “particular cages,” or “particular bliss” and “particular grief,” reflects the inherent duality and complexity of this “faggotness,” where joy and sorrow, freedom and confinement, coexist within the individual experience. Each detail, from attire to emotions and beliefs, contributes to this complex identity. Rooted in Eve K. Sedgwick’s proposition that “queer” is not just an identity but a continuous practice, José Esteban Muñoz articulates that to embody queerness is to perpetually disidentify, to find oneself flourishing in spaces where “meaning does not properly ‘line up’” (Muñoz 78).

This process of “queering” reflects the essence and experiences of the “particular,” as articulated in Danez Smith’s poem, and resonates with the reflections made by Britteney Kapri in “dboy Black: a poem for Briyae” on the multifaceted concept of “blackness.” This transformative reclamation of language is prominent in Smith’s poem “at the down-low house party,” where the use of coded language narrates the nuanced experiences of Black queer men,

exemplified in the lines “wats gud meaning / could love you until my jaw / is but memory” (*Don’t Call Us* 36). At a glance, it is a colloquial greeting in vernacular English, but upon deeper reflection, it reveals itself as a subtle nod to a sexual proposition. This implicit invitation is further poetically transformed in the line, “love you until my jaw is but memory.” While one interpretation gravitates towards the act of making love until one’s mouth is numb, an alternate, more profound reading emerges: a longing to love so deeply and wholly that individuality fades, resulting in two souls merging into a singular entity. Yet, beneath this exterior interpretation exists a more metaphysical and profound connotation. It suggests an aspiration to experience love so deeply and completely that the ability to communicate verbally becomes obsolete, that words are rendered unnecessary.

While Smith’s previous poems showcase a reclaiming of derogatory terms to form self-affirmation, they further venture into the intricate dynamics of power, vulnerability, and identity in their calligram “jumped!”:

they were around me like  
 nigga 1  
 nigga2      nigga3  
 nigga 4   me      nigga 5  
 nigga 6      nigga 7  
 nigga 8  
 but what could be safer  
 than a circle of boys  
 too afraid of killing you  
 to kill you? (*Homie* 9)

The calligram illustrates the poet encircled by eight symbolic “bullies,” revealing a visual contrast between vulnerability and unanticipated comfort derived from the figures’ reluctance to escalate aggression. The repeated term “nigga” underscores a network of shared experiences and mutual recognition. This interplay between individual and shared identity is heightened when the poet perceives a collective hesitation among the “bullies,” possibly hinting at common experiences or vulnerabilities. This complex relationship reflects the diverse connections within communities, portraying both potential conflict and unifying bonds.

As the story progresses, the poet’s early perceptions alter, unveiling profound emotional layers and eliciting unforeseen desires:

i had always wanted 8 niggas on me, but not like that.  
 after a while I started to like it? [...]  
 you should have heard them laugh  
 a language so delicious i cracked up cracked grin & all  
 i didn't know  
 a thing about love  
 until those boys  
 walked away  
 so happy.

my heart pouring from my nose (*Homie 10*)

This solitary vulnerability is juxtaposed in “saw a video of a gang of bees swarming a hornet,” the subsequent poem in *Homie*, where a calligram features a central rectangle representing a hornet, filled with the words “earth love / murders first / justifies later / so I guess / white folks / do love niggas / to bits” (11). The hornet is surrounded by the phrase “we are in their love,” symbolizing bees banding together in defense against the threat it represents. These bees rally around their “bee-homie”—a play on “be a homie,” hinting at close friendship—signifying marginalized communities’ unity against threats. Together, these poems in *Homie* transition from individual trauma to a unified resistance against oppression, emphasizing the strength and importance of community unity in the face of adversity.

*Not Without a Chuckle: Celebrating Pride and Self-Love.* Navigating the complexities of discrimination, racism, and solitude, both Lil Nas X and Danez Smith chart a course towards empowerment and self-love. Through their art, they adopt varied strategies, including confronting critics directly and using a blend of sharp wit and humor. This is meant to transform the daily discriminatory experiences within the Black and queer community from hurtful encounters into empowering catalysts for self-affirmation. In Lil Nas X’s track “Dolla Sign Slime,” he openly celebrates his body and prowess, standing in contrast to the vulnerability expressed in “Sun Goes Down:”

They can't stop me, say I can't do it, bitch, watch me  
 All you lame hoes turn hatin' to a hobby  
 Damn, watchin' me gotta turn you on  
 I should have my own category in porn  
 Ooh, I'm just such an obsession [...]  
 Everything about me came from genetics [...]

Baby, all these hoes imitate me [...]  
 Toxic, suck his soul out then block him  
 Got more cream than the sundae topping, ah

Mixing the traditions of “signifyin’” and “dissin’” in hip hop, Lil Nas X uses criticism as motivation in his lyrics. He portrays his critics as interested observers, suggesting they are more fascinated than hateful. His proposal of a unique pornographic category for himself underscores his originality, casting critics as unimaginative followers. The metaphor “more cream than the sundae topping” asserts his dominance over critics both metaphorically and sexually. This theme continues in “Industry Baby,” where he details his journey from responding to critics to dictating the story. His line, “I’m done making jokes ’cause they got old like baby boomers / Turn my haters to consumers,” shows an evolution in his approach, his shift from defensive humor to strategic control. He exposes again the irony of haters consuming his work, thereby bolstering his popularity and control, highlighting their contradictory behavior.

Lil Nas X’s ability to redirect prejudice through his lyrics is mirrored in his engagement with social media. Beyond just music, he often uses humor as a powerful tool to disarm and highlight the absurdity of discriminatory comments. In response to a tweet posing the loaded question, “Should all men dress androgynously and sleep with satin [*sic*]?,” Lil Nas X used a succinct “yes” to disarm the homophobic insinuation. His minimalist reply ridicules the question, highlighting his unwillingness to expend energy on such viewpoints. Moreover, the unintentional humor brought about by the tweet’s typographical error – mixing up “satan” with “satin” – underscores Lil Nas X’s dexterity in using wit to deflect criticism and reassert his position. Two months later, the singer ridicules yet another tweet: “we are 4 months in and people are still acting surprised that I am being gay and sexual in performances of a song about gay and sexual sh\*\* like the song is literally about gay sex what y’all want me to do play the piano while baking a cake?” (29 June 2021, 1:06 a.m.). Lil Nas X confidently stands by the content of his songs, emphasizing his right to express his sexuality just as openly and graphically as straight artists. This challenges the music industry’s biases that often embrace explicit straight themes but sideline similar gay expressions. In his 2020 single “Holiday,” Lil Nas X breaks away from usual rap ideas about masculinity. Instead, he openly talks about his sexuality and celebrates his growing popularity: “I might bottom on the low, but I top shit (But I top shit) / Switch the genre on your hoes, do a rock hit (Mmm) / I got the biggest

damn song, fuck the charts, sis, I don't need 'em." Bottoming is no longer something to be ashamed of when one is ruling or topping the charts. Power gets to shift, from sexual to artistic prowess.

While humor often serves as a tool to proudly defy critics and their biases, it also becomes a means to narrate stories of a more haunting and bleak reality, reminiscent of fairy tales with no happy endings. In the opening poem of Danez Smith's debut poetry collection *Black Movie*, titled "Sleeping Beauty in the Hood," the main character, Jamal, becomes Sleeping Beauty. He is admired by various Charming Princes, who might be either brothers or cousins, hinting at the unsettling possibility of them being potential abusers. The poem goes beyond simply parodying the famous story, diving deep into the layered meanings of the word "fairy" and its dual implications of a mythical creature and of a gay man. The words spoken cannot revive those who have passed away, and the tender kisses exchanged by lovers fail to awaken "Jamal's cold mouth" because "there is no magic here / The fairies get killed too" (*Black Movie* 3). Within the poem, a connection is forged between three words, forming a tragic triadic motif: "black," "fag," and "dead."

## Conclusion

Lil Nas X and Danez Smith navigate the multifaceted terrain of being Black and queer, reflecting their journey through their art, which is both an expression of personal experience and a form of protest. Themes of solitude, internalized biases, and societal prejudice reverberate throughout their works. Still, what stands out most prominently is their ability to rise above these challenges, transforming their lived experiences into powerful messages of empowerment, self-love, and change. The honesty, humor, and provocation that both artists employ are transformative in nature. By confronting societal norms and biases, they not only give voice to the unique struggles of the Black and queer community but also redefine what it means to be both. In doing so, they contribute to a broader dialogue about intersectional identities, challenging mainstream narratives and advocating for greater inclusivity.

In the 2022 interview mentioned earlier, Danez Smith spoke about the evolution of Black queer representation in literature. They highlighted how the influential works of predecessors such as Langston Hughes, Bruce Nugent, and James Baldwin were once perceived as unusual exceptions. Smith contrasted this

past scarcity with the present reality, especially post-Obama's presidency. Smith pointed out, "I'm not the only one. If you don't like my Black poetry, there are 80,000 others to go read, and they all write good and different. We're the first truly abundant moment of what's been a long canon, a canon that has all these silences within it" (Wilbekin). Obama's election signified a turning point, particularly for the Black community, ushering in an era that embraces an ever-increasing diversity in the cultural and literary world. In their poem "my president," which starts the collection of poems *Homie*, Danez Smith imagines electing as presidents "the trans girl making songs in her closet, spinning the dark / into a booming dress" (1) and "the boy crying on the train & the sudden abuela who rubs his back [...] & the drag queen who begins to hum" (3). As expressed in Wilbekin's article, the post-Obama era is a unique opportunity for Black queer artists to "creat[e] a lineage" and "the canon moving forward."

### Works cited

- @LilNasX. "y'all really like to pretend homosexuality didn't exist in african culture?." *Twitter*, 27 June 2021, 8:17p.m., <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1409350286586507266>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "y'all hate yourselves so much. Y'all live your lives trying your best to appease straight ppl. Y'all are uncomfortable with what I do because y'all are afraid they will be uncomfortable with you. work on yourselves, I love who I am and whatever I decide to do. Get there." *Twitter*, 29 June 2021, 12:48 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1409569290991247374>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "we are 4 months in and people are still acting surprised that I am being gay and sexual in performances of a song about gay and sexual sh\*\* [...] like the song is literally about gay sex what y'all want me to do play the piano while baking a cake?." *Twitter*, 29 June 2021, 1:06 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1409573285025648640>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "you're right I am insecure about my sexuality. I still have a long way to go. I've never denied that. When you're conditioned by society to hate yourself your entire life it takes a lot of unlearning. Which is exactly why I do what I do." *Twitter*, 29 June 2021, 2:23 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1409593325384998924>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "the truth is there is no attack. You view femininity as a weakness. You don't like gay black men because you are afraid of black men, as a whole, being

- viewed as weak. You cling on to your masculinity because without it you have nothing else going for yourself. *Twitter*, 24 July 2021, 1 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1418798251264856070>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “y’all be silent as hell when niggas dedicate their entire music catalogue to rapping about sleeping with multiple women. But when I do anything remotely sexual I’m ‘being sexually irresponsible’ & ‘causing more men to die from aids’ y’all hate gay ppl and don’t hide it.” *Twitter*, 25 July 2021, 11:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1419314047678357510>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “i love joking but on a serious note making this album was therapy for me. i began healing many unchecked wounds, facing skeltons [*sic*] in my closet i never wanted to, fighting internally every day and crying persistently, MONTERO is truly my baby. thanks for the love.” *Twitter*, 18 Sept. 2021, 9:24 a.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1439218686967963648>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “ok cool, I suck, my music is terrible, bad nas. Now answer the question “are queer men more respected when they do less feminine things” yes or no?.” *Twitter*, 7 June 2022, 6:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1534331685227077634>.
- @PopCrave. “Lil Nas X vents frustrations after receiving zero nominations at the 2022 BET Awards: ‘I just feel like black gay ppl have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top mfs try to pretend we are invisible.’” *Twitter*, 2 June 2022, 1:31 a.m., <https://twitter.com/PopCrave/status/1532142829971116033>.
- Danius S. and Jonsson S., “An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak,” *Boundary*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 24-50.
- Dunning, Stephanie K. *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same Sex Desire, And Contemporary African American Culture*. Indiana UP, 2009.
- Elisabeth Gross, “Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution. An interview with Gayatri Spivak.” *The Postcolonial Critics: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues – Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak*, edited by Sarah Harasym, Routledge, 1990, pp. 1-16.
- Gever, Martha, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson, eds. *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Films and Video*. Routledge, 1993.
- Martin Jr., Alfred L. *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-cast Sitcom*. Indiana UP, 2021.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. U Minnesota P, 1999.



- Simmons, R. "Tongues Untied: An Interview with Marlon Riggs." *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, edited by E. Hemphill, Alyson Publications, 1991.
- Smalls, James. "The Past, Present, and Future of Black Queer Cinema." *African American Cinema Through Black Lives Consciousness*, edited by Mark A. Reid, Wayne State UP, 2019.
- Smith, Danez. *Black Movie*. Button Poetry/Exploding Pinecone Press, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Don't Call Us Dead*. Graywolf Press, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Homie*. Graywolf Press, 2020.
- Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds.). *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, Palgrave, 1998.
- Wilbekin, Emil. "What Does It Mean to Be a Young, Black Queer Artist Right Now?" *The New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/t-magazine/black-queer-artists.html>.