# More than Nationalism in Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* and Kasi Lemmons's *Talk to Me*

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ABSTRACT: This article situates film as a critical framework for challenging scholars to use a Black feminist methodology to complicate the notion of an inherent link between blackness, maleness, and crisis in the twenty-first century. Kasi Lemmons's *Talk to Me* (2007) offers a trans-historical context for considering the difference that both time and a Black feminist theoretical perspective contribute to a re-reading of *Killer of Sheep* (1977) through a post-nationalist lens. *Killer of Sheep* is both produced and set during the waning of the Black Nationalist era. *Talk to Me* begins during the waning of the civil rights movement and ends in the dawning of the post-national era, but it is produced in 2007. The thirty-year difference between the productions creates considerable possibility for viewing and imagining Black manhood in a way that allows Black men to be agents rather than victims. Reading these films through a Black feminist lens not only creates a space for Black male agency in these films, but it also reveals an unfamiliar narrative for wider examination—Black men as emotional, feeling human beings whose greatest acts of agency are rooted in their own humanness, fallibility, and "weakness."

There appears to be a consensus between educators, sociologists, and the news media that the Black male in the U.S. is in crisis—or even worse, endangered. This idea has manifested in various forms since the failure of reconstruction, but over the past thirty years, the rhetoric around the plight of the Black

male in the U.S. has been framed by specific concerns about Black men: dispro-portionate representation in the prison system, underrepresentation in col-leges and universities, and a higher likelihood of involvement in violence than men in any other racial group. Given the high level of concern, it should be no surprise that both private and public institutions, centers, and programs dedi-cated to attending to "the crisis" abound across the nation. This phenomenon is not limited to academic, government, and non-profit entities that produce re-search and brainstorm intervention strategies, but it is also present in every area of culture. My goal in this essay is to challenge scholars to use a Black femi-nist methodology to complicate the notion of an inherent link between black-ness, maleness, and crisis in the twenty-first century.

The Black man and his social, political, and economic positions in the na-tion have been at the center of race politics since emancipation. It is, therefore, understandable that a binary has formed between exceptional race leaders who are minorities and the racially oppressed Black male majority. Yet, Black film scholar Ed Guerrero (1995) insists that positive-negative binaries are a "schizo-phrenic way of representing black males as concentrated at the poles of celebrity and pathology" (p. 396). He adds, "We need, in other words, to fill representa-tion's empty space with many more black dramas, family films, films with black men in loving relationships, but also with science fiction and horror films and dramatic transcriptions from black intellectual and political culture and African American history" (p. 398). Guerrero proposes that the visual can create a space to view Black masculinity beyond the simplistic binaries that have been created.

One way of moving beyond them is to rethink blackness and identity in ways that move beyond racing Black men and toward considering how gender, sexuality, class, and nation inform both how Black men are viewed and how they construct their own identities. From emancipation through the civil rights era, discussions on racial oppression and social inequalities were rarely approached through a gendered lens. The two were generally reduced to their racial compo-nents, at least in the broader discourse.[1] Black feminist scholar Kimberly Springer (2005) explains that, during the 1960s and 1970s, Black women activists insisted "both antiracism and antisexism [are] pressing battles to be waged simultane-ously" (p. 31). Historians Robin D. G. Kelley (2000) and Earl Lewis (2000) em-phasize that, during the 1970s, both sexual and racial politics were important, interlocking factors for most Black women because they "did not separate their fight for women's rights from issues affecting the entire black community" (Kel-ley, p. 553). What these Black women activists, scholars, and artists insisted is that being both Black *and* a woman produced certain unique experiences with racial oppression and social inequalities—experiences that could not be

addressed through the popular Black Nationalist rhetoric of the time. By the 1990s, the developing field of Black masculinity studies also registered, to borrow from Barbara Smith (1998), that the "politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors" (p. 6); this is not just in the works of Black women writers, as Smith discusses, but also in the works and lived experiences of Black men.

Rethinking blackness along an intersectional axis resulted in a burgeoning discourse on Black masculinities that began to take shape during the late twentieth century.[3] While many scholars have contributed to the study of Black masculinities during the last two decades, there are certain texts that have strongly influenced the cultural analysis this essay undertakes. The publication of Phillip Brian Harper's *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996) offered a significant contribution to discussions of Black masculinities that extends beyond familiar archetypes. Hazel Carby (2000) broadens the scholarship on Black male subjectivity, offering an interdisciplinary and trans-historical analysis of the various masculinities that "race men" have embodied. In her seminal work, Carby registers that Black men are not only diverse, but that many have also worked diligently to define themselves beyond archetype. In a similar vein, Marlon Ross (2004) approaches his study on Black manhood during the Jim Crow era by considering the ways in which Black men worked against a system that idealized White patriarchal manhood as normative and impossible for Black men to achieve. Ross's analysis relies on Black feminist theory and sexuality studies, in addition to race theory, to reveal a Black, male agency that crisis rhetoric obscures. Maurice Wallace (2002), too, relies on an intersectional lens to explore the ways that Black men have negotiated the relationship between blackness and maleness in U.S. culture through a variety of interdisciplinary texts. Mark Anthony Neal (2005) deconstructs the seemingly positive image of the "Strong Black Man," identifying this archetype as potentially damaging to both Black men and Black women. Neal's *New Black Man* is a particularly compelling call for scholars and everyday Black people to imagine a new way of thinking about what it means to be a Black man, particularly in regard to misogyny and homophobia. This New Black Man is much more vulnerable and self-reflective than the historic civic leaders or Strong Black Men. And, finally, bell hooks, both in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003) and chapters in earlier books on race and representation, has tirelessly insisted upon a reconstructed Black masculinity as the only hope for Black men to save their own lives and the lives of the Black women and men struggling with them.

What all of the aforementioned texts share is the application of Black feminist theory as an analytic for thinking about Black men as gendered subjects, not

just as raced subjects. Black feminist theory, then, has been instrumental to the production of nuanced analyses of how *both* blackness and maleness are interlocking factors in the life experiences of Black men. Following the path of these scholars and activists, my particular intervention in the theorizing of Black men and crisis is to shift the paradigm from the either-or binary Guerrero critiques to a paradigm that explores how everyday and ordinary spaces—spaces that are neither the playing fields and stages nor the prison cell—are rich locations for identifying Black masculinities that are neither schizophrenic nor in crisis at the dawning of the twenty-first century. My theoretical framework relies on both an intersectional approach and an anti-essentialist-informed reading of texts; thus, scholars must understand Black men's race, gender, sexuality, class, and relationship to the nation as factors that shape their personal and societally perceived identities. Such a framework also requires reading images and narratives other than those familiar, prescribed, and steeped in violence and/or oppression and, ultimately, a lack of agency.

In this essay, I examine Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and Kasi Lemmons's *Talk to Me* (2007). I use film as a critical frame for my argument because the dominant images and conceptions of Black men are rooted in and heavily reliant upon propagation through the visual. I selected these specific films because they offer a trans-historical context—albeit a narrow thirty years—for considering the difference that both time and a Black feminist theoretical perspective contribute to a reading of the earlier film. *Killer of Sheep* is both produced and set during the waning of the Black Nationalist era, whereas *Talk to Me* begins during the waning of the civil rights movement and ends in the dawning of the post-national era, but was produced in 2007. The thirty-year difference between the productions creates considerable possibility for viewing and imagining Black manhood in a way that allows Black men to be agents rather than victims. Reading these films through a Black feminist lens not only creates a space for Black male agency in these films, but also reveals an unfamiliar narrative for wider examination—Black men as emotional, feeling human beings whose greatest acts of agency are rooted in their own humanness, fallibility, and "weakness."

In the analysis that follows, I begin with a close reading of *Killer of Sheep* that accepts the traditional Black Nationalist reading of it, but propose that an intersectional and post-nationalist reading provides the protagonist with agency that could not be imagined in the former frame. I, then, demonstrate that, because *Talk to Me* was produced during the post-nationalist era, Lemmons gains increased flexibility when compared to the representation and archetype deconstruction established in *Killer of Sheep*. Doing intersectional and anti-essentialist

work is, however, a complicated endeavor, and, although Lemmons resists certain essentialist binaries and stock characterizations of Black men, the new narrative she presents remains bound by nationalist tropes of racial authenticity and gender dominance. Therefore, I conclude with a logical, relational question: what happens to Black women when we reject the crisis narratives governing Black male representation? Does reading Black men as agents also generate spaces of agency for Black women who interact with and share spaces with these Black men? Does Black male agency offer Black women a space for representation that diverges from popular binary representations of them as either over-sexed or castrating? The answers to these questions as represented in both films extend the critical discussions around the crisis of the Black male and potential new representations for engaging Black masculinity studies.

## WATCHING *KILLER OF SHEEP* TODAY

Charles Burnett produced *Killer of Sheep* as his master's thesis in UCLA's film program in 1977. As part of what is known as the "L.A. School of Filmmakers," Burnett is at the center of a "first wave" of film students whose work is noted for privileging political agenda over material profit. Due to costly music copyrights, the film played only sporadically at film festivals and museums until its theatrical and video release thirty years later in 2007. The film is shot in black and white and was restored from its original 16mm format to 35mm for its debut. *Killer* is set during the mid-1970s in post-riots Watts. The protagonist, Stan (Henry G. Sanders), who works in a sheep abattoir and suffers from insomnia, is presented as the soul of everyday Black folk in Watts who are just trying to survive.

Given that Stan is described as a "sensitive dreamer" on the film's website, it is ironic that film scholars have almost entirely overlooked sensitivity when analyzing him. They routinely identify *Killer of Sheep* as presenting an image of Black masculinity that runs counter to the highly popular Blaxploitation films' dominating representations of Blacks for the first half of the 1970s.[4] Although Stan is not a "badman," in the African American folkloric tradition, like the protagonists of Blaxploitation films, his character and scholars' interpretations of it are, in fact, rooted in a Black Nationalist epistemology that champions patriarchy, just like Blaxploitation films. Stan is simultaneously celebrated and empathized with because he tries but cannot perform the particular type of Black masculinity that debunks Daniel Patrick Moynihan's inflammatory critique of the Black family as pathological because it is matriarchal when the nation is organized patriarchally.[5]

Recognizing Stan as the embodiment of a failed civil rights movement, evidenced in the poverty and despair of post-riots Watts, informs the film overview on the DVD dust jacket that accompanies its 2007 release. In the overview, film critic Armond White proposes that viewing *Killer of Sheep* today "requires hard-nose sensitivity. It necessitates an unsentimental awareness of beauty. It demands a tough confrontation with social truth reflected in art" (dust jacket). I agree with White about how we ought to view *Killer of Sheep* today, but I resist his analysis of the film as always already bereft of tragedy that is, in his words, "like the foundation seat of the Blues" (dust jacket). A focus on tragedy, hardship, and poverty significantly limits, if not entirely erases, any way to read agency in the film (or to see Stan as a sensitive dreamer). Reading agency in the film provides a provocative alternative representation of Black masculinity that truly contrasts with Blaxploitation images.

I propose, then, that one way to watch *Killer of Sheep* in the context of today's cinema is to examine the film's children and Stan, characters at the heart of critics' tragic evaluations. In doing so, we should employ White's "hard-nose sensitivity," "unsentimental awareness of beauty," and "tough confrontation with social truth reflected in art" to search for exemplars of agency. Approaching the film as a direct response to Blaxploitation films and the Moynihan report, Paula Massood (1999) interprets the children's presence and play through an analysis that is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's discouragement of Blacks from migrating away from the South.[6] For Massood, the children and their play are reflective of the loss and despair of post-riots Watts. Massood contends, "The space itself resembles a war zone, with empty lots and abandoned buildings dotting the urbanscape" (p. 36). She continues by noting that the children's combative play frames the contradiction of the blighted, urban geography that makes these scenes so despairing. She concedes, however, that family scenes (in the home), with the exception of the sibling rivalry between Stan, Jr., (Jack Drummond) and Angie (Angela Burnett), are peaceful in comparison to what is going on outdoors. This analysis echoes Washington's concerns about the dangers of leaving the "protected" and simple life of the South where Black people could acquire land and live free from the vices of urban spaces. Armond White similarly reads the children's play through a lens of tragedy and danger. "The deeper one looks," he writes, "the more complex and tragic common things appear—like the playtime image of a boy's head under a train wheel; folly that mimics decapitation" (dust jacket).

The tragedy, danger, and ultimate despair that Massood and White register in the film is understandable, but ironic because it is, indeed, the kind of play that I remember with pleasurable nostalgia from my childhood—play in an urban city

during roughly the same time period in which the film was produced. The depictions of the children's play relate even more to the stories of play at the railroad tracks and in alleys that my father related about growing up in the Midwest in the 1950s and 1960s. When children growing up in economically and socially oppressed spaces do not have access to playgrounds and toys, they use what is around them—the railroad, trees, rooftops, rocks, woodpiles, etc. What Massood and White seem to have overlooked is the incredible and fascinating ability that children have to imagine even when they have been racialized and are impoverished, whether they are conscious of such realities or not. The children have turned the empty lots, abandoned buildings, and defunct railroad into play spaces. While they are indeed surrounded by the bleak and despairing landscape of post-riots Watts, their play, itself, does not have to be understood as bleak and despairing.

Instead, it can be read as a celebration of life that stands in stark contrast to Stan's social death, a development that produces a profound inability to feel. Unlike Stan, the children can feel and are not depicted as being aware yet of the grim realities of being Black in the U.S. Their rock fighting, roof jumping, and combative, but never harmful, play might be read more productively as signs of life and freedom that are available in childhood, before children are consciously subjected to the raciology that frames U.S. social politics. Instead, in the same vein as the White biographers that Nikki Giovanni hopes will never have cause to write about her childhood, Massood's and White's assessment of the children's play and the material culture that surrounds them suggest that "childhood remembrances are always a drag/if you're black" (Giovanni, p. 140). As a result, I read the children's play as an important element of the mundane and everyday that Burnett captures so beautifully in this film, a refreshing contrast to the unrealistic portrayals of Black life and absent portrayals of Black families in Blaxploitation films.

I also think it is important to view the children's play and leisure in contrast to the bleak adulthood represented through the adult characters, particularly Stan. The premise of Massood's argument positions Stan to be read as an allegory for the conditions of Blacks in post-riot Watts.[7] This positioning rings true, but what is overlooked in this truth is that Stan is a singular allegory, as his friends Eugene (Eugene Cherry) and Bracy (Charles Bracy) do not share his post-riot melancholia. When viewers first learn of Stan's insomnia, Eugene insists that he, himself, sleeps fine and proposes that, perhaps, what Stan needs to do is go to church, something that Stan admits he has not done since he was "back home." The bleak despair of the aftermath of the riots undoubtedly does affect Stan, but the film also suggests that his loss of rootedness in certain Southern values equally contributes to his state of despair. For instance, in addition to

abandoning church once in L.A., Stan corrects Stan, Jr., when he calls his mother Ma'Dear, a Southern term of affection that Stan most likely views as "country" and not progressive. When Stan shuns the Southern term of endearment as part of his urban acculturation, his attitude metaphorically leaves him without roots to plant when he arrives in an urban concrete environment that soon will have little left to nourish him.

What this notion of rootlessness suggests is that Stan's numbness should be analyzed in a pre-riot context. The film opens with a scene of a pre-adolescent Stan being chastised by his father for failing to fight for his brother. His father warns, "You're not a child anymore. You soon will be a Goddamn man. Now, start learning what life is about now, son." This scene is post-WWII but pre-riot, during the heyday of Black migration from the South to L.A., when, in spite of the racism that follows them to California, Black people still feel as if they can carry on intimate, fulfilling lives. Another example would be Easy Rawlins in Walter Mosley's novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*. But as *Devil in a Blue Dress* demonstrates, an intimate and fulfilling life is dependent upon certain Southern retentions when it comes to community and family. The lecture given by Stan's father and the family and community values he articulates are framed by constructions of manhood that are gendered. Stan is taught that men protect and provide; these two duties, coupled with the biological reproduction that is evidenced by Stan's two brothers and his mother's pregnant belly, are what makes a man a real man. The fact that the film opens with this scene positions it as instructive for understanding Stan's malaise as more than simply post-riot despair. The construction of manhood that he has been taught renders him silent and emotionless as a child—conditions that haunt him in adulthood. Considering Stan's emotional state prior to the riots troubles the idea of Stan as an "allegory for the conditions of Blacks in post-riots Watts" and, instead, challenges viewers to consider the devastating way in which nationalist and patriarchal dictums afflict the Black family and construct Black masculinity.

It is important to note, however, that Stan's emotional state is neither a result of the Black Southern folk culture in which he grows up nor of the loss of that culture when he migrates. Region is of little consequence when the ideologies that define manhood permeate the nation as a whole. A crucial point that critics have overlooked is Stan's dogged efforts to escape nationalist and patriarchal dictums by trying to reclaim the feeling that patriarchy and nationalism have stripped from him. Viewing Stan through an intersectional lens that does more than just race him, but also genders him, offers him agency rather than rendering him tragic. Such a view positions Stan within a framework of progressive masculinity, instead of a masculinity rooted in nationalist discourse and patriarchal ordering.[8] The most compelling example in the film is, perhaps, the scene when

Stan is sitting across from Bracy at his kitchen table, playing dominos and drink-ing tea before he goes to work. There is silence as each man blows on his tea to cool it. Finally, Stan asks, "What does it remind you of when you hold it next to your cheek?" Bracy looks at Stan doubtfully, but takes the cup, puts it next to his cheek, then places it on the table, and replies, "Not a damn thing but hot air." Stan is not discouraged by Bracy's response. Instead, he smiles and proposes the cup's warmth feels like making love. Stan has, for a moment, forgotten the emotionless and violent construction of manhood presented to him as a young boy—when his father lectured and threatened him, and his mother emphasized both parents' disappointment in him by slapping him across the face. Bracy, however, begins to laugh and exclaims, "Myself, I don't go for women who got malaria," and laughs even harder. Bracy's laughter ridicules Stan and his quick denial of being able to relate to the intimate memory that has slipped past Stan's almost permanent mal-aise implies that Stan is not being a man.

This scene is compelling because it challenges both gender and sexual constructs that foreclose spaces for Black men to be emotive. The fact that this scene takes place in the kitchen and is a discussion between two men drinking tea is significant. Kitchens are feminized spaces where "women's work" takes place; drinking hot tea is also gendered as feminine. Aside from the sheep abat-toir, however, a significant amount of Stan's time is spent in the kitchen doing handiwork, eating, having conversations, and spending time with his daughter, Angie. If interpreted through the nationalist lens that critics have used to ana-lyze this film, Stan's relationship to this space and his actions within it are in-dicative of how racial despair has pathologized him, or made him forget how to be a "real" man. Such a lens would also question Stan's sexuality—something that is implicit in Bracy's ridicule and quick denial.

Yet, an intersectional and post-nationalist reading offers an alternative interpretation. Stan, his feelings, and the space of the kitchen collectively de-bunk the nationalist and heteropatriarchal order outside of which he is being situated. I use the term heteropatriarchal and not simply patriarchal because race, gender, and sexuality are all being deconstructed and bound up together in this scene. Bracy's response—a stand in for the nationalist critique—makes it clear that heterosexual, Black men do not sit around the kitchen drinking tea and drawing parallels between making love and the warm touch of a teacup against their cheeks, even if the lovemaking is with a woman. Heterosexuality and patriarchy are inherently linked; a patriarch must be heterosexual and he must be able to rule the nation while controlling its reproduction, too.

The peculiar irony here is that they are in the kitchen, which is indeed a space that men occupy. Although women might traditionally order and manage

kitchens, men often act as spectators and voyeurs there. Whether it is waiting for or eating a meal or watching a mother or wife do a female relative's hair, men become circumscribed in the feminine space. The fact that the memory of intimacy that the teacup calls to mind occurs in the kitchen, an intimate space, speaks to the way it also becomes an intimate space for many African American men—men who have observed and sometimes participated in the conversations and hairstyling that have traditionally occurred there.[9] The kitchen is not only an intimate space, but it also can be a safe space for letting emotions run free—that is if you are a woman. The intimacy and safety of the kitchen combined with the memories of the warmth of the teacup against his cheek create a brief moment in which Stan can feel.

Bracy's laughter and ridicule also foretell the way that Scooter and Smoke, two neighborhood thugs, feminize Stan when he is unresponsive to their murder-for-hire proposition—when Stan refuses to perform Black masculinity as violence. Scooter and Smoke approach Stan when he is sitting on his front porch steps one afternoon and propose that he join them in the murder of another neighborhood man. Stan quickly declines the offer before his wife joins him on the porch and chastises the men. This scene is well noted by scholars, but when it is, it serves as evidence of how the socio-economics of post-riots Watts disallows Stan to be a true man through material possessions. Massood notes that there are two definitions of manhood operating in this scene. Smoke and Scooter define manhood through economics and violence, whereas Stan's Wife (Kaycee Moore) defines it through intelligence.[10]

I find it troubling that Massood (1999) quotes Scooter's demand that Stan "can be a man if [he] can," as well as a couple of other lines critiquing Stan's "questionable" manhood, but she does not quote how Stan's Wife defines manhood when she confronts these thugs. The only note that Massood makes about Stan's Wife's confrontation with Scooter and Smoke is that, when she first appears on the porch and is standing behind Stan, she makes a triangle with them that entraps Stan. Massood further states that, once Stan's Wife moves from the porch and positions her body in front of Stan, she removes "him from the conversation… literally erasing him from the onscreen action…. Stan's static and submissive position symbolizes his paralysis in the face of both Scooter's rather tautological demand… and his wife's definition of manliness" (p. 32). Again, Massood does not include Stan's Wife's definition of manliness, which is not only troubling because of the salience of it, but also because it is the only time that she is granted that many lines in the film. When both Massood and Burnett interpret Stan's Wife's one opportunity to truly speak, she is positioned as a castrating bitch—the Black matriarch who is getting in the way of Stan being a man.

It is important to reflect upon Stan's Wife's definition of manliness, for it is yet another instance when a nationalist reading denies Stan the ability to make a concerted effort to define himself and control his circumstances.

**Stan's Wife**: Why you always wanna hurt somebody?

**Scooter**: Who me? That's the way nature is. I mean an animal has his teeth and a man has his fist. That's the way I was brought up, goddamn me. I mean when a man's got scars on his mug from dealing with son-of-bitches every-day of his natural life. Ain't nobody goin over this nigga. Just drylongso. Now me and Smoke here we takin' our issue. (*Pause.*) You be a man if you can, Stan.

(*Stan's wife steps off of the porch and gets in Scooter's face.*)

**Stan's Wife**: Wait. You wait just one minute. You talkin' about be a man. Stand-up. Don't you know there's more to it than just your fists. With scars on your mug, you talkin' about an animal. You think you still in the bush some damn where? You here? You use your brain. That's what you use. Both of you nothing-ass niggas got a lot of nerve comin' over here doin' some shit…

What is overlooked here is that before Stan's Wife arrives as his *partner*, who is invested in their household and its well-being, Stan has already swiftly dismissed the proposition and expressed irritation with being presented with it at all. Nothing in Stan's verbiage or gestures suggests that he would be moved from his decision. Stan being a man is not a "struggle with self-definition" that "is linked to a larger community dilemma of self-definition" (Massood, 1999, p. 32). Stan knows who he is. He is not a criminal. In his mind, he also is not "poor," as he makes clear when he declares in a different scene, "man, I ain't po'. I give away things to the Salvation Army. You can't give away nothin' to the Salvation Army if you po'." Stan has defined himself quite well in the film, but he has not defined himself squarely within a Black Nationalist patriarchy and is consciously unwilling to perform some of the prescribed acts of manhood as the larger community defines them. Stan, therefore, is not as tragic as the space around him; he is actually resisting those spaces and the values that define them, which has a lot more to do with his sleeplessness than with being trapped and feeling claustrophobic, as Massood suggests (p. 29).

As viewers and scholars consider "how do we watch *Killer of Sheep* in the context of today's cinema" (White, dust jacket), I would propose that the primary thing we need to do is to recognize the film's strengths for what they offer in contrast to Blaxploitation and the "tangle of pathology" that Moynihan attributes to Black families. We must also acknowledge how failing to view the

gender context of the film is shortsighted. It reifies the "natural order" of things as heterosexual Black males keeping women "knocked up" in the interior space of the home, which is how the film opens and closes. The film opens with Stan's very pregnant mother slapping him as a reinforcement of his father's violent threat and tongue-lashing and closes with a pregnant woman. Understanding Black manhood as being bound by nationalist and patriarchal constructs of masculinity results in a shortsighted analysis of Stan's ability to define himself and his attempts to change his circumstances, a perplexing issue I will take up again when I discuss the final scene and the limits of progress in the film.

## TOWARD A BLACK MALE HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE

There are two specific ways that I am connecting *Killer of Sheep* and *Talk to Me* and both are rooted in retrospective. As I have argued in my analysis of *Killer of Sheep*, both Burnett's own assessment of his film and scholars' critical analysis of it is steeped in the nationalist gender ideologies that I propose Stan resists.[11] When Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou* and *The Caveman's Valentine*), a Black woman, took on directing and rewriting a biopic, *Talk to Me*, about the life and career of Washington, D.C., local radio and television legend, Ralph "Petey" Greene (Don Cheadle), she decided to focus the film on Petey's friendship with his previous manager, Dewey Hughes (Chiwetel Ejiofor). The friendship, camaraderie, and love that she portrays between Petey and Dewey against the backdrop of the nationalist period offers a critical retrospective on the hyper-masculine Blaxploitation films that were a product of the time. Like Burnett, then, Lemmons is responding to limited and limiting portrayals of the Black experience, but, unlike Burnett, Lemmons's film goes beyond troubling race. She brings an intersectional consciousness to her film by engaging the interlocking factors of race, gender, and sexuality, presenting a construction of Black masculinity that both complements and disrupts Burnett's 1970s depiction of Stan as a Black man who cannot be a man.

There is a second retrospective at play in *Talk to Me*, which is grounded in Dewey Hughes's role and presence in the production of the film. Hughes's son, Michael Genet, wrote the story that Lemmons crafted into a Black, male friendship film. In interviews, when asked about her research for the film, Lemmons explains that they had the rights to Dewey Hughes's story, but not to Petey Greene's story. Instead, they had to rely on listening to the limited remaining recordings and clips, reading some articles, and talking to Dewey. She notes that she was not allowed legally to read the "authorized" biography that "Petey" commissioned Lurma Rackley to write in the early 1980s. This prohibition is

interesting because Greene's biography, *Laugh If You Like, Ain't a Damn Thing Funny*, only notes Dewey Hughes in one of thirty-two chapters and even in that one, Hughes is not central.[12] The chapter generously notes Hughes's role in getting Greene a break in the radio talk show industry and, then, Greene's reciprocation when he later brought Hughes into the television industry. Otherwise, Greene's primary commentary on Hughes is that "Dewey was a very cunning guy…. And Dewey wanted to be a star himself…. Dewey saw me as an asset" (Rackley, 2007, p. 224).

What Petey is explicit about in regard to his relationship with Dewey is that he did not *need* Dewey; in fact, he notes repeatedly how the listeners insisted Petey did not need that "White boy" on his talk radio show *Rappin' with Petey Greene*.[13] Petey does concede, however, that Dewey was all about professionalism and knew that liquor was going to come in the way of Petey's success. He also notes that, although Dewey was a cunning businessman, he was also honest and would never take Dewey's money. The brevity of the inclusion of Hughes in the biography and the fact that Greene does not identify him as a close or particularly dear friend might explain why, in real-life, Hughes did not give a eulogy at Greene's funeral, as the film depicts, and, according to Greene's family, did not even attend the service. Hughes's significant contribution to and investment in this film, then, is his own retrospective on Greene and their friendship—a retrospective that perhaps repairs a relationship that was restricted and defined by certain prescriptions of Black masculinity that failed Hughes.

My interest in *Talk to Me* is not actually with the real life. Rather, it is in how Lemmons crafts the real life into a fiction that offers a different "classic" Black film, than *Killer of Sheep*, for gauging future filmic representations of Black manhood. The friendship between ex-convict and radio disc jockey Petey Greene and radio program director Dewey Hughes frames the film. The symbiosis between the two men is captured best when Dewey declares, "You say the things I'm afraid to say and I do the things you're afraid to do." This line echoes Greene's reflection on their partnership in his biography, "He brought me in radio; I brought him in t.v." (Rackley, 2007, p. 226). In the film, Petey and Dewey's dependence upon and completion of one another creates a space for a Black masculinity and Black male friendship that is more complex than the Martin Lawrence and Will Smith Black buddy image from *Bad Boys* or the thug-brotherhood that framed Black film during the 1990s. Lemmons depicts a social intimacy between Petey and Dewey that runs counter not only to the aforementioned representations of Black male friendship in film, but also to historical Black male political friends and foes. Just as popular culture could not, or would not, imagine roles in which Lawrence and Smith embrace and

have meaningful dialogue with one man in the nude, as happens in *Talk to Me*, such an intimate relationship between historical figures like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X or Huey Newton and Bobby Seale are also unimaginable.[14] In order to construct the friendship between Petey and Dewey, Lemmons has to do two things. She must first insist that Black heterosexual masculinity be freed from homophobic constructs that disallow heterosexual Black men to have socially intimate relationships and meaningful dialogues. Lemmons must also locate a space where notions of blackness can be freed from essentialist notions of racial authenticity.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) was one of the first feminist scholars to note the distinctions between rules that frame women's social relationships with women versus those that dictate men's social relationships with men (p. 2–3). Sedgwick contends that women can express love through kinship, sisterhood, friendship, and erotic desire. Men do not have the same freedom of what she refers to as a nondichotomous continuum. The relationships women have are not restricted to two divided spheres—there is a fluidity that provides them the freedom to develop relationships that move within and across social and sexual spheres. The fact that expressions of love in men's relationships are limited to the homosocial—men promoting the interests of men—or the homosexual—men having sex with men—is a result of patriarchal structures, wherein it is normative that men promote the interests of men, as well as patriarchal homophobia.

Gendering *and* sexing Black men, two things that, when not done, limit understandings of agency in *Killer*, create a different kind of agency in *Talk to Me*. Gendering and sexing Black men creates the ability and freedom to choose how Black men love one another, a freedom that elides the gender constructs and posturing that contribute to Stan's inability to feel. It is important that I note my use of *love* is not implying homoeroticism; quite the contrary, my discussion of love is an effort to make the point that both society and, to borrow from Wahneema Lubiano, "the cultural logic of black nationalism" impair one of the most innately human qualities—the ability to express love, and in turn, to feel loved (1998, p. 236). Love in this context is a specific type of love—a filial love. To be clear, then, I am not "queering" the relationships between the Black heterosexual men in *Talk to Me*—what I am doing is offering an example that demonstrates the benefits, or freedom, inherent in understanding social intimacy and filial love as "normal" elements of Black men's heterosexual friendships. Petey and Dewey's love for one another complicates what it means to be brothers, just as it complicates nationalist notions of brotherhood when they learn to love one another in ways that move beyond simply loving each other because they are both Black men.[15]

In granting Petey and Dewey the freedom to choose how they love one another, Lemmons frees them from the apathy that haunts Stan and disallows feeling. Just as *Killer* has the wonderfully intimate expression of feeling when Stan rubs the cup of tea against his face, *Talk to Me* has an equally intimate moment when Petey arrives at Dewey's apartment in the buff after his girlfriend, Vernell (Taraji Henson), walks in on him having sex with another woman. Vernell initially threatens to cut Petey's neck with a broken beer bottle, but, after having second thoughts, she tells him to get out of his apartment, encouraging him with her insistence that she will castrate him with the broken beer bottle if he does not get out fast enough. When Petey arrives at Dewey's door, Dewey has a female guest who is presented as a love interest. Upon seeing the naked Petey, the woman promptly leaves, declaring, "I'll leave you two alone," and asking Dewey, "Is this what you mean by taking your work home with you, being married to your career? I should have known."[16] Her odd response about Dewey bringing his work home, as opposed to responding to Petey's nudity, situates this scene in a perplexing way. The scene, on one hand, is profound simply because a scene with two Black men on screen in one another's personal spaces, one naked and the other clothed, has been written into the script. On the other hand, it is the one and only time that there is any suggestion that Dewey has any kind of sex drive. Throughout the film, scenes depicting Petey's uncontrollable sex drive are contrasted with Dewey's asexual performances of being wed to his career and his relationship to the labor market.

This scene plays on the homophobia that dictates how men, and Black men in particular, can and cannot interact socially; thus, this woman also serves as a way of assuring viewers that, while Petey and Dewey might have a progressive, homosocial friendship, there is nothing "funny" going on between them. The subtle assurance that Dewey's female guest represents allows both men, but especially the naked Petey, to "keep it real" and, even in the buff, maintains Petey's blackness—read his straightness. In an argument for more spaces for Black men to inhabit, it is ironic that it is not Petey who queers Dewey, but rather it is a woman, who is subordinated in this construct, that perpetuates the heteropatriarchal ideologies instead of the men. Lemmons ultimately pushes for a call for an alternate space that is alien during the time period the film is set, and perhaps even during the period it is produced, as she plays on established heteropatriarchal nationalist tropes while also undermining them. I will return to the racial authenticity concession that Lemmons makes in this scene after analyzing a second instance when she expands the conception of male homosociality.

The second moment where Lemmons expands conceptions of male homosociality beyond the realm of business and politics occurs when Dewey and

Petey reunite with the help of Vernell, after they parted ways years before because Petey blew the opportunity that Dewey fixed for him on *The Tonight Show*. They meet in the same pool hall where Dewey romped Petey many years before at the start of their friendship. They both freely acknowledge that they could not have accomplished the things they did without the other doing and saying the things the one was afraid to do or say, acknowledgements that echo their earlier conclusion about completing one another. Petey takes it further and declares that he will forgive Dewey because he loves him like a brother and is certain that Dewey loves him too. "You too stubborn to say it, but I think you miss old Petey Greene. So I'm gonna give you one last shot." Dewey's response to Petey's offer of forgiveness is simply, "That's deep… you might put that in a card some day," echoing Petey's response nearly two decades earlier when Dewey explained to Petey how they completed one another. Dewey never apologizes for trying to force Petey into a career move that was driven by his personal aspirations for himself, but the film presents them as inseparable after their reconciliation, making up on lost time until Petey's premature death.

I interpret Dewey's reluctance to apologize as being reflective of the involvement of Hughes in the production of the film. Hughes served as an adviser to Lemmons and assisted her in directing a film about a relationship between Petey and himself that repairs what both Petey's autobiography suggests and Petey's family insists was never reconciled. The involvement of Hughes in the film as an act of reconciliation also manifests when, after reconciling with Petey, Dewey visits his brother in jail of his own volition, rather than as a promise to their mother (what drove his earlier visits), and actually has a real conversation with him.

These two scenes, coupled with Hughes's retrospective repair work, reveal an alternate definition of Black manhood that does not equate it with violence and material goods, like Scooter does in *Killer of Sheep*. Lemmons goes beyond simply engaging the discourse around race, assimilation, and essentialism when she creates a scenario that can encompass a Black, male homosocial bond outside of business and politics. In doing so, she offers viewers an alternative way of viewing Black masculinity and Black male agency. Lemmons takes to task the need for more freedom of expression in representing Black male social bonds on film and performing them in real life by imagining a Black male friendship that is comfortable with *not* performing a blackness that has limited definitions.

Although Lemmons expands definitions of Black male homosocial relationships, her efforts do encounter a particular type of limitation. She faces the trouble that blackness, itself, presents during the film's setting and through its two leading actors. The film depicts a familiar subplot, when Dewey Hughes

transforms from "sellout" working for "the man" to community race leader with street creds via the tutelage of "keepin' it real" Petey Green. That familiar subplot is complicated by the fact that Petey is the friend who is most willing to work toward a more expansive definition of Black male friendship. Vernell reminds Dewey, "Because Petey Green is the real deal, Jack… he's the sho' nuff…" Petey, himself, instructs Dewey that he's "the people," not Dewey. It seems peculiar that Lemmons would draw on this rather tired trope of the sellout that becomes enlightened when her previous films have demonstrated a clear investment in troubling notions of Black authenticity and presenting some of the new narratives Guerrero calls for in both *Eve's Bayou* and *Caveman's Valentine*. This peculiarity makes me wonder whether the trope of Black authenticity has less to do with Lemmons and more to do with the involvement of Michael Genet and Dewey Hughes in writing and consulting on the film. Hughes appears to have insisted on representing a relationship between him and Green that Green's biography does not suggest ever existed.

Yet, if the involvement of Hughes in this film is, in fact, a retrospective and an act of reconciliation, then the transformation his character experiences reflects his regret. Some could argue that the fact that Lemmons allows Hughes to perform these acts of reconciliation positions her work as conceding to Black Nationalist ideologies of racial authenticity, but I disagree. Giving Hughes the freedom to reconcile the past is her prerogative. The fact that the "authentic" Black Nationalist, Petey, is the one most invested in dropping performances of hyper-masculinity when the two reunite suggests a corrective to the limited definitions of Black masculinity that framed the dominant Black Nationalist discourse. In this way, Lemmons maintains her mission to depict images of blackness and Black masculinity, in particular, that disrupt the "schizophrenic way of representing black males as concentrated at the poles of celebrity and pathology" (Guerrero, 1995, p. 396).

### "THIS IS A MAN'S WORLD… BUT IT WOULDN'T BE NOTHIN' WITHOUT A WOMAN"[17]

Although a fair number of film critics found *Talk to Me* to be riddled with clichés and a predictable plot, what is noteworthy about the film is how it challenges the Black Nationalist discourse that renders Stan without agency in *Killer of Sheep*. And, perhaps, the sense of nostalgia that the soundtrack and costumes spurred allowed me to overlook the clichés and predictability. What I could not overlook, however, is that when deconstructing heteropatriarchal constructs of Black masculinity, Lemmons fails to provide Black women with an escape from

the patriarchal institutions that bind Stan and from which she frees Petey and Dewey. In this sense, there is little difference between Vernell in *Talk to Me* and Stan's Wife—who really is only identified as "Stan's Wife"—in *Killer of Sheep*. Therefore, as I conclude, I want to examine the paradox that occurs in *Talk to Me*; while an intersectional and post-national lens offers a way to understand Stan, Petey, and Dewey, working both to define and change their circumstances, it also suggests that the representation of Black women is stagnant.

Due to Burnett's investment in casting Stan as the "every" Blackman whose manhood is held hostage by White supremacy in post-riot Watts, Black women and girls fit the only two nationalist models available to them: either compliant and committed to "the revolution" or unruly impediments to Black men recouping their manhood. By using an intersectional lens and doing an anti-essentialist reading, I have proposed that Burnett unknowingly and unintentionally creates an alternate conception of Black masculinity through Stan's character, a conception that allows Black men to exact agency and be feeling human beings. When examining Black female characters, however, deconstructing heteropatriarchal constructs does not produce the promising reconceptionalization that it does for Stan. The development of Stan's character as the embodiment of the dispossessed and disenfranchised Black community in post-riots Watts is juxtaposed to women and children who fit the Moynihan model, just as critics propose Stan does. If Stan is the Black man who has been dethroned from his proper and "necessary" place as head of the household, then Stan's Wife is the Black woman who threatens to assume, or in many cases does assume, his proper position.

This patriarch-matriarch juxtaposition is depicted most explicitly through the children and their interactions with one another. There are two primary scenes in which girls are cast as a threat to the young boys struggling to become men in a Black world that, despite James Brown's insistence, is not a Black man's world at all. The first scene occurs early in the film in an alley. A group of girls of varying ages are dancing and socializing as a boy of about ten years old—a boy who resembles Stan as a child in the opening scene of the film—approaches on his bicycle. Rather than riding his bike around the group of girls, he pedals toward the middle of the circle, where the biggest girls are, and demands, "Get outta my way, you scags." The girls immediately question to whom he is speaking and he responds by pushing one of the middle-aged girls down. The older girls quickly pull him off of his bike after his attack.

In spite of being greatly outnumbered, the boy reiterates that the girls are "ugly scags" and is kicked by another one of the middle-aged girls. Before running off and leaving his bike in the alley, he begins to cry and threatens to tell

his brother on them. The girls' only concern is whether his brother is "fine." This scene is compelling for understanding the nationalist agenda at the heart of this film, particularly when read alongside the opening scene in which Stan is the older brother who is chastised by his parents for not fighting for his younger brother. The second scene is not as explicit, but occurs toward the end of the film, when the children are jumping from roof to roof. A rock fight ensues amidst the roof jumping. A boy and a girl are playing king and queen of a particular roof and the girl is able to hold her own on the roof, becoming The Queen. The boy is hit by a rock from below and is forced off, crying and defeated, and the girl is left standing, defending her territory.

These scenes encourage viewers to understand these young girls as growing up to become matriarchs who usurp Black men's positions as dominant and head of the home. An understanding of this inescapable dialectic frames the film when, in the opening scene, viewers are able to see the proper order of things, which is lost during adulthood in Stan's generation. The chastisement that Stan receives is from his father, a father who is present and clearly the head of the household—a position affirmed by the silence of his mother, who is outside of the shot during the tongue-lashing, but included in the shot at the conclusion of it to reinforce her husband's disappointment with Stan's failure. This scene would be set well before Moynihan released his report on the pathology of the Black family in 1965, and while there is no notation in the film, because viewers know Stan migrated to L.A., they also recognize that the scene is set outside of an urban center, most likely in the South. The opening scene, then, conveys all that is lost at the contemporary moment of the film, which is reinforced in the first contemporary scene when Oscar suggests that Stan might be able to remedy his melancholia if he attends church, something he acknowledges he has not done since being "back home." I will note, once again, that while "back home" is symbolic of certain Southern values, the performance of patriarchal values is not produced organically in the South. Patriarchal values frame the nation as a whole.

Viewers are reminded of contemporary losses throughout the film. Stan and his perceived failed manhood, of course, is the greatest reminder, but there are others, as well. The bullying young girls from the alley are juxtaposed against Stan's daughter, Angie, and the peculiar young girl who is hanging laundry. Angie and the laundry girl do not participate in the boy-play of rock throwing and roof jumping. Both are confined to their homes, the domestic sphere that is clearly preparing them for their proper roles as wives and mothers. In most scenes including Angie, she is combing her doll's hair, clearing dishes from the table, and simply being a good girl. At this young age, she has also already learned to protect

Black men, not chastise them, a sentiment that is evident when she demonstrates a clear concern with her mother's persistent verbal and silent appeals to Stan to connect with her on an emotional and physical level.

The scene that best reveals Angie's sense of the need to protect her father from her mother's appeals is as follows: after her mother is rebuffed by Stan's silence when she proposes they go to bed, her mother leaves the kitchen and Angie goes to her father, massaging his shoulders and holding his face as they smile at one another. In this scene, Angie is not only compliant and protective, unlike the image of her mother, but she is the embodiment of what the heteropatriarchal Black man believes he needs the Black woman to be. Angie, then, is a troubling surrogate for her momentarily absent, "ball busting" Black mother, as the progressive partnership her mother demonstrates on the front porch scene is undermined by Angie representing an entrenchment in the very ideologies being exploded.

Like Angie, the laundry girl is also committed to the patriarchal values that the opening scene suggests haunt Stan. This good, dutiful girl is at home hanging laundry in the yard, rather than running the streets. Also, in overdone symbolism, she is wearing a long, white dress that covers her from neck to ankle as if she is waiting for her wedding day and officially having the opportunity to take on the domestic duties of womanhood. In her vintage, white dress she represents the epitome of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century model of prescribed womanhood—a model pre-suffrage and women's rights, one from which Black women were excluded. When a gang of young boys run through her yard and throw dirt on her laundry, she simply stands fixed in motion, mouth agape—silent. She is both poised for and anticipating her duty as a good wife who will enable her man to be a man in a man's world, even if his manhood means that her work will be devalued or go unrecognized.

The idea of Stan as an allegory for a lost patriarchal order in post-riots Watts is further emphasized when the film both opens with and concludes with pregnancy. Stan's mother appears to be on her fourth pregnancy, with a good gap between Stan and the child she is carrying and another between Stan and, presumably, his much older brother sitting at the kitchen table. The film ends with a "girls' day" at Stan's home. Stan's Wife has several friends over, and a final guest arrives, a young woman who has a slight physical disability and possibly a mental one, too. Upon arrival she immediately whispers to Stan's Wife that she is pregnant. All of the women celebrate the pregnancy, particularly Stan's Wife, who has not shown any semblance of happiness or hint of life outside of her home until this point in the film. In the midst of celebrating, one bawdy woman produces uniform laughter when she makes the observation, "I

thought her old man was shootin' blanks, but I guess he's droppin' bombs on occasion… I guess."

By encapsulating the film with pregnancy, and presumably pregnancy by women in marriages, Burnett not only depicts life in a community that is surrounded by desolation and destruction, but also counters the pathological image of the Black family that Moynihan revealed the same year that the six days of rioting ensued in Watts. What the encapsulation also suggests, however, echoes Stokely Carmichael's "humorous statement of fact" in 1964, in response to Mary King and Casey Hayden's "Position Paper: Women in the Movement." When discussing the paper with King and other Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members, Carmichael queries, "What's the position of women in SNCC? The position of women in SNCC is prone" (as cited in Barber, 2008, p. 102). While historians have noted the truth in Carmichael's statement—many White Northern women like King and Hayden found themselves in that position—and the "harmless" humor with which he intended the reception of it, that particular mentality was a reality and it appears to infiltrate Burnett's film, as even the bawdy woman's diction suggests a militaristic violence that can now be executed since the "blanks" that were once being shot are now dropping bombs. The paradox, then, is that while an intersectional and post-national lens creates a libratory space to rethink Stan's character and to see him as trying to define himself and act for himself, those theoretical frameworks cannot erase the nationalist and patriarchal structure that Burnett sought to uphold.

In this regard, *Talk to Me* does not serve Black women much better. Although the film depicts a corrective of Black Nationalist constructions of Black masculinity, what would have heightened the project to deconstruct a nationalist-informed sense of Black masculinity would have been to trouble Black Nationalist ideologies about the subordination of Black women. Vernell is relegated to the gender hierarchies of the same patriarchal institution that produces Stan's melancholia, and that Petey and Dewey partially escape through one another. Their escape is only partial because, as Anna Julia Cooper (1988) explains, over one hundred years earlier, "Only the Black Woman can say 'when and where I enter… then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (p. 31). Ironically, Lemmons's film oeuvre fails to recognize Cooper's proclamation, as *Eve's Bayou* and *The Caveman's Valentine*, just like *Talk to Me*, are preoccupied with redeeming and uplifting Black men. In the case of *Talk to Me,* her uplift provides a needed alternative representation of Black manhood—though it is still limited to imagining Black manhood as criminal and race leader.

That alternative, though, is reliant on a Strong Black Woman who always, unconditionally has her man's back. Whether it is the conjugal visits at Lorton

Correctional Complex, reuniting two overly proud friends, or giving Petey a pep talk before he calls on Dewey to hold true on his promise to help him with employment, Petey is always Vernell's top priority. Even after threatening castration for infidelity, Vernell never stops uplifting Petey. The politics of production for the film are telling. Vernell is cast as Petey's "woman." Petey has many women, but Vernell is the one to whom he always comes home, who stands by him, and who knows him better than anyone, even Dewey. When asked about Vernell's character, Lemmons explains that there was not *one* Vernell, but a compilation of many women who filtered through Petey's life. This is most likely true, but the real-life Petey did have a wife, two kids, and a home in the suburbs and his wife, Judy Greene, left him after more years of his philandering and drinking than she could handle.

   Although Joe Fries, one of the producers, and Lemmons insist that the film is fiction and that they were not attempting to accurately portray all aspects of Petey's life, the fact that Petey's and Dewey's wives are written out of the story is significant. The absence of Dewey's wife is particularly problematic, and it reflects a regressive homosociality that is a continuum of "men-promoting-the-interests-of-men" (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 3). The blurb at the end of the film notes that Dewey Hughes was the founder of the Radio One network, which is true, but what is left out is that both he and his wife, Cathy Hughes, founded the network, that he left the network very early on to return to television, and that they divorced. He has no ownership rights with the powerhouse Radio One that exists today and, from all accounts given in interviews and biographies of Cathy Hughes, Dewey had no hand in building it into what it is today.[18] Why, then, if Cathy Hughes bought WOL along with Dewey and subsequently founded Radio One, is this ignored in the script and unacknowledged in the concluding blurb of the film? Why do Judy Greene and Cathy Hughes become both fodder and foundations for the development of Petey and Dewey's careers and the sustenance for the possibility of any radically alternative development of their relationship with one another and their individual manhood? This question is particularly important when considering that after Cathy and Dewey purchased the radio station in 1979, they separated within the year and Dewey eventually returned to television while Petey worked for Cathy at WOL.[19]

   The questions I pose do not have easy answers. What is consistent in each of the films I analyze is that when moving beyond crisis rhetoric, an entire intersectional discourse around race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality must be overhauled. I praise these films for the exciting possibility they offer for rethinking how scholars, educators, and activists approach the idea of Black men in crisis. Both films have shortcomings when it comes to imagining an alternative role for

Black women, but those should not be understood as failures. The shortcomings are, in fact, valuable because they highlight the attention that needs to be paid to gender when furthering the field of Black masculinity studies. What I hope my analysis demonstrates is that there continues to be a need for Black feminist studies and Black masculinity studies to engage in a sustained and respectful dialogic communication. Now that a growing body of scholars are approaching Black masculinity studies with a critical gender consciousness and recognition of a plurality of masculinities, I hope there will be a concerted effort by scholars, activists, educators, and artists working in both fields to consider critically how the representation of Black women fits into efforts to expand the schizophrenic binaries of Black male representation.

### NOTES

1. During both slavery and freedom there have always been Black women activists like Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Claudia Jones who insisted that gender must enter into the race discourse, but it was not until the second wave of the women's movement that Black women's voices found serious spaces for reckoning and change.

2. See Kelley and Lewis (2000, p. 553).

3. Critical legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her 1989 law review article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," as a theoretical tool for revealing the ways in which race and gender function in Black women's employment experiences. The point of her analysis is that Black women face a political and legal conundrum when their claims of discrimination cannot be situated within a discrete source of discrimination, as either racial or gender discrimination. The term itself has been both widely used and criticized for its vague definition and method (see Nash, 2008).

Scholars working on Black masculinities are indebted both to Crenshaw's theory and Black feminist theory more broadly. Those who have acknowledged the influence of Black feminist theory in their own work on Black men include, but is not limited to, Mark Anthony Neal, David Ikard, Maurice O. Wallace, and Marlon Ross.

4. See Harris (1999), Massood (1999), and White (2007).

5. See Moynihan (1965), which was commissioned by the United States Department of Labor.

6. See Washington, particularly the "Atlanta Exposition Address" (1901, pp. 217–237).

7. Harris (1999) also draws this conclusion about how Massood (1999) structures her argument in his preface to the *Wide Angle* special issue on Black cinema.

8. Mutua defines the concept of "progressive black masculinities" as "innovative performances of the masculine self that eschew dominance and are engaged in the struggle to transform social structures of domination" (2006, p. xxii).

9. See Gates (1994) for another example of a Black man registering the kitchen as an intimate space.

10. I refer to Stan's wife as "Stan's Wife" because that is the only form of identification she has in the film other than that of a mother.

11. See Evry (2007) for Burnett's self-assessment.

12. The biography focuses primarily on Petey's life prior to radio and television.

13. In the film, and apparently in real-life, Dewey Hughes exuded mannerisms and ideologies that fall into essentialized notions of "whiteness;" hence, Petey's listeners' reference to Dewey as that "White boy."

14. Reid-Pharr (2007) does something similar with troubling the limited ways of imagining Black masculinity, particularly in Black male race leaders and intellectuals, when he selects a photograph of a buff, shirtless Huey P. Newton for the cover of his book, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual.* This queer image disrupts the machismo that emanates from the most popular images of Newton in his militant Black Panther gear.

15. I emphasize my point here, because my reading of this film has compelled some scholars to critique an absence of a queer reading in my analysis. The sensibility that any form of intimacy between Black men must be circumscribed by queerness perhaps speaks to Black people's discomfort with queerness, which in turn produces a (mis)reading of social intimacy between Black men as indicative of queerness or same gender loving behavior. Thus reinforcing my argument of just how empty representation has been of Black men on screen and in the popular imagination.

16. An alternative way of interpreting her response as representing Black women's deep suspicions about Black men's alleged propensity for same sex interaction, a.k.a. the "down-low."

17. Lyric from James Brown's "It's a Man's World."

18. Cathy and Dewey divorced on good terms and remain friends. She speaks highly of him and has made the point that when he left radio to focus on television, which is what he really wanted to do, he simply sold his shares in the station to her. She also points out that the owner of WOL did not like her and only sold the station to them because of a favor he owed Dewey.

19. In an interview for *Ladybrille Magazine*, Cathy Hughes is asked how she felt about not being mentioned in *Talk to Me*. Hughes explains that she was not on the East Coast during the time the film covers and had not met either Petey or Dewey yet. The film covers 1966, when Petey is released from Lorton, until Petey's death in 1984. Hughes was on the East Coast and working at the Howard University campus radio station in 1973.

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