



Living in C Minor: Reflections on the Melodies of Blackness, Queerness, and Masculinity

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Abstract

This autoethnographic performance interrogates the centrality of music to queering Black masculinity. Theorizing from my lived experience, I highlight how Black girl hand games, countertenor performances in Soul music, and male vocalist performances in Gospel music intervene and provide alternative entryways to understanding Black masculinity. Three pivotal moments from the authors' life, which span the aforementioned genres of music, are explored to elucidate the subtle and direct messages Black men and boys receive about "proper" gender performance. Through critical engagements with performance theory and Black queer theory, this performance illuminates the multiple and at times contested meanings of Black masculinity as navigated by the author within familial, educational, and religious settings. Moreover, this performance highlights the creative interventions and transgressive alternative masculinities necessary for the survival of Black queer individuals and communities as offered through music.

Keywords

Black masculinity, queer, performance, autoethnography

C major or Key of C is one of the most common key signatures in Western music, most noted for its lack of sharp or flat notes within its scale. C minor, on the other hand, is noted for its usage of pitches that utilize sharps instead. The minor chords are the black keys on the piano, the keys which often give melodies and harmonies darker, smoother, more soulful sounds. I like to think of my life as living and rifting off of these keys, the pitches that sound like the most common key signatures with just enough of a change that you hear and see the subtle difference. This autoethnographic text plays with the tones, which in my opinion are the richer tones, the Black keys, the minor tones, the keys of improvisation, the ones necessary for greater harmonies and more complex notes.

The metaphor of living a life in a minor key is particularly apt to describing my life as a Blackqueer male. My stitching together the two words, "Black" and "queer" on paper seeks to interrupt the ways queerness is separated from Blackness and Blackness from queerness, rendering specific Black populations "vulnerable to processes of death and devaluation over and against other populations (Hong & Ferguson, 2011, p. 2)." Critical autoethnographers Dominique C. Hill and Robin Boylorn have been influential in my thinking on the interdependency of Blackness and queerness. Although in relationship to a racial and gendered identity as a Blackgirl, Hill (2014), quoting Boylorn, states that the term *Blackgirl*

speaks to the twoness and oneness of my raced and gender identity. I am never only Black or only girl/woman, but always

both/and at the same time . . . I merge the words to make them touch on paper the way they touch in my everyday existence.

Similarly, my joining of the two terms, signals the twoness and oneness of my own identity as a Black and queer male. My queerness is not simply a marker of my sexuality and is inextricably and always linked to who I am in any given moment.

My form of Blackness, masculinity, and sexuality are always in sharp contrasts to the predominant and prevailing keys of the key signatures in Western life—heteronormativity, dominant forms of masculinity, whiteness, and so forth. What follows are three episodes of my life which illustrate a life in C minor, the constant negotiating and improvisation of identity, resiliency, and resistance. In particular, each episode revolves around music, the music of my childhood and those musical moments and memories that taught me how to live in my beautiful Blackqueer body. I organize each of these episodes as the site in which the scene/seen of the Blackqueer body is staged. Harvey Young (2010) posits the Black body as both the seen—the "epidermalization of blackness the inscription of meaning onto skin color" (p. 1)—and the scene—the spectacular event created when

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discursive imaginings of Blackness creates (deleterious) material realities. Extending Young (2010), I offer pivotal moments within my own life which *stage* the Blackqueer body that is being seen (the performance), marked as a thing, and staging a scene, to signify this marking (the performativity of it)—what it means to live in a body marked simultaneously by both Blackness and queerness.

The Scene/Seen 1

“If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else, can I get an Amen up in here.” *Amen!* These are the words that close out every episode of RuPaul’s Drag Race, one of the few shows I religiously watch nowadays. Me and Mama Ru, as I like to call her, go way back. Back before I knew I was a Black boy who loved other Black boys. Back before Lily and I would have to confront this truth. Back before the years of abandonment, distrust, silence, and hurt which shaded my relationship with KK.

The year is 1992. I am 7. RuPaul’s, “Super model (You Better Work)” plays on KK’s television set. I can still hear the lyrics now, “You better work, turn to the left, now turn to the right . . .” I was enthralled by this amazon of a woman, and as I bopped my head to the beat and sang the words out like an anthem this is the fondest memory I have of time spent with my father. Sometimes, May’s house would transform into our own runway, Puddin and I use to strut down the long, winding hallway to the opening theme song of “It’s Showtime at the Apollo.” As if we were in fact walking down the grand walkway of the Apollo Theatre, we wanted to be just like the Showtime dancers, all dressed up in feather boas matching headdress and sequined feather leotard. I never knew who Puddin was immolating, whether it was the guys or the girls, back then I didn’t give those things much thought. We were simply having fun. And with each high-kick, shimmy of the shoulders, and twists of “my imagination,” as May would say, me in my chubby, less graceful male body, mimicking the Apollo female dancers, was a sight to behold every Saturday night. It was clear we were different. I was different.

My difference, like my fascination with femininity and Mama Ru, go way back, so when she exploded onto my father’s television screen with long legs, blonde hair, a red dress, and the words “you betta werk,” it only made sense that this was a song I loved. A mantra to hold onto. Sitting in KK’s house, a place, I seldom visited, I was elated, entertained, and safe in this celluloid fantasy. The brief distraction of Mama Ru shielded me from the reality that this wasn’t actually his house, but the woman he was currently seeing at the time, the woman who had replaced my mother.

The video stops. The fantasy over. Reality creeps back in as Lily picks my sister and I up. We argue about RuPaul being a real woman. Red, “I’m telling you that’s not no woman.” I mean what did I know? It wouldn’t be until much later that concepts like gender, or drag queens, or

playing gender, or gay men, or faggies or sissy boys, or “twinks” like Lily would call them would make sense to me. But why did any of this matter? She was beautiful, the lyrics were catchy, and she told me to “werk.” I decided that on the matter of RuPaul being a woman or not (which clearly she was) didn’t matter. Slightly confused, wanting to trust my mother but having no way to know for sure, I decided that I was right. She just didn’t know music like I did. Did she even watch MTV like me?

Lily and I continued this, dance of her recognizing my difference while still loving me tenderly enough for me to know that boys can do girl things and still be boys. A truth, I cling on to even now. But there were some things she just would not stand for. Lily refused to teach me to plait my sister’s Imani doll’s hair. So I taught myself. Underhanded. It was ok for me to play with dolls, to wear my great grandmothers hats and wigs, to play hand games with Puddin and her friends. It was even acceptable for me to be uninterested in sports and sing soprano. Just don’t be a “twinky.”

Another truth, I’ve had to wrestle with, in coming to myself. Lily’s tone, was crisp over the crowds excitement, and the warm spring Baltimore air. There he was, sashaying down the street. I guess Lily never noticed my loose hips, or saw the way Puddin and I performed every Saturday night. Or, perhaps she had noticed, like Black mothers do, watching and waiting. Baltimore on days like this made us proud. Each year, we’d attend some parade, or festival. And, today was a special treat because Lily had time off to take us. “Look at that twinky!” Lily says. “*Who,*” I ask, “*him*” she says and points. Her admiration for his fervor and finesse but disdain for his effeminate nature signaled, that you can be you as long as that you isn’t a “twinky.” Am I?

The Scene/Seen 2

Can you hear it, the crisp falsetto voice of Glenn Leonard (Tucker, 2004) followed by Dennis Edwards with a sermonic interlude, a message just for me.

“In my mind, I want you to be free

For all of our friends, to listen to me

Now hear what I say, we wish you

A Merry Christmas to each one of you” (The Temptations, 1970)

Freedom was just around the corner as I heard a voice like mine, emanating from another Black man. M-e-e-r-r-r-y Christmas to all of you . . . oooh oooh . . . and then this high soprano voice comes over the radio singing with soul.

Lily and I are on our usual early morning mad dash from my grandmother’s apartment in the county to my elementary school in the city. We are driving my grandmother’s silver Nissan Sentra. The outside rectangular shaped car with its metallic coloring was our family vehicle to get us from point

A to point B and sometimes C. A and B always being work, school, church, and all church-related activities, with C being the occasional trip to our cousins in the “country.” We called it the country even though it was another county in Maryland, because they had so much land, so much open space, where we could run and play in the street. The street, which turned into gravel as you got closer to the dead end and where my cousins lived across the street from my Uncle Horse and his wife, their grandparents and parents.

Today we are simply traveling from point A to point B, with C being a journey to reassure my pound-cake colored self that again boys can do girl things and that there is nothing wrong with being a guy and singing soprano. Everybody wants to talk about the homophobic Black family and community, but nobody seems to talk about the family and community that is in transition to love and affirmation, or the same family and community that nurtures Blackqueer boys like myself. My mother pulled over the car on the side of the road, we were already late, as usual from leaving the county to take me to school in the city. But she knew that now was the time. I had been bullied and teased in school recently because of my difference, because I sang soprano, switched harder than most young boys, and enjoyed playing girl games. In those piercing eyes of hers, she looked me over once, and through to me. Her eyes moving left to right as they did fluttering, scanning me, connecting to my heart and soul as only the retinal scan of a Black mother can do. Lily asks turning up the radio, “Do you hear that . . . do you know who that is. It’s Eddie Kendricks, one of the Temptations and he sings soprano just like you.” My mind racing, “like me?” Sometimes you feel as if you are the only and yet here was a whole world of soul singers who had made lives off of their unique talents, and opened up the possibility for me to feel valuable. In those few words, “Do you hear that, do you know who that is,” Lily reminded me to listen to Black mo’nin¹ and find in the soul singer my own voice, my own freedom, my own inherent worth in my difference. We turn the radio back down, and the song ends with, a deep voice saying “Merry Christmas from the Temptations.” I am still somewhere at the beginning, because in my mind I want still want to be free, “Do you hear that . . . do you know who that is?”

The Scene/Seen 3

Down by the riverside hanky panky do that do that hanky panky fee fi fo fum listen to the girls drum see that house on top of the hill that’s where me and my girlfriend live smell that chicken smell that rice come on girl let’s shoot some dice

Down by the riverside hanky panky do that do that hanky panky fee fi fo fum listen to the boys drum see that house on top of the hill that’s where me and my boyfriend live smell that chicken smelt that rice come on girl let’s shoot some dice

Sometimes me and Puddin would play this game with her and her friends. I would always get the words confused. I was the only boy often, whose house will I live in and raise a family? Who’s cooking chicken and rice, I didn’t know then I just might have a boyfriend but playing with the words seemed alright to do. At least in the Blackgirl universe that I was able to visit. The improvisation of it all seemed fine, a different form of masculinity, which is ok until one grows up. Adulthood was followed by rough interruptions.

“I was a wretched undone living in a world of sin, had no hope no peace within somebody told me what Jesus did . . . Now I’m justified I’m sanctified.” There was a key change at “Now I’m justified,” and I was truly a wretched undone. Leading the song and singing soprano I couldn’t perform this Sunday. Why? My voice had been raspy all week but I just knew it would be together for my solo. I continued, my fellow sopranos giving me the side eye, wondering why I wasn’t pulling my weight. “I don’t know either.” Sister Bobby takes over for me, shamed face I stay with the rest of the sopranos but I sing in a whispery tone what I can, “come to Jesus right now, come to Jesus right now.” I had lost my ability to sing 1st Soprano and it marked a change, the look of the female sopranos looking at me not pulling my weight, my inability to properly sing the solo, not knowing what I had lost but wanting not to lose it, not to be like the other boys, or what I thought masculinity meant was tough for me. But I learned as I had to make best of the changes, of living my life in a minor key.

However, I wasn’t quite prepared for the revelation that the universe I visited with my sister, the world of Black women and girls which surrounded me, and the affirmation I found in the masculinity of difference in my Black Baptist upbringing, and in the soulful sound of R & B singers no longer offered the same safety.

Self-Benediction

I think I’ve heard my last and I mean last

Anti-homosexuality sermon, speech, soap-box oration from in the sanctuary of the Lord . . .

From in the sanctuary of the Lord!!!

No longer can I subject myself willingly or other wise . . . to be torn down

I have tried . . . and God knows I have tried to cast out this “demon” called my life . . .

These mannerism you denounce but are battle scars of a boyhood of difference . . .

You ask me to lie . . . to ignore the love fostered by women in my life . . .

These hips move as they do cause my momma raised me . . .

This voice echoes a tenderness of a grandmother . . .

These hands swapped licks with a sis . . . wrist limp to bend for

Slide baby 1-2
 Rockin Robin Tweet tweedle dee . . . and
 Miss Mary Mack all dressed in black-black-black,
 I have cried one too many nights prayed one too many prayers
 . . . lied one too many times to you and myself
 Hated who I was for far too long to allow you to poison me any
 longer . . .
 I think this is where I must depart with you my beloved brethren
 in the Lord . . .
 You ask for far too much of me . . .
 My life is no longer up for sale . . .
 I will not trade you any longer
 Rhetoric for righteousness
 Fellowship for silence
 Love and affirmation for denial and dishonesty
 I cannot allow you to war against my body and spirit any
 longer . . .
 I take back sanctuary, this sanctuary . . .
 Refuge and safety shall I find among the robbers and thieves
 the gangsters and prostitutes . . . and among the others you
 rejected
 The drug dealers shall distribute joy to this soul . . .
 The prostitutes breast milk will feed this weary soul
 The thugs and gangsters shall now administer my peace
 Our Lord still Jesus, our love still for Christ, but a love now
 unfettered beyond these four walls you paint and remodel,
 renovate and decorate to hide who we truly are . . .
 Human
 Among the people shall my tabernacle lie . . .
 With the sheep and not the wolves will I fellowship
 I Think I have heard my last anti-gay sermon
 You . . . you ask of far too much of me . . .
 My dignity, my life . . . my love . . . for humanity and Christ is
 NOT and I repeat NOT for sale . . .
 And so may the Lord watch between me and thee while we're
 absent one from another.
 Cause I have tried God knows I have but I've come to love
 myself far too much to tolerate this any longer . . .
 Amen . . .

April 19, 2009. I left The Church of the Charismatic² before
 the benediction. Sitting in my car with tears streaming down
 my face, I penned "Self-Benediction." The sermon that
 Sunday was violent, yet familiar. Familiar in the sense that

I grew up in church, I knew the power and possibility of the
 pulpit to soothe, to incite, to offer hope, and to enculturate.
 We were receiving an education, one that placed my
 Blackqueer body on the line. The violence came as the pas-
 tor proceeded to preach that

the demon of homosexuality . . . it's comin even earlier . . . kids
 at 5 and 6 years old showin mannerisms . . . the demons our
 kids r fighting today are not the same ones of our generation
 they are more concentrated . . . they r the John 10:10 demons
 who come to steal, kill and destroy our children's futures . . .
 (Personal communication, April 19, 2009)

I had stopped regularly attending church, a break from
 my non-traditional charismatic Baptist upbringing where
 I was routinely in church every week, several times a
 week. Being away from home, allowed me to break away
 from this routine, as well as the expectations, and respon-
 sibilities I had back home as a youth minister. Excited to
 finally go to a service after my prolonged absence, I could
 not believe what I was hearing. My unbelief was informed
 by the fact that as a country we were in the midst of a
 string of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)
 youth suicides that year. Contrary to the preacher's
 admonishment, it was not homosexuality, which took
 Carl Joseph Walker Hoover or Jaheem Herrera's life, but
 rather homophobia (Callier 2016; James, 2009; Pritchard
 2013; Simon, 2009).

My body radiated red hot, pulsating in silence with all of
 the faces and stories I carried of those snuffed out because
 they lived in their truth. I recalled my own silent pain, the
 years I spent as a youth minister outwardly loving a woman,
 while secretly sleeping with men (Callier, 2012). In that
 moment, I also remembered growing up, fervently, praying
 to be delivered from my attraction to and sexual desire for
 men. Now, in an awakening of coming to accept my own
 truth and honor it, I was unwilling to believe the logic that
 "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner." I was also unwill-
 ing to sit, and listen to a homophobic sermon, within the
 context of a community of care. I looked around to see if
 anybody else was disturbed, amid the high praises that went
 up to affirm the pastor's point. A familiar face, met mine, I
 had seen him around at the local gay club from time to time.
 Our gazes met, no smile, no nod, but a meeting nonetheless.
 I was looking for something in our meeting that I never
 received—an acknowledgment that we didn't deserve this,
 shouldn't subject ourselves to it and that we were in fact
 worthy of God's love. He stayed. I left.

In my Baptist upbringing, you do not leave before the
 benediction. To do so is sacrilegious, because you never
 leave before the final blessing—the benediction. You can
 come late; just don't leave before you receive your final
 blessing. But what happens, when there is no blessing to be
 received because you and those like you are considered a
 problem to be cast out? You bless yourself.

Conclusion

2009 was a year punctuated by breaks and departures. The year I left organized religion was the same year that Carl Joseph Walker Hoover and Jaheem Herrera committed suicide. On April 6, Hoover's mother discovered him, with an extension chord wrapped around his neck, hanging from the third floor rafter of their home in Springfield, Massachusetts (James, 2009). Herrera, a resident of Atlanta, Georgia, took his life 10 days after Hoover (Simon, 2009). He was discovered by his mother and younger sister, hanging by his belt in his bedroom closet (Simon, 2009). Hoover and Herrera were both only 11, when they decided to silence the daily taunts they experienced, of being called, "girlie," "gay," or "fag" (James, 2009; Simon, 2009).

For a brief moment, there were national conversations about bullying experienced by LGBT students, the needs to address anti-gay harassment in schools, as well as suicide rates among LGBT youth (James, 2009). However, as youth of color, issues of Hoover and Herrera's race/ethnic backgrounds as well as class and their non-normative performances of masculinity were erased and placed secondary to anti-gay bullying efforts. What might it mean to have intersectional discussions regarding anti-gay bullying where issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender non-conformity in the case of Herrera and Hoover are given precedence?

I don't know why or how I made it and Carl didn't. We were both Black boys who were teased for being perceived as gay. And while there are gross differences, I recall what it was like growing up queer. For each traumatic moment I can recall, what softened the blow and helped me to survive was the presence of other models of masculinity—in the soul singer, the church "sissy," and twinkies—as well as a loving community of Black women and girls—from my mother, grandmother, my sister, and SOLHOT.³

It is now years later after that fateful car ride. I drive Lily from time to time, Puddin and I no longer play hand games and my voice is as deep as it's going to be—1st tenor instead of 1st soprano. However, I am still there in our Sentra, still listening to the sound of freedom. Admittedly it is never truly Christmas unless I hear the Temptations, "Silent Night." Do you hear that, do you know who that is?" Be free.

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1. See F. Moten (2003).
2. This is a fictitious name I created to protect the name of the actual church located in a small Midwestern city.

3. Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT)—a Black girl celebration collective and practice which engages in art-making practices as political, sacred, educational, and necessary liberatory practices. See Ruth Nicole Brown (2009, 2013).

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