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Reconstructing Manhood; or, The Drag of Black Masculinity

Rinaldo Walcott

What might human dignity and freedom look like for black people, especially poor black people in the post-civil rights/post-independence neoliberal moment of our times? How might we think about the states of freedom and unfreedom that currently organize all of human life under the contemporary regime of the global terms of neoliberal economy and by extension what I would call its culturally rhetorical disciplinary apparatus? Recently, Shelby Steele declared Clarence Thomas “the freest black man in America.” Steele tells readers of Canada’s *Globe and Mail* newspaper that Thomas “wears no masks at all. He’s not a bargainer or a challenger. He’s his own man. He has deep and profound convictions. You can take them or leave them, but he is unwavering. He is a rather heroic figure.”¹ I am always interested in the masks black men wear or don’t wear. And I am more interested in when we (black men) claim not to be wearing one and what might be at stake in such a claim. Let me suggest at the outset that it might be argued that the history of black masculinity is one in which masks play a fundamental and crucial role in manhood. The role of the mask might be so primary to black manhood that it obscures and covers over how black men have been able to articulate their selfhood both consciously and unconsciously to themselves and to others. The masks black men wear are many and varied and might be understood as congruent with the difficult history of the agency or lack thereof of black masculine self-fashioning that is autonomous and wholly self-interested. As we all know, history is always in question when black masculinity is in discussion.

1 Shelby Steele, “Why ‘Vanilla-Nice’ Obama Will Lose to Clinton,” *Globe and Mail*, 20 October 2007.

In recent months Orlando Patterson, Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint, Shelby Steele, and Clarence Thomas have all had something to say about black masculinity in the public sphere.² In each case a heterosexual black masculinity is assumed and always found wanting, in that it does not live up to the script of what it should be. These recent, but not new, critiques of black public masculinity assume not only heterosexuality; all the critiques assume a coherent black masculinity as well. And in the above cases the question of history is one that is interpreted as a set of social, economic, and political obstacles of the past that have been and or has to be overcome—the move from “victim to victor” (in the words of Cosby and Poussaint) is central to the narrative of coherency in the assumption that black manhood is an impoverished masculinity in need of repair and or rescue, and the unspoken is that a good douse of patriarchy would do it well. The phrase “victim to victor” seeks to hold up a narrative that places African American personhood in an epic battle of degradation, or in other words, slavery, to one of overcoming slavery and segregation to emerge as victors in the moral, economic, and cultural wars of the civil rights period. The phrase’s power lies in its ability to capture a large swath of history and summarize it as a dictum and a call to action. In this case the phrase works to call to mind a post-civil rights period in which the only persons that can be responsible for African American marginalization are African Americans themselves. It is in some respects a chastising phrase. In this contemporary moment when black masculinity is being given such prominence in the mainstream media, it remains crucial then to think about its representation and the potential consequences for a more radical politics, especially new sorts of solidarities to emerge along with it.³

The representation of black masculinity as in need of repair and rescue is not merely internal to the US conversation, it leaks across borders. In the context of neoliberalism’s production of “wasted populations” in a “lawlikely” fashion, as Sylvia Wynter has termed it, black masculinity has globally come under new kinds of cultural policing.⁴ For example, Boston minister Eugene Rivers has met in Toronto with Canadian municipal managers, including the mayor of the city, concerning issues of “black crime,” fatherhood, and black single mothers. Rivers has become the spiritual inspiration for a Toronto faith-based coalition, composed entirely of men who are active around issues related to “gang” and street crime—all marked

2 Orlando Patterson, “Jena, O. J. and the Jailing of Black America,” *New York Times*, 30 September 2007; Bill Cosby and Alvin F. Poussaint, *Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), in an interview with Time Russert, *Meet the Press*, MSNBC, 14 October 2007; Shelby Steele, “The Age of White Guilt,” *Globe and Mail*, 25 October 2007; Clarence Thomas, “Clarence Thomas: The Justice Nobody Knows,” interview with Steve Kroft, *60 Minutes*, CBS, 30 September 2007. Each of these commentators in very different ways reduced complex economic and historical mechanisms of the working oppression to “cultural practices.” In their view the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement solved the problem of racial oppression, but African Americans have continued to be outsiders to the “American dream” because of pathological cultural practices like crime, single-parenthood (mothers), music, and so on. Their analyses fail to account for or to offer nuanced interpretations of the links between economic and social and cultural health and decay. Interestingly enough, these authors all converge on the question of the decay of “African American” culture even if their overall political affiliations and philosophical understandings of race and racism differ or have differed over their careers.

3 In this case I am thinking of Barack Obama’s candidacy for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. A certain kind of hopefulness presents itself for the proliferation of a range of black masculinities to come into focus and public knowledge and thus public policy, discourse, and space.

4 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337, 317.

as black male issues. On the other hand the white elites of the same city have invited Shelby Steele to speak to them in their prestigious Grand Speakers Series, which has hosted such international luminaries as Gore Vidal, Christopher Hitchens, Camille Paglia, Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In many of these moments I witness a certain kind of twinning of black North American imperiled masculinity alongside the Islamo-hatred of Muslim masculinity in a post-9/11 world. I hope to briefly hint at such a twinning in my conclusion.

The attempt to narrate and represent a coherent black masculinity in its singularity is in part what I want to respond to in this essay. But even more, I want to suggest that thinking about a range and variety of black manhoods and masculinities might provide analysts with a set of interesting refigurings of black manhood outside of its current and historical spectacularizations that offer a lens for seeing black manhood differently, and thus thinking about black manhood differently. I am interested in highlighting modes of self-fashioning that allow for a reconstruction of black manhood from the place of incoherence and femininity which might be best exemplified, or at the least typified, in recent representations of and by black trans-cultures, but not exclusive to them.

In Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History*, his discussion of the archive is particularly important to me. De Certeau both questions the turn to the archive as a performative law of the science of a regulatory history and at the same time offers the archive as "the point of departure and the condition for a new history."⁵ De Certeau is, after all, motivated by a critique of professional history writing and its attempts to regulate its domain through scientizing it. In such a case the archive becomes an important terrain of struggles over knowledge making. Similarly, in a critique of the desires to take history writing to the status of a science, Hayden White argues that the knowledge historians seek to produce must reach for a certain kind of coherency.⁶ White ultimately suggests that when such coherency is craftily accomplished and executed it achieves the qualities of art, and thus history writing achieves a quality that might make it a lasting endeavor. Reading de Certeau and White together allows me to think about the ways in which contemporary conversations concerning black manhood, its representations, and its remaking draw on scientized histories, specific archives, and forms of knowledge making that produce narratives of a singular and coherent black masculinity. This singular black masculinity is then set up for repair within an ideological and political frame of neoliberal capitalism that assumes a narrative of progressivism from a dreadful past to a victor present that can be individually driven. I hope to interrupt some of the lie of such a contemporary neoliberal project.

The Pursuit of Happyness is a film based on the biography of the multimillionaire Christopher Gardner.⁷ The film is an excellent example of "victim to victor." Will Smith's character loses both his money (wealth) and his wife due to bad investments. However, he struggles to

5 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 75.

6 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

7 *The Pursuit of Happyness*, dir. Gabriele Muccino, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2006.

maintain a “family life” by becoming solely responsible for his son. Such an action is important because lack of responsibility for children has been the single criticism most launched at black masculinity at least since the late 1960s and culminating in the invention of the “welfare queen” in the 1980s, the decade in which the film begins. Along the way Gardner must deal with homelessness and jail time as he becomes a victim of circumstances of his own making. The machinations of capitalism and in particular the workings of the investment market and its promises are never questioned or even hinted at as playing a part in the problems that will unfold for Gardner, when in fact in the end these are his savior. However, Gardner eventually triumphs over his victimhood when he works hard, studies hard, and secures an internship on Wall Street that eventually leads to him developing his own company and becoming a multi-millionaire. The narrative of the film sleekly fits contemporary arguments that suggest African American manhood is only marginalized because individual men refuse to pay the kinds of personal sacrifice that Gardner paid, along with the same kind of moral turpitude he exhibits to make for themselves and their families a livable life. In my view the film’s narrative neatly packages the cultural elements of the neoliberal project.

The neoliberal project, I am suggesting, is not merely one of economics and institutions; it is indeed a cultural project as well. Its cultural arm is concerned with individual conduct that spills over from the economic realm and is coterminous with the new economics of managerialism, audits and performance indicators, competitiveness, and, most important, the market. As David Harvey has pointed out, neoliberalism gained some legitimacy when Friedrich von Hayek and Milton received the Nobel Prize for Economics, a prize created by bankers.⁸ Because of this legitimacy that the aura of a Nobel gave the theory, it immediately began to impact policy areas. But one policy area that is often not accounted for is the area of culture. Since culture is often conceived of as everything and nothing simultaneously, too many analysts leave out thinking about it in their assessments of our neoliberal moment. It is my claim that all of the practices mentioned above that characterize neoliberal economics also apply to its cultural arm. Personal managerialism, competitiveness, and audit and performance indicators, all measured by accumulations of wealth and material consumption, as well as nuclear heteropatriarchal families that operate like states unto themselves, are a part of the cultural arm of neoliberal economics. The family becomes the organism and mechanism for the operation of the macro-politics and -policies of neoliberal philosophies and practices.

Aihwa Ong, drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality, begins to bridge the gap between the economic sphere of neoliberalism and its cultural arm. In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, she engages a wide terrain of environmental, technological, and global migrations, as well as higher learning, citizenship, and even maid services, to demonstrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies and their cultural impact. Ong is intent to demonstrate how “neoliberal rationality informs action by many regimes and furnishes the concepts that inform

8 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.

the government of free individuals who are then induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness.”⁹ It is particularly the notion of management that I find compelling concerning the ways in which neoliberalism’s ideas take their cultural turn. Therefore, Stuart Hall, in an interview concerning neoliberalism and the university, most forcefully articulates neoliberalism’s managerial regime. Hall states, “Managerialism is not only the hallmark of neoliberalism but actually what I would call the motor: if neoliberalism is a set of ideas, how neoliberalism then gets into the system is through managerialism.”¹⁰

It is in part my contention that conversations concerning black manhood are premised on neoliberalism’s new managerial regime in which black masculinities are understood to be underperforming, in need of programs of efficiency and better management. Such is particularly so for poor, redundant, and “wasted” masculinities that appear to have nothing to contribute to the global engines of capitalism. In this instance managerialism as both discourse and practice seeks to control and conduct how these wasted persons, often reduced only to a body, might be understood in light of the numerous contradictions that plague the wealthy West. In what follows, I suggest that a number of artists have offered us some insights into how to think about our times.

In 2006 two kinds of black histories began to emerge in Toronto. As mentioned earlier, Boston’s Eugene Rivers arrived to offer counsel on street crime, gun violence, and negligent black fathers and mothers, and presented a faith-based program of racial straight talk and then racial uplift. At the same time, the artist-run center and gallery A-Space opened an exhibition titled “I Represent,” in which six black artists engaged the question of identity politics as the impetus for their contributions to the show.¹¹ Each of the artists in different ways drew on an archive of various invented and coherent narratives of a singular black history to offer counter-responses to both a white art world and that art world’s critique of black identity politics, and at the same time, the artists sought to complicate, extend, and articulate heterogeneous expressions of blackness as a political response and engagement with singular narratives. These artists’ engagements, as far as I know, did not have the opportunity to be entangled with Reverend Rivers’s articulation of narratives of a coherent black history of victimhood that had been overcome by civil rights struggles and that were now being destroyed by numerous intra-black social and cultural pathologies.

I was intrigued by the ways in which both the black Canadian faith communities and the white political establishment greeted Reverend Rivers’s calls for black uplift and especially his criticisms of contemporary forms of black womanhood and manhood. Rivers’s message was well received, given its embeddedness in neoliberalism’s individual managerial language of personal responsibility with little recognition of a collective responsibility and a common

9 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

10 Stuart Hall, “Universities, Intellectuals, and Multitudes: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” in Mark Coté, Richard J. F. Day, and Greg de Peuter, eds., *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments against Neoliberal Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 111.

11 Rinaldo Walcott, “Representin’: Black Artists Tell the Truth in ‘I Represent,’” *Fuse Magazine* 29, no. 2 (April 2006): 33–35.

social good. Furthermore, I would suggest that his criticism rendered both black men and black women queer, queer in the sense of an abnormal heterosexuality, since nonheterosexual identities were not even on the table in the discussions concerning Rivers's visit. In that moment I became interested in what other kinds of narratives existed for holding open the possibility of a black queer heterosexuality alongside questions of nonheterosexual identities and practices as well. Rivers's many criticisms of black men and women provided me the opportunity to think about this situation more clearly as both a question of history and a question of our contemporary moment. Both de Certeau and White point to history writing as always about our present moment and context, and in this way Rivers's intervention into the Canadian scene allowed for a return to the archive of an assumed singular black diasporic history to think about representation, resistance, and refiguring of black sexualities and genders.

Thus when I first saw Syrus Ware's *Self-Portrait #5, with Cotton Balls* in the exhibit "I Represent," I was struck by the way in which he had manipulatively dragged the present into historical time (fig. 1).

The force of the painting's contemporary statement reaches into what often passes as a coherent history and thus places the portrait's narrative in a time-space context of debates concerning history, queerness, femininity, masculinity, and trans-politics. But most important, the painting has provided me a canvas from which to think about contemporary forms of black masculinity—in both their singularity and their varieties. The ways in which Ware drags and transforms black masculinity and femininity in this work forces a conversation about identity that ask the questions, What makes a black man? What is black masculinity? How might we imagine black masculinity? To read this image is to engage the history of plantation slavery; its production of modes of black selfhood, especially womanhood and manhood; and the contemporary politics of nonheteronormative and nongender normative identities, desires, and practices. In essence, the complicated politics of identity and representation announces itself. In this instance I am interested in the complicated narrative of masculinity this portrait holds for discussions, which assume a coherent masculine subject of black selfhood.

The painting is an actual self-portrait of the artist who identifies as a transman. Ware, who was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and now lives in Toronto, has an investment in art raising difficult political questions that might otherwise not be articulated in the realm of some black discourses concerning identity and history. Since the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which I argue continue in a revised fashion today across the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences, the question of identity and representation has appeared as if suspended while carrying on in a kind of low-intensity warfare. I became interested in Ware's painting because it offered me many access points from which to think about my own masculinity in ways that I do not often encounter. Alongside Reginald Shepard's poetry, few black artists confront the queer and erotic (in Shepard's case) traces of black masculinity's history in a fashion that makes that history both complicated and nuanced, especially in relation



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Fig. 1. Syrus Ware, *Self-Portrait #5, with Cotton Balls*, 2006.
Mixed media painting, 72 x 118 inches.

to the degradations and subjections of plantation slavery. Additionally, few black artists offer representations of black masculinity that require viewers to step back into history as a means not for explanation but for a kind of truth to black masculinity's queer foundations. Because these works use the traces of the past to say something about the present, these works encourage dialogue about the ways in which black masculinities are queer beyond the practice of sexual desire. Black masculinities might be queer in the very instance that we must homogenize them and speak of them as such and then what artists like Ware and Shepard do is to call critical and creative attention to what such homogenization does and what it cannot do as the basis for new forms of knowledge making. In my view Ware's painting offers such an opportunity. But it also offers the opportunity to engage incoherence as an analytic for thinking about human possibility. Before I say more about incoherence and develop it further, let me suggest something about representation and its politics, en route to commenting about art, artists, and intellectuals.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby writes:

I use the word *representation* in two distinct ways: as it is formally understood in relation to art and creative practices, and as it applies to intellectuals who understand themselves to be responsible for the representation of "the race," defining and constructing in their art its

representative members and situating themselves as representative members of an oppressed social group.¹²

In Carby's definition the politics of representation is an important factor in delineating the work that representation does. The image of Ware works to unleash a different kind of representation in its challenge to normative black histories, which find queer selfhood to be a kind of difficult knowledge that must be rendered outside of representation. In this instance the question of queerness is hailed as always already inside the history of plantation slavery. Ware's art attempts to grapple with the ways in which too many conversations, dialogues, and other forms of representations fail to acknowledge such possibilities and thus require viewers to broach the question of what might be at stake in not doing so. By forcing such a conversation, Ware's art aims to complicate and multiply forms of historical representation. As the late art historian Craig Owens would put it, the kind of representation that we're interested in here is more concerned with what is concealed than what is revealed.¹³ It is indeed the question of concealment that I think has been sorely missing from conversations concerning black masculinity. Carby's text explicates how concealment or absence works in her reading of Francis Helen Watkins Harper as producing fiction that worked as a "political weapon" to forge a different and more nuanced intellectual and moral contestation of commercial interests and racism.¹⁴ In that instance Carby reads for how the mulatto figure allows for many absences to take up political space in the mulatto figure's ability to move across at least two worlds, illuminating both worlds differently and similarly as well—in effect binding them together.

Likewise, Manthia Diawara has read Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* in the context of absence or concealment as a means to unveil the ways in which the film works to articulate a new cinematic language of a black avant-garde, as well as a black perspective on modernity and postmodernity, through a black imaginary that concerns itself with freedom and liberty.¹⁵ In Diawara's view, it is such concerns that make the film transgressive on a number of fronts. As much as *Looking for Langston* might be read through "The Absent One," as Diawara names it, it is also a film about what appears on screen or is released from concealment and thus a certain kind of twinning is evident. This twinning works in the ruins and mourning of representation's power to conceal and reveal simultaneously, and then to make things even more queer; since twinning involves only two, it works to propose new modes of representation, a third, if you will. It ultimately proposes new representatives of "race" and "the race." Absence and unveiling concealment have become significant tropes of diasporic transgressive representational practices across a range of genres. The "new" representations and representatives are more accurately in keeping with the complicated and nuanced histories that queer artists

12 Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 164; emphasis in original.

13 Craig Owen, "Representation, Appropriation and Power," in Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, eds., *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 88–113.

14 Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 94.

15 Manthia Diawara, "The Absent One: The Avant-Garde and the Black Imaginary in *Looking for Langston*," in Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, eds., *Representing Black Men* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 205–24.

in the contemporary moment use to marshal history and its incompleteness as a mode to return us “back to the future.”

The philosopher of New World conditions Sylvia Wynter offers in the essay “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice” a reading of the now classic Jamaican film *The Harder They Come*.¹⁶ In Wynter’s reading of the film she proposes what she calls a “deciphering practice,” by which she means to signal some rather important ways of reading and making sense of texts (broadly defined) so that we can move between and beyond the specifics of what she calls “ethno-criticism” and into a reconstituted universalism proffered from the vantage point of the subaltern or the dispossessed. Thus, for her, “a deciphering turn seeks to decipher *what* the process of rhetorical mystification *does*. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to do, and it also seeks to evaluate the ‘illocutionary force’ and procedures with which they do what they do.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Wynter posits that the question of taste is important to a deciphering practice because it challenges the Western middle-class cultural imaginary in an attempt to offer a counter-politics that seeks to produce a “global popular Imaginary whose referent telos is that of the well-being of the individual human subject and, therefore, of the species.”¹⁸ Thus a deciphering practice is about attempting to engage in a political process that concerns itself with changing our present governing orders of rule for both individuals and the collective body politic. Sylvia Wynter, in attempting to think the political inside the aesthetic, is not at all trying to reduce art to a crass notion of politics. Rather, Wynter attempts to argue and demonstrate that art always speaks for some kind of politics. I have turned to Wynter in the context of Carby and Diawara to animate further the reading of a film that I think encapsulates the kinds of concerns I have been attempting to articulate up until this point in terms of the reordering that neoliberalism’s cultural reach has produced for agency and subjectivity.

In the film *The Aggressives* these issues come to the fore in important ways.¹⁹ *The Aggressives* is a *transgressive* film about masculinity and its twinning with femininity, making each queer and equally troubled by race, in this case blackness and class in the United States. This film follows six persons in New York City: five of them identify as African American and the sixth as Asian American, with remarkable complications for both categories. To echo Wynter, the genres of the human are identified, complicated, and exceeded in this film in ways that sometimes undermine the filmmaker’s desire to pin down the categories through his repeated attempts to define the personalities of the film. It is difficult to offer any substantive details of the six figures in the film, given that each one brings a uniqueness to the film, making it an important text to think about with and alongside other ideas of masculinity. I’ll focus on

16 Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice,” in Mbye Cham, ed., *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237–79.

17 Ibid., 267; emphasis in original.

18 Ibid., 269.

19 *The Aggressives*, dir. Daniel Peddle, Imagine Entertainment, 2005.

Marquise, the only person in the film to identify as transgendered, but as a transgendered lesbian who loves lesbian women, a complex category that complicates both “lesbian” and “trans” for analysts of these politics and identities. I am also interested in Marquise as a figure because his positions in the film speak back to the “race men” and their narratives of “victim to victor” and thus reveal a set of fallacies about black personhood. In short, the film can be read as one way to point to the incoherencies of our contemporary moment, especially masculine ones. Significantly, these incoherencies do not have to be debilitating, but the incoherencies can point to the crises of neoliberal arrangements and their empty rhetoric of progress, efficiency, competitiveness, and freedom.

Marquise is an interesting figure because it is clear that his family relations are somewhat intact. Marquise is involved with his mother; he is also involved with his little brother and appears to be in a healthy relationship with a woman. Significantly, Marquise also desires social mobility in the United States and sets out to try and achieve this by joining the army. At the same time Marquise is not naive about the consequences of joining the army. He wants to provide for himself, his family, and his girlfriend. In this fashion Marquise articulates a rhetoric of manhood, at times a rhetoric of manhood that mirrors that of the “victim to victor” articulators. At the same time, Marquise is ambivalent about masculinity, variously reaffirming being a “woman” and stating that “you don’t have to be a man to raise a good man,” in reference to his bother. The latter statement is one that I heard repeatedly in Barbados and Toronto from my mother and nine sisters. Yet by the end of *The Aggressives*, viewers learn that Marquise has gone AWOL from the army just prior to the US invasion of Iraq. Marquise occupies numerous sites of incoherency.

Marquise joins the army fully aware of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule and thus joins as a transgendered lesbian who comes across as a man. It is hoped that the three years of enlistment might pass without his coming into harm’s way. Marquise is aware of the larger geopolitics in which he is positioned in the US army; he suggests that he is a pawn in a larger game and is just trying to get “his” by enlisting. He thus suggests that other less dangerous sources or other avenues of social mobility are closed to him. The army remained his only insurance at that time, faulty as such insurance obviously is for life and limb. Thus when Marquise goes AWOL at the eventful moment of the US invasion of Iraq, he makes a strong political statement about the limits that he will place on his black body. I want to suggest that Marquise’s actions allow us to see why and how poor black men have historically and self-interestedly consistently dropped out of various social institutions. They do not act out of some kind of irrational, inefficient pathology, as the “race men” accuse them, but out of a sense that these institutions, in which they have no control over their arrangements, do not work in their self-interests. Marquise’s actions clearly articulate such a stance. His actions suggest his contemporary unfreedom and his incoherence as a free-thinking subject as he attempts to wrestle some kind of space for the expression of a possible practice of freedom in a world weighted against him.

In commenting on the body of scholarly literature that frames masculinity studies in its most progressive articulations, Deborah McDowell writes that “masculinity is incoherent, unstable, and in a state of utter convulsion,” as she makes sense of bio-male-to-male discourses in “Pecs and Reps” in the anthology *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*.²⁰ The substantive and still growing body of literature in masculinity studies, especially studies of racialized men, is a field dominated by queer men. At the same time, these studies have largely been premised on an assumed biological maleness. It would be unfair to suggest that this bio-maleness is necessarily an exclusion, since in the wake of those earlier studies trans-politics did not present the kinds of questions necessary now. And those studies are characterized by analytics that take seriously the fluidity and plurality of masculinity and feminism’s insights on manhood and its practice. However, McDowell’s comments resonate with theoretical positions in contemporary trans-studies, which posit masculinity as incoherent also.

In contemporary trans-studies conceptions of masculinity are varied. In a sense masculinity is theorized for its incoherence as a performance conditioned by myriad other performances, encounters, and interpellations. Central to the incoherency of masculinity in trans-politics are the ways in which language both fails and reaches its limits. *The Aggressives* dramatizes the limits and failures of language most certainly in the myriad of ways in which the subjects in the film are described in promotional materials and the ways in which they describe themselves. For example, in the course of a few minutes in the film, Marquise goes from being “transgendered,” to being “a transgendered lesbian,” to being “a woman who likes lesbian women.” Reading Bobby Noble and Judith Halberstam together as cogent commentators on trans-politics, one is pointed to the body as source of recognition and misrecognition in its masculine performances.²¹ For example, Halberstam, writing about Brandon Teena, claims, “This case itself hinges on the production of a ‘counterfeit’ masculinity that even though it depends on deceit and illegality, turns out to be more compelling, seductive, and convincing than the so-called real masculinities with which it competes.”²² In a similar vein, I want to suggest that the subjects in *The Aggressives* highlight the trials of a poor black masculinity in a fashion that compels us to act in regard to the lives that neoliberal capital and its rhetorics of cultural conservatism make present in terms of disciplining black lives.

What is most striking in the talk of our contemporary “race men” is that they seem to lack or they have deliberately ignored (and I believe it is the latter) the ways in which contemporary neoliberalism’s managerial and surveillance practices have structured new regimes

20 Deborah McDowell, “Pecs and Reps,” in Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, eds., *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 369. For representative texts, see Gamal Abdel-Shehid, *Who da Man?: Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures* (Toronto: CSPI, 2005); David Marriot, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); M. Blount and G. Cunningham, eds., *Representing Black Men* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, “Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier,” in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988).

21 Bobby Noble, *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2006); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

22 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 45.



Fig. 2. Abdi Osman, "Self-Portrait I," 2007. Digital photograph.

of unfreedom for black people. The ways in which these unfreedoms work for black men in general and black nonheterosexual men in particular require a kind of analysis that calls for more than signifying gestures of the *Gatesian* type. By this I mean that the persons in *The Aggressives* are not merely some trope of orality or historical excess but people grappling with how history and the present are intertwined to produce this moment in which they must immediately live, both consciously and unconsciously. This moment is a damning one for poor black people, and it is also a moment that is characterized by the numerous contradictions of intensified global capital and its impacts. Marquise's actions highlight some of these. Thus as scholars of culture and its numerous economies we need to think through these moments carefully.

In a harsh critique of what he calls the "signifiers," Phillip Richards argues that elite black cultural critics whose "black hustling style" has produced an entrepreneurial place and space for themselves, must be and should be implicated in the kinds of conditions that the "race men" have been targeting.²³ Richards argues that those elites have been inept cultural leaders

23 Phillip Richards, *Black Heart: The Moral Life of African American Letters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 22.



Fig. 3. Abdi Osman, "Self-Portrait II," 2007. Digital photograph.

whose analyses can offer no meaningful explanations of the world we have inherited and presently reside in (notably exempted from Richards's critique is Hazel Carby, whom he describes as "a politically sophisticated reader" in reference to *Reconstructing Womanhood*). Richards is adamant on providing a reading of cultural criticism that conforms to Wynter's insights that both art and criticism is intended to do something. Such positions have been important to me as I struggle to articulate analyses of texts, analyses that suggest how those texts might matter in their "worldliness," to cite Edward Said.²⁴ The worldliness of texts remains important as questions of queerness collide in President Bush's imperial war. With bombs sent to greet faggot Iraqis and Abu Ghraib's "homosexual torture," alongside Iranian president Ahmadinejad's recent condemnation at Columbia University and his silly denial of homosexuality in Iran, the war is now not only freeing Afghan and Iraqi women—a laughable feminist war—but also Muslim queers. Cultural work on representation and politics must unpack the seductions of such claims and pinpoint how those claims work to make us complicit with global forms of terror that police the globe's 80 percent poor in old and new and novel ways. Part of what I

24 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

am suggesting is that how we push back against the old and new colonialisms of our times is beginning to take shape in a number of different ways in artistic expression.

Abdi Osman, a Somali photographer and gay man, has attempted to think through these positions in the post-9/11 world. His self-portraits ask some other questions about black masculinities in which the Muslim is singularly articulated as a brown body obscuring and making invisible the black/African Muslim body and its complicated histories of colonial entanglements across the Arab world and the West (see figs. 2 and 3). Osman, who is aware of a longer African Muslim presence in the Americas that has been obscured by a particular enactment of Africanness that Roland Judy calls into question,²⁵ reminds us in his work that the Muslim was first a slave, brute, and nigger in the Americas before a brown body.

Drawing on Fanon's controversial veil essay, as well as influenced by Lyle Ashton Harris's engagement with Fanon, Osman dons the veil at the same time that he cites his Westernness and his Somaliness. His queer visibility is a complicated binding of overlapping colonialisms—Arab and Euro-American—alongside the disappointments of postcolonial Africa. At the same time, his is a refusal to capitulate to some recent discourses that would have us see the Muslim as only a brown and assumed heterosexual body. This is a contentious masculinity that embraces incoherence, begging us to tell a story that is always only contextual and indeed constantly shifting, but one also embedded in histories of the vernacular and the everyday. In essence, then, it calls for a politics and ethics that refuses certain kinds of advance knowledge in favor of one that requires encounter—not encounter as in face-to-face meeting—but encounter as in serious reckoning with our historical time. In this art, black masculinity is always and only a temporal performance, but it is never ahistorical, as so much of the contemporary discussion has positioned it. What is at stake then are vernacular cosmopolitan and multicultural histories of subaltern positions.

These vernacular cosmopolitanisms point to questions of freedom and unfreedom as black men across nation, region, space, and time engage each other in the very potentially deadly politics of representation. A figure like Marquise demonstrates the limited places and spaces that the black poor might be able to occupy to attempt to practice any semblance of freedom. Thus what becomes clear is that when the question is posed as one of unfreedom, the modes of managerial and surveillance mechanisms of neoliberal orthodoxies, both economic and cultural, become more apparent. The “race men” comfortably ensconced in those conditions can only offer insult and further degradation, with no discourse of a more hopeful future. Instead they must engage the throw-away populations of our time as if those populations produced themselves out of thin air.

In other work I have suggested that Audre Lorde might be positioned as both an actual and symbolic figure of a black queer theory and politics that keeps feminist questions central to the ways in which modernity's categories of the human might be used against its relentless

25 See Roland Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

unfolding of violences.²⁶ I now want to add to such a claim Hazel Carby's insights, which point to the exhaustion and the limits of European modernity's categories of the human. In Carby's work the exhaustion is not cause for defeat but is instead a new opening up and opening out of the category of the human, meant to recuperate a different kind of planetary life. What Wynter terms "new forms of human life" are glimpsable in the practices and persons I have been discussing above, persons whose art and whose politics point to a different kind of conversation if not future.²⁷ These "new forms of human life" refuse neoliberal meta- and micro-practices and structures of managerialism and surveillance in ways that many of the contemporary figures of the post-civil rights successes and failures can neither see, acknowledge, nor engage. When we bridge the gap between neoliberalism's economic and cultural arms and consider the complicated politics of representation, the work that art and artists do for us, and the ways in which the poor refuse to settle into being just waste, then the work for intellectuals in our time becomes more urgent, as the work of not just making life livable but making life anew presents itself as our only option.

26 Rinaldo Walcott, "Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory," in M. Wright and A. Schuhmann, eds., *Blackness and Sexualities* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), 29–40.

27 See Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in Vera Lawrence and Rex Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5–57.