

Passing, Cultural Performance, and Individual Agency: Performative Reflections on Black Masculine Identity

Bryant Keith Alexander
California State University, Los Angeles

This performative article uses the trope of “passing” as reference to crossing racial identity borders as well as to intra/interracial issues of identity and authenticity. Passing is constructed as a performative accomplishment and assessment by both the group claimed and the group denied. This article is structured around three divisions—passing as cultural performance, the social construction of identity, and the quest for self-definition of socially mediated expectations. All issues are centered within the specific concerns of Black masculine identity. In the process, the essay also seeks to establish the notion of an integrative ethnography of performance that envelops the critique of a performance as a part of the overall textual presentation of experience.

Keywords: *passing; cultural performance; integrative ethnography of performance; reflexivity; reflexive critique; Black masculine identity.*

By interrogating the primacy of conventional masculinity to received conceptions of blackness, this book constitutes a critique of masculinism in African-American culture. At the same time, because those conceptions incorporate no lesser burden of proof than does masculinity itself, the book is also a critique of black “authenticity” and the conformist demands that the concept implies. Hence, it explores in particular manifestations of difference in African-American culture, which typically precipitate the most intense controversies about—what or who—qualifies as “black.”

—Phillip Brian Harper (1996, p. ix)

The aim of my analysis is to present enabling forms of consciousness that may contribute to the constitution of the social, economic, and political relations that continually consign the lives of black men to psychic malaise, social destruction, and physical death. It does not encourage or dismiss the sexism of black men, nor does it condone the patriarchal behavior that sometime manifests itself in minority communities in the form of misdirected machismo.

—Michael Eric Dyson (1993, pp. 185-186)

The concept of the masculine subject is useful, then for two reasons. First, it highlights the multiple discursivity that posits individuality on the subject, while also acknowledging the performative character of this constitution. . . . The second benefit associated

to engage other performances. Cultural membership is thus maintained primarily through recognizable performative practices. Membership is contingent on the validation of those cultural performances. The accusation of passing is, therefore, an assessment of cultural performance.

So, in addition to Singer's (1992) notion that cultural performances are "framed events," they are also "important dramatizations that enable participants to understand criticize, and even change the worlds in which they live. And it is without doubt this reflexive quality . . . has been the most appreciated aspect of cultural performance" (Guss, 2000, p. 9). And although the work of Singer and Guss focus primarily on communal, ritualistic practices that transmit social culture, self-awareness of cultural performances in everyday life offers the same level of possibility of seeing the self and others in the negotiation of cultural membership. In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner (1988a) argues that "cultural performances are active agencies of social change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more effective or ethical 'designs for living'" (p. 24).

The "designs for living," in the case of passing, are performative moves that attempt to assume the identity and the specified benefits of being a cultural familiar within a particular context. For example, gay men who pass as straight attempt to avoid the social and cultural strictures against homosexuality. Light-skinned Blacks passing for White assume the social and cultural privileges of being White and avoid the stigma that is sometimes socially associated with being Black. In either case, passing is a performance of suppression. In "Posing as Black, Passing as White," Linda Williams (2001) states that the performer "suppress[es] the more obvious artifice of performance [that is associated with the origin of their denial.] Passing is a performance whose success depends on not overacting" (p. 176). Thus, "overacting" would call attention to the fact that performance is, in actuality, being used as artifice to racial identity.

Hence, passing is a product (an assessed state), a process (an active engagement), performative (ritualized repetition of communicative acts), and a reflection of one's positionality (politicized location), knowing that its existential accomplishment always resides in liminality.² This is not the process of becoming but rather the state of being between two performance communities—the point of origin and the territory of desire—with the performative expectations of both communities serving as mediators in a tensive feud (or maybe fraud) of identity—acceptance versus denial. For although performance can manifest the subject of its focus, it does not modify the materiality of embodied presence and the social investment in race.

Good Man-Bad Man: Performative Agency and Choice³

I'm a man.

I'm a Black man.

The Black male body is polemical. It is a site of public and private contestation. Black men are trapped between binary opposites such as “secular and the sacred; between prosperity and poverty; between the artistic and the empirical; between the lofty and the lowly; between the immediate and the deferred; between the tragic and the comic; and between the specific and the universal” (Dyson, 1996, p. xviii). Dyson’s oppositional descriptives capture the complex dualism that is a part of the Black male experience but is very seldom reflected in the public framing of his image. The dualism that exists within the character of the Black man is not acknowledged, hence, relegating him to a stereotypically pathologized position in which any variation might be constructed as inauthentic or not being real; hence, passing for something that he is not. I offer you some of those frames with an eye on felt experience.

In the classroom, as a student, I am a “Good Man,” a sometimes cultural representative and resident exotic Other. I stand as a Good Black Man in contrast to the problematized and media-produced images of my brethren. Instructors, from time to time, have even sought my opinion on issues of a “delicate racial nature.” I am “a kind of native informant, lurching about the island and showing Prospero its sweet and secret places, serving to provide data with which Prospero can then rule” (Karamcheti, 1995, p. 142). Typically, as a teacher, a good(hyphen)non(hyphen)traditional(hyphen)White woman(hyphen)student(hyphen)bigot says at some point, “You’re a very nice Black man, a credit to your race.”⁴

Crossing over—crossing under that invisible divider, the wall—the border that separates the white ivory tower from the larger, often depressed, surrounding cultural community, I sometimes enter perceived as Bad Man. I enter as “John Houseman in racial drag” (Karamcheti, 1995, p. 143). I am perceived as a Black man trying to transcend his “natural” state, elemental and unsophisticated. I am perceived as a Black man who is trying to pass for White, not based on appearance, but in the metaphoric drag of linguistic performance and wearing the garments of academic accomplishment.⁵ I am deemed a bad Black Man because I seemingly do not perform the expected role of the indigenous Black Man, the “authentic” Black man, the “real” Black man—someone who is perceived to be organically connected to the Black community in ways that are deemed appropriate.⁶

In this context, the qualities that make me a Good Man—being relatively articulate, relatively intelligent, relatively polite, a “gentle-man”—transform me into Bad Man. Here, I am critiqued on a different standard.

As “stereotypical” Black brother:

“Listen to the way he talks. Faggot.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend?” Faggot.

“What do you mean no basketball?” Faggot.

“You’re a teacher?” Faggot.

My performance of Good Man is read as Bad Black Man (or at least different). It's read as odd, read as strange, read as queer. In this case, the expectations and possibilities of being a Black man are conflated into a limited series of performative displays—you are or you are not—as if performative displays somehow transcend physical beings. In *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, Majors and Billson (1992) remind us of the following:

Many black men have learned to live up to a harsh standard: real men are not involved with anyone or anything that is not cool. Adhering to this standard means that black men may have a hard time being down to earth with each other; they have to be cool, especially with the “fellas.” Their behavior must follow an unyielding code of coolness in order to gain acceptance. If a black man does not act in these prescribed ways [Good Man] others are quick to ostracize and label him as corny, lame, square [Bad Man]. (p. 45)

The more pejorative and culturally stinging terms might include faggot, bitch, or pussy. The latter is a derogatory reference to the feminine. The former is an accusation of homosexuality, but it also refers to any behavior that is incongruent to the Black male aesthetic—strong, assertive, hyperaggressive, hyperheterosexual. The reference to “bitch” is a double signifying term that both chastises the gay Black male and denigrates females at the same time.

Black men who participate in this form of masculinity view this double negation as a positive and, ultimately, as a form of power. Because of the security, power, and attention that come from embodying phallogentric Black masculinity, there is strong resistance by those who have adopted this form to alternative models. The logic might suggest that Black masculinity itself was forged out of resistance to White institutional practices; anything less would be performing “less manly.”

bell hooks (1995) suggests that the resistance to rethinking masculinity is not only embedded within the psyche and lived experience of Black men but also within women as well. She says, “Women have not unlearned a heterosexist-based ‘eroticism’ that constructs desire in such a way that many can only respond erotically to male behavior that has already been coded as masculine within the sexist framework” (p. 111). So even heterosexual men who engage in a sensitive awareness of feminist issues and in alternative performances of Black masculinity are demonized for not being strong, take-charge kind of guys. Cornel West (1993) notes the following:

This situation is even bleaker for most black gay men who reject the major stylistic option of black machismo identity, yet who are marginalized in white America and penalized in black America for doing so. In their efforts to be themselves, they are told they are not really “black men,” not machismo-identified. Black gay men are often the brunt of talented black comics like Arsenio Hall and Damon Wayans. Yet behind the laugh lurks a black tragedy of major proportions: the refusal of white and black America to entertain seriously new stylistic options for

black men caught in the deadly endeavor of rejecting black machismo identities.
(p. 129)

Contemporary black men have been shaped by these representations. We must push the borders of this narrowly defined identity. As West says, “our truncated public discussion on race [and masculinity] suppresses the best of who and what we are as a people because we fail to confront the complexity of the issues in a candid and critical manner” (p. 4).

The notion of Good Man and Bad Man is often embedded in a culturally linguistic transfiguring move in which bad becomes good and good becomes bad. The performative elements of masculinity are then situated locally and mediated by context. Masculinity, as a performance, is set to a musical score, a dirge orchestrated by culture and social design. It is an audience-based construction of movement—a choreography of talking the talk and walking the walk. It is a performance of Self and Other. Here, I echo the sentiments of Herb Green (1996) in “Turning the Myths of Black Masculinity Inside/Out”:

The parameters of my identity are not constrained by a single static border—my identity is fluid and flexible. In fact, sometimes the very essentializing and reductive nationalistic ideas that are supposed to unite us and make us identifiable to ourselves and others often render us silent about significant realities about ourselves and our individual desires. (p. 253)

The accusation of passing and the assessment of “good” or “bad” is a reduction of identity and delimits the possibility of expression to specified sanctioned performances. To pass is ultimately to acknowledge that identity is not static. To pass is to test and challenge the fractured and multifaceted aspects of identity that are identified with race, designed by culture, and subverted in desire.

The hyphen between Good Man–Bad Man is really a continuum, varying shades of light and dark—a rehearsal process, a descent into madness, into anger. It is a construction and a deconstruction that begins with something like the following:

(Very polite and soft-spoken.) “Excuse me, may I have some service?”
(Ignored by White-girl worker.)

It initiates itself as a sincere, yet unacknowledged, effort to connect, to communicate.

(More irritated, a little more strident.) “Excuse me, but I’ve been waiting for some time now!”
(Sentence cut short as the White-girl worker turns to another White customer.)

Acknowledging the tensions that may exist within the lifescritps of those involved, it becomes a little less tolerant, more insistent.

(Escalating in tone.) “Excuse me, I need some help here!”

And finally, realizing that niceness (Good Man) won't work, or as my brother would say, "You want to see me act like a nigger? I can act like a nigger!":

(Explode in anger, direct challenge.) "Can I have some God damn service now!"

(White-girl worker is frightened and maybe embarrassed.) "Oh I'm sorry sir. I didn't see you. How can I help you?"

Contact at last!

The question from those in polite society is, "Why do you have to be that way?" or "What do you get from that?"

The answers are simple, yet complex.

"Service."

"Attending to."

"Visibility?"

Even if I have to cross under, even if I have to be a subversive, even if I have to tap into negative stereotypes that fulfill fearful expectations from others, to be an Other to myself, I do this to pass—not to pass for White, for my dark-brown skin and the dreadlocks growing out of my head prevent that racialized possibility, but to become an Other to pass through particular racial/cultural roadblocks.

I assume the performative role of Bad Man when really, I am Good Man. Somehow, the simple act of social acknowledgment has to be reduced, or escalated, to this kind of racial-cultural attention. It is in the lack of reflexivity in those who ask the question, "Why do you have to be that way?" that keeps them from acknowledging how they are implicated in and call forth such a performance. There is a "general anxiety about black men's assumption of such masculinity as has been deemed socially proper [expected] and normative, as evidence of its problem notwithstanding" (Harper, 1996, p. 119).

And without the presumed-to-be-natural presentation of my Black masculine identity, I am not seen—even though I am standing in clear view. Ralph Ellison (1946/1995) captures this social dematerialization of the Black male body when he says,

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eye, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (p. 4)

"Oh, I'm sorry sir. I didn't see you. How can I help you?"

Referencing the darkened imaged of O. J. Simpson on the cover of *Time Magazine* in June of 1994, Phillip Brian Harper (1996) writes about the limits

of race and social regulation as a strategic mechanism for maintaining the social construction and image of the bad black man:

Time's cover image serves as twofold corrective, disciplinarily reaffirming Simpson's "actual" blackness while underscoring the criminality inherent therein. For this positing of Simpson as constitutionally "wrong" to operate simultaneously as a crucial setting "right" of the social order suggests that even more rests on the congruency of skin color and racial identification than we already know from our daily experience; indeed, historical efforts to stabilize it may well carry an import beyond considerations of mere racial status as such implicating a will to social regulation for which black masculine identity serves a notably instrumental function. (p. 131)

And so, within this public establishment, I symbolically darken my face and escalate my volume as is expected, and I engage in a loud Blackface performance for the complex social desire of the Other.

It is complex because it is an odd mixture of expected fear and the signification of Otherness that maintains a certain order, distance, and maybe even comfort between Self and Other. And whether I literally perform the Bad Black Man or not, I am always and already perceived as engaging in that performative mode by those who have made it a relational standard. So, the perception of me as the Bad Black Man has become a practiced and performative inculcation of beliefs by others. Or as Judith Butler (1990a) suggests in *Gender Trouble*, "The 'coherence' of 'the person' are not [necessarily] logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility."

In traditional blackface minstrelsy performed by Whites, "The mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other, while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over him" (Lott, 1996, p. 13). So in this moment of necessity (or desperation), I reciprocate and, at the same time, subvert this performance tradition as I figuratively darken my already dark face and become Other to myself to ensure the same benefits as the Other, who, historically, has performed me. In *Playing the Race Card*, Linda Williams (2001) states, "For blacks to adopt the heritage of minstrelsy is to collude in their fetishization. But to not adopt (and adapt) this heritage is to lose the very means with which to engage with an important part of the cultural past" (p. 140). Also following the cue of Michelle Wallace (2002) in *Constructing the Black Masculine*, "I engage the performance according to stereotypical forms and narratives that anticipate and fix the conditions of black possibility well in advance of" my presence (p. 154).

The question—"Why do you have to be that way?"—also speaks to issues of agency, as if to ask, "If you find the performance so problematic, why do you engage it? Why do you use it as a means to an end and then critique those who presumably initiated the performance when it is, in fact, your choice to engage

it?" ("It" refers to the stereotypical performance of Black male rage.) In responding to these actual questions and critiques, I am interested in how Stephen M. Whitehead (2002) speaks to and through Foucault's (1978) construction of the "discursive subject"—a subject who is created through discourse, sometimes in relation or contradistinction to the materiality of the body—and how this is linked with alternating practices of power. I cite Whitehead at length to capture the fullness of his logic as applied to my response to the questions posed.

Foucault stresses the symbiotic relationship between power and resistance. In so doing, Foucault develops further his concept of discursive subject as a social and historical construct, fragmented, de-centered, but crucially, enabled by the very circularity of power at large in the social web. The body remains the primary point of subjectification by regimes of power, but it is now understood by Foucault to be marked and created as a subject (and thus categorized as an individual) by these very same dynamics. Thus the symbiotic relationship between power and the subject is revealed both in the individual's subjection to those "laws of truth" that constitute various discursive regimes and in the simultaneous marking and identifying of the subject as an individual—an enabling, positive moment of (self)-creation. (p. 101)⁷

So, those who ask the questions engage in a critical, albeit shortsighted, reflexivity without the benefit of questioning why the performance was successful or even questioning the conditions that gave rise to the performance. They demonize me for demonizing them—which is, in actuality, a stratagem that maintains the social order—through a practice of their own power over me. I extend this logic as "a performance of whiteness" in "Black skin/White Masks" (Alexander, *in press*).

While they demonize my critical observation along with the described performance, they fail to understand. They fail to understand that while I problematize my own performative choice, these (the performance and the critique of the performance) are both practices of power that help to transform me from the objectified invisible Other into the identified (visible) subject that gets attended to—but not just attended to like a petulant child who craves attention. The performance becomes a political act that illuminates the racial politics that are already in play—in the actual scene depicted in performance, now, and in the critique of the scene in performance. And unlike Peggy Phelan's (1993) problematic arguments about the illusive "Unmarked," we (the "me" and the "not me")⁸ are both clearly identifiable social agents, and the power of my embodied presence, which is clearly marked, is merely extenuated through and by performance.

It is the performance of Bad Black Man and the critique of the conditions that gave rise to the performance that becomes a moment of self-creation⁹ that provides agency. I will acknowledge, however, that outside of this critical engagement of writing about the performance of Bad Man, the practiced form

of agency (in everyday life) can be a place of entrapment for many Black men. It can be a performance that perpetuates the expectations, while it services their (and my) desire. And therein lies our sad compromise—playing into “the spectral and the spectacular in racist representation of black men” (Wallace, 2002, p. 30).

But the performance of Bad Man is less cannibal and more crafted, canned, and contrived. It is conniving, coping, and controlling. It is contending with the conditions in the circumstance.

So I wear my mean Black man face, from time to time, as a defense mechanism—as a performance, and even as a stratagem to get or cross over.

I wear the expected mean Black man face like a sign of membership or a signifier of identification to those who buy into that socially constructed performative expectation.

I wear the expected mean Black man face like I would carry a fake passport, a documentation of citizenship in some (not so) imagined world in which my identity is dictated by others.

I wear it knowing of course, that my body is always and already marked and that sometimes, it is not only what I look like, but also how I act (read through the performative lens of desire and disdain.)

So, from time to time, I make a spectacle of myself to fulfill the necessary qualifications/conditions for the immediacy of service, knowing that spectacle is the “principle symbolic context in which . . . societies enact and communicate their guiding beliefs, values, concerns and self-understandings” (Manning, 1992, p. 291). It is a magnified performance for display, and it serves as a rhetorical act to promote a particular social positioning.

I also know that it is not really a compromise. The moment of my decision to engage in the performance of Bad Man (and I can only assume like other Black men in similar circumstances) is one that has been historically rehearsed. It is a stock performance in the repertoire of most Black men that is called forth in a moment of desperation. It has

a distinct developmental history, along with a definable set of expert “end state” performances. [Most Black men] do not exhibit their intelligences “in the raw”; they do so by occupying certain relevant niches in their society, for which they must prepare by passing through an often lengthy developmental process. (Gardner, 1999, p. 38)

In that moment, I hesitate, contemplate, and even practice a certain restraint as I filter the scene through my own sensibilities; then, I decide how I want to proceed.

In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992) further assist me in arguing against the perception that the performance of the Bad Black Man is exclusively reactionary. On one hand, “It is not an instantaneous reaction to immediate stimuli . . . [for] the slightest “reaction” of an individual to another, is pregnant with the whole history of these persons . . .

their relationship' [p. 124] and the historical structuring of relationships within these shared social spaces" (Mallet, 2003, p. 94).¹⁰ On the other hand, I have faced accusation and critique by others who suggest that the performance of the Bad Black Man is premeditated in ways that exceed the constructed nature of all human behavior as performative. For them, it is a form of ambushing or bushwacking White folks. And if it is, then I am hiding in plain view, and my place of concealment is really the socially constructed space of my habitus in relation to their own habitude. They demonized me for negatively characterizing the White girl in the scene without regard to how I am demeaned and must further demean myself for service.

In the act of calling the other to attend, I know that I am not consciously giving up my agency by giving into a performance that demeans me. I experience the performance of Bad Man as a "double-voiced act," in the way that Gary Saul Morson (1981) elaborates on Bakhtin's concept of the double voice.¹¹ It is a performance that works on multiple levels for a particular effort. He writes the following:

The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating. (p. 108)

So, in the moment of the performance of Bad Man, I want the White-girl worker to be an audience for the performance and to respond with my desired effect. But I also want her to understand how the performance of Bad Man is layered on top of the performance of Good Man that she ignored.

The performance, which constructed premeditated behavioral enactment, is designed to display my performative flexibility in light of her rigid and limited engagement of me. In this sense, once again following the cue of Howard Gardner (1999) in *Intelligence Reframed*, my conscious performance of Bad Man becomes a display of an often unnoticed, socially invalidated, and collectively demonized form of intelligence in many Black men—that is, the ability to read a situation and respond. As with the very nature of a palimpsest, the historical construction of the Black male body becomes the site "where an original inscription [was] erased and another written over again and again. [But] the earlier inscriptions were never really fully erased so over time the result [is] a composite—a palimpsest representing the sum of all the erasures and over-writings" (Crang, 1998, p. 22). And the body remembers.

In the performance of Bad Man, it is the "me" and the "not me" in the moment of the enactment and in the face of history, calling forth a historical construction of the self, that facilitates a particular desire in the moment of

the social engagement. Or, referencing the work of performance artist Ana Mendieta, Jane Blocker (1999) states the following:

In the performance of identity, and in identity as performance, Mendieta is and is not “herself.” She negotiates among identity possibilities that themselves emerge with the act of performance. No one true identity exists prior to the act of performing. No one identity remains stable in and through performance. Understanding identity as having these “performative” qualities enables a discussion of gender, color, nation, and ethnicity that bypasses essentialist categories. (p. 25)

So, to what degree in this moment of deconstructing performance and in this makeshift integrative ethnography of performance (a critical textual replay of the staged performance and response to the performance of cultural practice for those who ask the questions) am I engaged in framing the space of my own marginality for the close scrutiny of (the) other(s)? To what degree do I engage in the relational politics that Phillip Brian Harper (1994) refers to (in his project *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture?*) when he writes,

On the one hand, the idea of “marginality” depends on the notion of a fixed “center” in relation to which it derives its meaning; on the other hand, it is precisely one of the lessons of postmodernity—promulgated in the teachings of poststructuralist theory—that the disposition of various subjects in a social entity is anything but fixed. It is clear, however, despite what we know “theoretically,” that certain individuals have less access than others to political power in contemporary U.S. society, based on the configuration of their “identities” and other factors that mark them socially. (p. 12)

Oddly enough, they (and I) practice a racially subversive power that is also socially constructed and allocated. It draws its strength and potency out of the relational wreckage that constructs Self and Other, whereas the proprietors of civility are held captive to their own construction of the uncivil (or “the Bad Black Man” to put a face on the specified construct of my focus) and their fear.

I suspect that most Black men know that this is not a legitimate power grounded in our position or status but a referent or coercive power that is only and always relational, that is based on the materiality of bodies involved in the specific social negotiations.¹² The forces of singularity that exist within the event horizon of our experience do differ.¹³ Hence, the borders of marginality shift, and sometimes, others are also on the outside of the comfort zones of their own socially constructed reality. And my project becomes a concern to illuminate the positionality and complicity of bodies in those specific (yet shifting) locales.

In responding to their questions, I know that I am engaging in more than a text-based academic call and response. I know that I am not “a resistant transcriber of my stage work,” because the work is intricately interwoven into

the very contested nature of my being as a Black-gay-male-teacher-scholar-performer (Pineau, 2000, p. 1). Hence, "I understand the intellectual and political necessities of recasting my staged work in print" (p. 2)—not just to concretize thought or to freeze time but, in an Aristotelian sense, to engage all the available means of persuasion. I seek out opportunities to engage myself and others in a critically reflexive process of seeing ourselves and the ways in which race, gender, and power are always and already in play in the act of performing, audiencing performance, and responding to performance.

What is truly at stake for me is not the sole necessity of scholarly production. It is the real world consequences of how these issues play out on the stages of everyday life and how my body is sometimes an unwilling participant in acts of social violence, destructive forces pressed against the will of my desire. Knowing that this is academic (and far from a safe mode of social exchange), it is the irony of my hard-fought privilege as a Black male scholar¹⁴ that affords me access to extend my personal and political agenda into this venue. I know that the backlash of audience critique is always forthcoming, and even that can further a certain critical reflection on performative practice while helping to expand the parameters of discussion for performance pundits. In terms of disciplinary mandates, I echo Dwight Conquergood (2002) when he says,

The performance studies project makes its most radical intervention, I believe, by embracing *both* written scholarship *and* creative work, papers and performances. We challenge the hegemony of the text best reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension, not by replacing one hierarchy with another, the romance of performance for the authority of the text. (p. 151)¹⁵

While critics of performance, in an often-unsuccessful staged act of delicacy, try to isolate the specificity of their critique (the tenor from the vehicle, the text from the person who generated it), I find that in my response to questions and elaboration on intent—both theirs and mine—I cannot separate what is often constructed as an intellectual engagement over an emotional response, not knowing if there is really a difference and not knowing what I would get from that endeavor, especially when the parties involved know the issues that are at/in play.¹⁶ Many of the questions and concern-filled critiques about this performance came from Whites—"white power [attempts] to secure its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (Jackson, 1998, p. 5), although the particularity of bodies offering critique, whether in staged performance or the performance of everyday life, in relation to the bodies that are critiqued always implicate the thoughts and attitudes expressed.

Signaling the performance work of Amanda Denise Kemp (1998), "The Black Body in Question," is my own—a body that is "settled into a web of social relationships" (pp. 127-128). And considering that theories of the flesh¹⁷ define the very domain of performance and that the lifescipt—the sedimented experiences of people, which both guides and dictates action—filters their

experience of performance; we are all complicit in performances that critique and illuminate racial and cultural politics. We are trapped in what Primo Levi (1989) calls “the gray zone” (p. 54). Debarati Sanyal (2002) extends his construction to describe that “moral topography of [social exchange], a zone of violence and ambiguity in which victim, perpetrator, accomplice, and witness [are] ‘bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity’” (p. 1).¹⁸

I also understand that I am engaged in critically reflecting on my role (my own culpability) in the (re)staging of this historical scene. I understand that like the very nature of performance studies, I am “struggl[ing] to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice . . . [to] embrace . . . different ways of knowing [myself. That] is radical because it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy” and historically, what I have been expected to know (and not know) about myself (Conquergood, 2002, pp. 145-146). Maybe this is why I embrace the project of performance studies, not only as a (pre)occupation, but as a vocation—“an urge or the predisposition to undertake *a certain* [italics added] kind of work” that helps me identify the self in relation to society (Morris, 1972, p. 1435).

Through a process of critical self-reflection that rivals constructions of autoethnography (the specific act of using the terrain of personal lived experience to excavate the meaningfulness of social, racial, cultural, and psychological being), performance studies becomes a radical methodology that I use to engage an act of decolonizing my own mind.¹⁹ In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*, bell hooks (1994) offers me a method of understanding “the process of decolonization.” The person engaging the process comes to a greater sense of self-knowing. She states,

Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization. If we discover in ourselves’ self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking and we face it, we can begin to heal. Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth. (p. 248)

So maybe in this article, *I am feeling my melanin*²⁰ and articulating a racialized identity that is both a part of who I am and how I have been socially constructed to be. Knowing, of course, that my agency signals what I am willing and not willing, to claim.

But most of the time, my face is just my face.

My face is Black and notably not mean—although that is my own assignment. It shows my joy and my pain. It reveals my disposition—of angst, of frustration, of fear, of overwhelming insecurity, and, more often than not, of my joy, passion, and compassion.

“Regardless of how I perform identity, my body is marked with signs that signify identities that exist outside of my desires, signs that exact (mis)recognitions. It is these (mis)recognitions that actuate the border patrol, that necessitate border inspections” (Esposito, 2003, p. 214). The visage of my sometimes-stern Black male expression (in staged performances or in daily wear—they are almost indistinguishable) always seems to be jarring for some, even to those who claim to know me and see me narrowly as Good Man, a distinction that is its own place of entrapment. In this case, I am relegated to a limited space within a margin of their comfort with me.

Their narrow view of me is a performative dualism that they deny themselves to acknowledge. It is an extreme myopia that prevents them from seeing their own “bad” performances, which are often projected as power, interpreted as strength, and used to mark difference and assert control. Or maybe it is a cultural performative dexterity that allows them not to have to engage—a performance that they don’t need to engage in to cross over or cross under or to pass through; maybe it is a regularized performance that they give, which is never read as Bad White Man or Bad White Woman; for maybe they (those who engage such performances of privilege and propriety) set the sliding standard, the shifting territories of identity on which all else is measured.

I think about what it means to be a so-called Good Man, and I look to the contemporary men’s movements, the Promise Keepers and mythopoetics. To look at them, I see that possibly to be a Good Man might be to tap into the Bad Man in me—the controlling man, the dominating man, the patriarchal man, “Iron John” (Bly, 1990).

Maybe it is to chant,
to scream,
to drum,
to beat . . . (pounding on the chest) . . .
to rape . . . to pillage? NO!

What passes as a real man?

Well, maybe that kind of performance is only privileged by the middle, which is not to be mistaken for the margin—the *middle*, as in middle of the road, as in middle class, as in middle(hyphen)aged(hyphen)white(hyphen)heterosexual(hyphen)men, who claim spirituality and religious doctrine as their justification to be—

(The sign of the cross is made as form of benediction.)

Good Man.

As a Black man, I am always in the margins of those social constructions, those same performative practices

(to scream,
to chant,
to drum,
to beat [drums] . . .) for me are always deemed as bad, and in this case, bad ain't good.

Attempting to Define a Mediated Self

In this performative vernacular of Black masculine identity, I offer a working definition of self through a process of negation. Contemporary Black men must systematically and instantaneously survey and deny the prevailing stereotypes that demonize our bodies and pathologize our characters. This is followed by the painstaking process of reconstructing in the minds of others an identity and an image that is reflective and representative of who we are and who we wish to be. This program of self-identification is an “on-going performative process” that works against a historical backdrop and the prevailing sociological and classist intentions that mark and minimize us (Butler, 1990b, p. 271).

Yes, Judith Butler (1990b) rightly argues that the body is a “materialization of possibilities” (p. 272). In this notion, the fluidity of identity is acknowledged, and the body becomes an emergent landscape. The landscape of my body, like that of my mind, is not dictated by my race or my sexual identity, delineating one territory from the other in which a border crossing is negatively constructed as passing, nor does a social script that may delimit my expressive possibilities (as a Black man) also dictate the specific landscape of my body. It is a site in which the borders of my identity are only limited by the reach of my desire. When I cross over those borders, I pass—not passing as in denial, but passing as in extending. I pass—not passing as in faking, but passing as making myself known:

To pass, as in “gaining passage despite obstacles.”
To pass, as in “to move past in time.”
To pass, as in “to be transferred from one to another.”
To pass, as in “to undergo transition.”

The contemporary Black male agenda is not to unweave the cultural tapestry that tells the story of our history. Rather, it is to reconfigure and offer alternate perceptions to those who view the display and to those who blind themselves in the veil of oppression. The idea is to show the texture of our lives, to reveal the dimensions of our characters and the beauty in our souls. Within this vigorous program of self-identification and determination, the materialization of possibilities is revealed in a nonessentialized fabric of many hues. The scale of perceptions of Black men, good and bad, will be expanded beyond the binary to include the multiple and varying shades of identity and the performative dexterity that it takes to be unique within a cultural system.

In the process, we (and in my process, I) see the hyphen between Good Man–Bad Man as a bridge. Following the example of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981) in *This Bridge Called My Back*, I offer an uncompromised definition of my Black masculine identity, which may resonate with you (the reader) in some ways. This definition of self comprises both the articulate and sociably polite Good Man as well as the blunt, in your face, and down right rude Bad man. I find that I exist somewhere at the intersection of the two.

My Black masculinity is not a “penis-as-weapon” locus of control, in which “I fuck my way through the world as some form of social orientation” (hooks, 1995, p. 207).

NO!

My Black masculinity is not some pugilistic combative representation of the Black male in which my mere presence threatens to kick your ass if you look at me in the wrong way.

NO!

My Black masculinity is not a performative stoic identity that denies felt experience waiting to explode as some uncontrollable Black rage.

NO!

My Black masculinity is not floating in some liminal transitional space teetering on the hyphen between Good Man–Bad Man, waiting for some ritualistic or biological determinant to push me over the edge.

NO!

So I say to you this: My Black masculinity is a human positionality firmly situated in individual choice—a choice to move, to cross, and to pass over the socially constructed and restrictive borders for my identity. Yet, within that movement, my Black masculinity carries with it the resonant traces of a rich cultural heritage. If that sounds like pride, it is. For as Adrienne Rich (1994) suggests, “Pride is often born in the place where we refuse to be victims, where we experience our own humanity under pressure, where we understand that we are not the hateful projections of others but intrinsically ourselves” (p. 787).

My Black masculinity is mediated by an academic enlightenment. I am engaging the close scrutiny of the Self and Other that is necessary in any process of social and cultural renewal. The process demands a confluence of understanding from the intellectualism of the academy and the articulation and liberation of our enfleshed knowledge. That mediation, like the hyphen between Good Man–Bad Man, serves as a bridge to our multifaceted selves. We do it for ourselves, refusing to have others continue to intervene in the construction of our identities. We are attempting to resolve the difference within our selves, the Black community, and our individual lives while commenting on others.²¹

My identity is influenced through social discourse. I acknowledge that varying aspects of identity are socially constructed, and through dialogue, these can also be socially reconstructed in ways that are liberating. The nature of my work and other Black scholars interested in the social construction of identity and the relationship between race, sex, and gender speak in dialogue with each other to influence change and awareness.²²

Those of us who are still working to mix the vision of autonomy evoked by X category with our dedication to ending domination in all its forms, who cherish openness, honesty, radical will, creativity, and free speech, and do not long to have power over others, or to build nations (or even academic empires), are working to project an alternative politics of representation—working to free the black image so it not enslaved to . . . any exploitative or oppressive agenda. (hooks, 1994, p. 153)

My identity is enacted as an alternative performative masculinity that ameliorates and challenges the static interpretations of how I should be, interpretations that inevitably oppress me in both academic circles and my own racial/cultural communities. The homophobia and anti-intellectualism of the Black community, coupled with the racism of the academy, demands that those who would wish to concurrently claim membership in these disparate communities must find ways to reconcile the tension that exists in passing back and forth. This reconciliation might engage performative practices that sustain personal worth while challenging the contested notions of what constitutes cultural membership in both.²³

Border Crossing: A Conclusion²⁴

In passing, one crosses socially constructed borders. A border and, consequently, border crossings suggest positionality—bodies poised at the intersection of geographical and social boundaries.

Our race and gender confer boundaries as well as possibilities in various relations, particularly the kind of friends we can make, work we can do, mates that are available to us. Surely, the meanings of race and gender, like those of class, are socially constituted; there is no inherent significance to these identities as social signs. (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 161)

The metaphor of border crossings suggests an exploration and an envisioning of new places and new ways of seeing, doing, and being. Border crossings are imbued with the spirit of adventure and calculated with a purpose—that is, to seek, to find, to engage, to know. They are also fraught with danger of encountering the unknown, challenge, rejection, evaluation, and the critique of border guards. Likewise, the notion of passing suggests a movement, from one cultural community or physical disposition, such as race or sexuality, to another, such as Black to White or straight to gay. Either is accomplished and maintained through performative practices—the use of language, racial/cultural stylistics, associations, and activities.

To pass is an assessment of performance.

It is to say that the appropriate performance has been engaged.

It is to say that people have deemed the performance as authentic, if not plausible.

It is to suggest a denial of that which has been passed.