

# Black Queer Bodies, Afrocentric Reform and Masculine Anxiety

by  
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## Black Queer Youth As Pedagogical

Even though queer youth of color have a strong presence in urban communities and schools across the United States, they are often misunderstood, ignored, and assaulted (Blackburn, 2007; McCready, 2004; Quinn, 2007). Gay and gender non-conforming Black male youth, in particular, can be troubling to urban educators because they disrupt beliefs and behavioral norms associated with young Black men who are often represented as hyper-masculine, heterosexual, thugs (Majors and Billson, 1993). Maintaining such a negative view of Black queer youth constitutes a missed opportunity for urban educators to develop more socially just praxes that challenge multiple forms of social and cultural oppression. In order for this to happen, however, urban educators must treat the lives and experiences of queer youth of color as “pedagogical” in the sense that they have the potential to educate teachers, researchers, and policymakers about the effects of dominant cultural practices, representations, and ideologies in urban communities and schools (Rodriguez, 1998). In this article, I consider the experiences of two gay and gender non-conforming Black male students who participated in a northern California high school’s African dance Program (ADP) as pedagogical. These students’ experiences serve as a strong reminder of the possibilities and limitations of Afrocentric reforms that aim to foster student engagement.

## Student Engagement

The concept of student engagement refers to students’ attachment to school (in its broadest sense) and their level of classroom engagement on a day-to-day basis (1992). Student engagement is rooted in both the individual and the environment.

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Individual students' beliefs about their school, particular classes, and their peers contribute to engagement as well as a school's climate and the structure of academic and extracurricular programs. The concept of student engagement offers a way for educators to interpret racial disparities in grades and attendance, and how these might be related to larger social forces that act on students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kelly, 2008).

There are multiple methods of assessing student engagement, both qualitative and quantitative (Glanville and Wildhaven, 2007). Close observations of schooling in the form of ethnographic studies have revealed that the motive to maintain a positive social identity (i.e., racial identity) can lead to withdrawal from school (disengagement) and peer group behavior that supports anti-school norms. For example, John Ogbu and colleagues have argued that Black students disengage from school because they view school as an institution that caters to Whites and unfairly disadvantages Blacks (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1992). Even though several studies show that Black students are not, in fact, any more likely to have anti-school attitudes than Whites (Gibson, 2005; Morgan & Mehta, 2004), his ideas remain a powerful explanation for Black students' disengagement. I would argue, based on over a decade working with urban teachers and administrators, that most urban educators in the United States are familiar with the idea that successful Black students who attend schools with racially diverse student populations must cope with the "burden of acting White." Moreover, racial discrimination in urban schools has been an ongoing concern of social justice educators since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision of 1964 (Ball and National Society for the Study of Education, 2006; Orfield, et al., 1996).

## Afrocentric Reform

One of the responses to the concern that Black students cope with the "burden of acting White" in order to do well in school has been to ground academic and extracurricular programs in the experiences of people of African descent. In doing so, educators aim to reduce the "cultural mismatch" between Black students' culture and the school's (White) culture (Irvine, 1991). In the 1990s, one of the most popular curricular reforms in this vein was Afrocentric education. Afrocentrism, broadly defined, is a set of principles that aims to liberate Blacks through re-education, establishing economic, political, and religious self-sufficiency, and creating a nation through land acquisition (Ginwright, 2004). As a worldview, Afrocentrism not only aims to transform the way Blacks understand themselves in relation to White America but also challenges predominantly White institutions to acknowledge the exclusion of African American identity. Afrocentric proponents agree that many African Americans, particularly children and youth, suffer from an ethnic identity crisis and that rediscovering West African and Egyptian philosophies holds the promise of cultural transformation for Blacks (Ginwright, 2004).

In the context of schools, Afrocentric reform is an educational strategy designed to strengthen and improve academic performance and student engagement using principles based on ancient Egyptian culture. According to Shawn Ginwright (1994, p.25), Afrocentric educators share four fundamental beliefs:

1. African American students are disconnected from their African cultural roots provide practices, beliefs, life lessons, and worldviews that are fundamental for cultural survival and success in school.
2. The persistent failure that Black youth experience in schools is largely due to the cultural incongruence of the curricula they encounter. Afrocentric reformers believe that culture influences all dimensions of human behavior, including teaching and learning, and therefore students who come from different ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds than their teachers will experience cultural incongruence in the classroom, which can lead to disengagement.
3. African culture provides a pathway to cultural practices that hold the promise for self-, social, and spiritual transformation. Afrocentric educators' belief that Black students, in the process of reconnecting with African culture, can become more empowered and therefore engaged.
4. Empowerment through African culture will translate to greater academic performance. This is accomplished by teaching students about African and African American contributions and culture, using teaching techniques that are based on Afrocentric principles.

The principles of Afrocentric reform, which aim to de-center Whiteness and European cultures in the curriculum, have been critiqued for their unnecessarily nationalist orientation that essentializes Africa and people of African descent (Cobb, 1997). For example, Afrocentric educators have a tendency to represent African people and African societies as patriarchal, regal, and heteronormative. Such representations obscure the complex ways that Black males, for example, identify as Black, African, and/or masculine. Black gay poet Essex Hemphill reminds us that "Someone had to clean the bathrooms" of the temples where royal families worshiped (Dunning, 2005). In other words, not every Black person is royalty; not every Black person is heterosexual. In the context of Afrocentric reforms in schools, the experiences of gay and gender non-conforming Black male students similarly remind us that not all Black male students identify as heterosexual and hegemonically masculine. Such was the case in the Black Studies program at Northern California High School (NCHS)<sup>1</sup>.

## Black Studies and African Dance at NCHS

In the Fall of 1968, fueled by the energy of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and fed up with California's passive response to the needs of its underachieving Black students, the Black Student Union of NCHS issued a list of 14 demands to the school board. These demands included the establishment of Black Studies programs in elementary, junior high, and the high school, the hiring of a Black studies director/"curriculum associate," serving "soul food" in the cafeteria, and removing law enforcement officers from campus who reportedly harassed Black students. Mark Johnson, the spokesperson for the BSU and an affiliate of the Black Panther Party, warned school board members to "Get on your job and approve our demands. We won't come back a third time. We won't compromise. If you do not respond to our demands which not only represent the Black community, but much of the white community at XXX High—we feel like will have exhausted all legal means and will express our demands through the racist news media" (*Local Newspaper*, 10/16/68, p.2 col. 3). "Imagine these threats coming from blue-eyed, fair-skinned Mark Johnson with his leather jacket, afro, black beret and sunglasses," said a University of California professor I spoke with who had studied that period of NCHS's history. "He must have looked pretty crazy. You know they were scared!" Fearing a race riot, the school board approved, in essence, all 14 of the demands.

Carl Collins, a Black male teacher at NCHS, was hired as the curriculum associate making him the first director of Black Studies at NCHS. Collins believed Black Studies would help end racism in the United States by providing Black students with a sense of identity and a power base, and by sensitizing Whites to racial problems. "Black students are asking for some sense of history so they can develop a sense of identity," Collins said, "They want to know what black people have contributed to this country and what has happened to them here" (*Local Newspaper*, 2/16/69, p.22). Courses in Black Studies included Afro-American history, African civilization, Afro-American literature, Afro-American journalism, African dance, history of jazz, and the economics of Afro-Americans.

## Participant-Observation Methods

Throughout my career as a researcher, educator, and activist, I have led a professionally separate life as a dancer (African and modern styles), performing for a variety of community- and university-based dance companies. These experiences fostered a curiosity in the African Dance Program (ADP) in Black Studies. I spent the entire 1998-1999 academic-year observing a beginning ADP class twice a week for a total of two hours per week. I also stage managed the 1998 Fall Afro-Haitian dance concert and periodically provided administrative assistance to the ADP instructor. Near the end of Fall term 1998, I conducted an hour-long lunchtime focus group with 10 students (eight Black female students, one

White female student, 1 Black male student). Additionally, at the end of spring term 1999 I formally interviewed three students (one White female, one Black female and one Black male) about their future aspirations and experiences taking ADP classes. My observations of the classes focused on the range of ways Black male students articulated their race, masculinity, and sexuality identities in the context of rehearsals, performances, and interactions between students and the director of ADP, Nana Diouf. As I recorded observations, I continually wrote and revised questions that would eventually become the semi-structured protocol I used to interview gay and gender non-conforming Black male students in the program.

On a typical day of observation, I would enter Gym B, the girls' gym, one of the oldest and most in-need-of-repair buildings on campus. From the outside, there was nothing special about this brown and tan two-story building that was badly in need of renovation. The inside, however, revealed the building's distinct character. The odor of singed synthetic hair, pomade, hot combs, blow dryers, and makeup mixed with body sprays, perfume, and sweat stayed with me as I would make my way through in the foyer and hallways and up the creaky wooden stairs to Gym B where ADP classes were held.

Often, before class started, students used the class boom box to play hip-hop and/or rhythm and blues (r & b) music. The music may have been part of a dance they were practicing for homecoming, an upcoming African Dance concert, or a school-wide assembly. Nana encouraged students to connect the "traditional" West African dance they did in ADP to the contemporary hip hop dance they did informally and at social gatherings. The dances that students practiced contained movements from the latest videos broadcast on MTV. Adults at NCHS frequently characterized these dances as "nasty" due to their sexual suggestiveness. Nana often pointed out to students that the traditional dances from West Africa they were learning and the contemporary hip hop dances they did at social gatherings have the same point of origin: Africa. On many occasions, I overheard her saying to a student doing hip-hop movements, "That's African dance you're doing, you know." Usually the students practicing before class were upper-class students who acted as "proctors" or student teachers in the beginning class. The less-experienced, beginning dancers usually observed from the sidelines, sometimes gesturing the movements or cheering when someone executed an exceptionally flashy movement.

In the moments before class started, I would usually paste myself to a wall on the sidelines where students put their clothes, shoes, and book bags. Nana would be sitting inconspicuously on a folding chair next to the boom box (it must have been loud) reading her mail or talking to students. At first, I paid little attention to these informal conversations. However, as my fieldwork continued, I listened more closely and discovered that some of these conversations were quite serious with topics ranging from sexuality, pregnancy, menstruation, and peer pressure to name-calling, costumes, depression and family conflicts. Nana assumed the role

of parent in these conversations, giving students advice, telling them the proper way to behave in certain situations, or admonishing them for being lazy or not trying hard enough to succeed.

## Black Queer Youth and Masculine Anxiety

### *Focal Students: Antoine and Kevin*

Two students with boundless energy that I met during my fieldwork were Antoine and Kevin. I approached Antoine and Kevin to participate in my research at the recommendation of Albert, another Black gay male student who used to be known as “Mr. African.” Both Antoine and Kevin considered themselves friends of Albert, although I believe Kevin’s friendship with Albert was more intimate. Antoine viewed himself as “pretty” and “beautiful,” although to avoid harassment his everyday presentation was a “cool pose.” For example, at the end of the school day, Antoine often hung out in the “Black section” of NCHS near the front entrance. A protective circle of Black female students usually surrounded him. I observed his gestures while he conversed with them; they were somewhat effeminate but restrained.

Kevin, on the other hand, was unapologetically flamboyant and consequently endured the relentless persecution by his Black male peers. He often strutted through the courtyard like it was a fashion runway. He routinely wore expensive MaxFactor lip-gloss and sometimes put glitter on his chest to call attention to his long, beautiful neck. On one occasion, he caught the attention of some students in a nearby building who were inexplicably hanging out of an upstairs window armed with water balloons, ready to drop their bombs on the next uncool passerby. Kevin fit the bill. As he walked under the window, a rain of water balloons whizzed by his face, splattering on the pavement in front of him. I, incidentally, was walking behind him, a witness to the entire spectacle. I ran up beside him to lend my support. We hurried through the rest of courtyard, looking at each other in disbelief. I had had a taste of what it was like to experience NCHS through Kevin’s eyes; it was dangerous, unsettling.

## Queer Bodies and Masculine Anxiety

The experiences of both students demonstrate the way “queer” bodies have the potential to invoke masculine anxiety. Here I am using the term queer to signal the disruption of the binary of heterosexual normalcy. From an intersectional perspective that views race, class, gender, and sexuality as mutually constructing identities and forms of oppression, they disrupt racial normalcy as well. Queer bodies take to task the normalizing demands for stable and binary notions of race and gender (masculinity), and sexual object choices central to the dominant heterosexual order. Instead, queer bodies aim to spoil and transgress coherent (and

essential) race and gender configurations and desire for a neat arrangement of dichotomous racial, sexual, and gendered difference central to group identities (Fuss, 1991). Through the narratives of Antoine and Kevin, it becomes clear that their queer bodies create anxiety because they disrupt the norms of masculinity associated with heterosexuality in African dance.

### *Antoine's Story*

When I interviewed Antoine, he was 18 years old and a senior at NCHS. At 5'7" and 150 pounds, he was smaller than most of his Black male peers. His medium brown skin, prominent nose, light brown eyes (from contact lenses), texturized dark brown hair with a bronze tuft in the front gave him a slightly feminine air. His voice was a slightly nasal baritone, lispy, peppered with slang. He dressed in the uniform worn by most of his Black male peers: baggy jeans, T-shirt under an oxford-type shirt (Polo or Nautica), plain baseball cap (blue, tan-orange, or whatever matched the outfit he was wearing), pierced left ear, boot-like shoes, and a backpack with a single arm sling. His clothing reflected his desire to fit in with his peers rather than to call attention to the ways being gay and a gender non-conforming dancer set him apart. Antoine, in fact, had always found it difficult to establish relationships with boys. In elementary and middle school, he preferred the games that girls played like jump rope, hopscotch, and foursquare rather than the games that boys played like basketball and football. The only time he ever played football was when the girls and the boys played together, a rare occasion in elementary and middle school. His same-age cousins who lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same schools wondered, "Why you always playing with the girls? You never wanna play with the boys." But Antoine was clear, "If the girls didn't play, Antoine didn't play." His attitude angered his cousins and the other neighborhood boys, but Antoine was reluctant to change. Instead, he developed less confrontational ways to fit in and not stand out. He acted shyly and said little. When he did talk, he deflected attention away from his own identity by telling stories about his mother, sister, father, cousin, or friends.

When Antoine came to NCHS in the ninth grade, as a result of his social isolation during elementary and middle school, he admitted that he lacked confidence: "I wasn't really good at like holding your head up and smiling and like, stuff like that."

At the beginning of the school year in ninth grade, he met with a counselor about his class schedule. When the counselor brought up the physical education (P.E.) requirement, Antoine asserted that "I'm not interested in any kind of sports or nothing like that so don't put me in that." The counselor suggested African dance, which at NCHS fulfills the P.E. requirement. Antoine agreed to "give it a shot." During his first semester of ADP, he was nervous and danced in the back. Second semester he began to warm up, and by sophomore year he remembered, "I was fine...and I gradually started coming to the front (of the class)."

Although participating in ADP gave Antoine a newfound celebrity, he continued to be socially reserved. Some of his interactions with Black male dancers who identified as heterosexual were particularly disturbing in this regard. On several occasions, I witnessed them punch Antoine's shoulder hard or slap him upside the head. Antoine would playfully protest these interactions, but he never reported them as a form of gendered harassment, which is what I believed they were. To me, hitting Antoine was a way that some of the heterosexual-identified Black male dancers dealt with their feelings of anxiety brought on by having to interact with a Black male student whose queer body disrupted the heteronormative masculinity of ADP.

Interestingly, when I asked Antoine about these incidents he had a different interpretation, one that surprised me. He said that his heterosexual peers regularly thought about same-sex desire, but had trouble admitting it. This anxious desire physically manifested itself as punching and hitting:

I think everybody has thought about it in a negative or positive way, being with the same sex. And when I say a negative way, if I was straight and I was like, "Ooh, I can't see myself doing it to another dude" or "I can't see myself being with a dude." That's still thinking about it...They be like, "Naw, no, we ain't never, we ain't never, I ain't never thought about being with another dude or whatever." And I'm like, if you sit there and be like, "Eew, I can't see myself being with another dude, that's nasty," that's thinking about it. So c'mon, you have thought about it in a negative or in a positive so you thought being with the same sex at least one time or more in your life. (Antoine)

Although I was taken aback by Antoine's non-confrontational approach that seemingly let his peers off the hook for the abuse they inflicted, it also showed that he was aware of the anxiety his queer body was producing. By taking the physical assaults in stride, which symbolically allowed them to repudiate queer masculinities, he kept the peace with heterosexual Black male students and quelled their anxiety. For instance, I observed Chris, an adult dancer in Nana's professional company, repeatedly, but jokingly hit Antoine upside the head while backstage during a dance performance at a local community center. Antoine never reported the harassment to Nana. On another occasion, I observed a Black male dancer punch Antoine's shoulder repeatedly as he yelled "Stop!" at the top of his lungs. In this instance, Nana did nothing to intervene, and I saw Antoine chuckle after the incident. Was Antoine's passivity simply a reflection of his low self-esteem? I think such an interpretation is too facile. When I asked Antoine about the social dynamics between the heterosexual and gay dancers, he said:

Like everybody wears a mask. Everybody has, everybody in this world has different faces. That's how I look at it. And it's like, when they [Black male dancers who identified as heterosexual] are by themselves they're more relaxed and more like, "Oh, bitch" and whatever. They don't say "girl" or nothing like that. But they, they call each other bitches and stuff like that and it's like, me



being who I am, I know the whole little, the movements, the motions and all that, the motions of being gay and all that stuff. I know what it is, and I'll sit back I'll just be like, O.K., if I was to ask them if they was gay, they would say no or if they was bisexual they would say no. But, if you sit there and watch their motions and watch a person, how they are, their personality, you'd be like, "A normal guy would not do some of the things that they're doing." And it's like, a normal guy don't sit there and go "bitch" and whatever and sit, and it's like, they kind of, they do little girls stuff too. And it's like, but you're straight, so you say, so why you acting like that or whatever. I find that weird. I don't care. I think that they are (gay), without a doubt. I think either they tried it (gay sex), or they wanna try it or something. They don't know how to come out. I really really feel that they are [gay].

This quote shows that Antoine is aware that some of the Black male dancers wore a heteronormative mask when they were in public and a more effeminate, queer mask when they were alone. The notion of masculinity as a mask evokes the work of Erving Goffman (1959) who used theatrical metaphors to describe the presentation of self in social situations. From this perspective, identity is conceptualized as a series of performances that differ, depending on the audience and the situation. Some of the Black male dancers, regardless of their actual sexual practices, experienced a great deal of anxiety in interactions with their (presumably) heterosexual female peers and wore a mask to compensate for this. Alone, their anxiety subsided and they felt more at ease to use "the motions of being gay."

I interviewed two Black male dancers who identified as heterosexual to follow up on Antoine's hypothesis that some of the Black male dancers wore heteronormative masks to quell any suspicion they were gay. One of the first questions I asked them was "What's it like being one of the very few young men in ADP?" After I asked the question, they let out a long sigh, looked down and said, "It's hard," which I interpreted as an indication of the anxiety they felt as a male dancer. Both young men talked about how their peers often assumed that they were gay just because they liked dancing. This may have been why they seemed to distance themselves from Antoine and Kevin during class and rehearsals; they experienced the all-too-common fear of being perceived as gay when you socialize with a person who is openly queer. Although their need to be viewed as "straight" was understandable, it seemed to create a simmering tension in the advanced ADP class that never quite dissipated during the period time I observed the class. Kevin, the other openly gay, gender non-conforming Black male student I interviewed, also fed this tension. Kevin took the notion of queer bodies to another level by publicly challenging the gender norms of ADP. For this reason, he produced a great deal of anxiety among his peers, male and female alike.

*Kevin's Story*

When I interviewed Kevin in his senior year, his goal in life was to be a "superstar" entertainer. His slender, medium brown, 5'10" body was like that of a chameleon. He seemed to be able to change his looks at will. Unlike Antoine who aimed to blend in with his peers, Kevin wanted to stand out. He purposely experi-

mented with his clothing for shock value. For instance, on the first day of school his senior year, Kevin said he wore “the most phenomenal outfit” as a testament to his individuality:

I had on these cream bell-bottom pants, these high-heeled boots with a Black shirt with a fur vest. Who wears fur to high school? Who wears, just tell me, have you ever seen just anybody wear fur to high school and really be serious about it? I was totally serious about wearing fur, and I strutted down that freakin’ street something fierce, with my fur vest on. And people just kept on touching it. I was in class just rubbing it ‘cause I had the fuckin’ best outfit the first day of school.

Purposely wearing a fur vest, a fashion accessory associated with femininity, is just one of the ways Kevin strove to be a gender non-conformist. Kevin felt there were “no manly things” about him. From sixth to eighth grade, Kevin told me he “passed” as a girl [ref]. From Kevin’s perspective, passing allowed him to have intimate relationships with boys in ways that would have been impossible had he presented himself as an effeminate boy:

I started sixth grade with the whole telling boys I was a girl thing and that’s how I got my first boyfriend. It was like that. That’s when Ms. Justice, that was, I could have gotten myself into some world of trouble. I do not know how much trouble I could have gotten myself into. My name was Justice, and I was a girl. (laughs) It was really funny and I had like, four or five boyfriends, something like that, and they never found out. Only one found out and he said he was going to kill me or something. It was weird. So that’s what it was like back in the neighborhood, (laughs) they just treated me like a little girl. That’s what they knew me as.

Although Kevin’s feminine appearance and androgynous body allowed him to pass as a girl in junior high school, the onset of puberty caused his physical features to change, making it impossible to pass when he reached high school. During this time, his appearance caused his male peers a great deal of anxiety. He recounted a dramatic incident that occurred at the school he attended before transferring to NCHS:

- K: Actually, this once at Tech I got harassed and I hope and pray to God it never happens again because it was Switch Day at Tech, the boys be girls and the girls be boys and of course me being the gay fag that I am...
- L: Wait, switch day?
- K: Yeah,
- L: They don’t have that here (at NCHS).
- K: No, I tried to get them to get that here too.
- L: So what is Switch Day?
- K: The girls dress up as guys and the guys dress up as girls. I took that to the extreme. I came, this was when Barbie Boutique was really at its peak. They had an all new Batik, cultural Barbie outfit. I took a little leotards

and tight hip huggers and flare at the bottom, some tennis shoes and my hair, I had long hair, so I had got some weave in it too. I got two ponytails and um the weave and the two ponytails and I had on like, lipstick and all this stuff. I was cute. And, I mean, the whole day went fine. The dudes was messin' with my titties and stuff and all this stuff and tryin' to pop them and stuff and it was pretty fun and so at the end of the day, I'm walkin' with my friends and there were dudes that were following me. I just knew something was gonna happen but I was tryin to like, I dunno, not think about it. And I sat at the bus stop and then one dude punched me in the eye and he ran, mind you. I was like fuck! And I was like, [holds his eye and makes whimpering noise], acting like a little fruit and he ran. That was so weak.

L: He ran?

K: Yeah, he punched me in my eye and then him and his friends ran around the corner and laughed. And I was just like, "God that sucked," and it hurt really hella bad and I lied and told everybody I ran into a tree. (laughs) They're like, "What happened to you?" "Oh, girl, I ran into a tree," and it was so funny 'cause no one believed me but it was the thing to do. Why would I walk around like, "Oh, I got punched in the eye by a boy, heehee." And my friends would be like, "Why'd you do that? Why'd you do that? You shouldn't be hella gay."

When Kevin finished telling this story, I remember being struck by his bravery, as well as by his perception that the inability of some boys to accept his playfulness with gender was a sign of weakness. Kevin had traveled a long road to accepting the fact that he enjoyed being effeminate. Over time he also realized that being effeminate did not necessarily mean presenting himself as a girl; it meant feeling comfortable expressing his masculinity in ways that most people associate with women. Over time, he learned how to be feminine without impersonating a woman, primarily through wearing certain hairstyles:

Hmm, ninth grade I had a ponytail, tenth grade I had a ponytail. Eleventh grade me and Lucas came (to school) with the same hairstyle: Eve braids in the back with the fake hair. Then um, I rocked, braided like this, really long, blue singles in the top and like, some in the back. And then the ponytail and then I cut it. When I cut my hair my whole high school career changed. My whole attitude changed about myself. I actually felt for the first time that I was cute, that I was attractive, 'cause I remember all these years, I've only thought I was cute since my junior year. Since just last year is when I started thinking I was semi-cute, you know. 'Cause before I had my ponytail, my hair, and then I cut it off and I saw that I had a face.

For Kevin, cutting his hair was a transformative experience that helped him accept himself as a gay, gender non-conforming young man:

Like, before I never looked in the mirror. I never thought I was cute. I don't know, I just thought I was, just me. Now that I started to look in the mirror, I started to like what I saw and wanted to improve it and get, I wore contacts since freshman year, or get my eyebrows arched or get, you know, a taper going on or, you know what I mean? It was just cute and I just felt cute and I guess people saw that too. 'Cause they started saying that I was cute.

Although Kevin was an excellent dancer, his effeminacy aroused the anxieties of Nana and some of the Black male dancers and drummers in ADP. They felt that his way of expressing himself in dance and everyday life was too female-identified. On several occasions, I witnessed Nana scold Kevin for using his hips too much. During another class, Baba, Nana's husband and one of the other paid musicians for ADP, sucked his teeth and yelled at Kevin for pointing his toes while doing a kicking movement. I overheard a Black female student snicker, "Kevin look so funny pointing his toes." Later, Kevin told me that he was well aware that he was supposed to keep his foot flexed in kicking movements, but sometimes he liked to practice other dance forms in ADP to "shake things up."

Although he admitted acquiescing to criticisms about his gender identity in class and during rehearsals, he did his "own thing" during performances, which meant doing as many gyrating hip movements as possible. Such performances not only allowed Kevin to express himself, but also to indirectly challenge the gender norms of African dance. For instance, in the last ADP dance concert of his senior year, Kevin wore Black yarn hair-extensions that made his dance steps look even more dramatic. I sat in the audience to gauge the reaction of his peers when he danced. As is customary among Black students, a contingent of Black female supporters of Kevin to my left hooped and hollered his name whenever he came out on stage furiously shaking his hips, lips pursed in mock coquettishness sporting serious attitude. The supporters' Black male friends and boyfriends laughed and pointed their fingers at Kevin exclaiming, "That guy dance like a faggot!" Quick as a flash, the Black female contingent jumped to Kevin's defense saying, "Shut-up!" or "I don't see you up there dancin'!" In this instance I believe Kevin's queer body was making space for alternative representations of masculinity.

Despite his popularity among some students, being a "superstar" gender non-conforming dancer eventually its toll on Kevin in the form of alienation and exclusion. Kevin felt he could only trust a few youth and adults, none of whom were his teachers or heterosexual identifying male peers. When I asked him to name the teachers that knew him the best, he replied:

I would say like, of all the people who should know me the best, it should be Nana. But then I don't think she knows me very well. I don't think any of the teachers know me very well.

I spoke with two of Kevin's teachers, Anne Harris and Bob Anderson, to get a sense of what he was like in his academic classes. Both teachers said that he

endured a lot of harassment from his peers, but in spite of it all he was extremely polite and a decent student. With Kevin's permission, I looked at his transcript and saw that it was filled with Bs, Cs, and a few Ds in math classes. Kevin said, "I never was good at math." Anne Harris, Kevin's English teacher in tenth grade was struck what he wrote about in the diary he was required to keep about class readings. "Often," she said, "he wrote about gaining a sense of self-worth, as well as his ongoing insecurities. He's torn between having self-image problems and knowing that he's fabulous." Bob Anderson, Kevin's history teacher in eleventh grade, praised Kevin's bravery to be himself in the face of intense peer pressure to conform. "Kevin made it easier for others to be different," said Mr. Anderson, "Everyone benefited from the risks he took."

### Implications: Queer Possibilities for Afrocentric Reform

The over 200 most Black students who register for classes in ADP each semester are one indication of Black Studies' success in engaging Black students. However, the experiences of two students in the program who identify as gay and are gender non-conforming, Antoine and Kevin, uncover some cleavages in Afrocentric reform that give us pause for celebration. In particular, their narratives reveal how a profound masculine anxiety lies at the heart of Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy, and queer students who enact non-traditional masculine identities catch the brunt of this unease. Both Antoine and Kevin were physically assaulted for being gender non-conforming. Even though both students survived the assaults and continued to attend classes at NCHS, the harassment took its toll on their self-esteem and self-worth. This is ironic since one of the main goals of Afrocentric curriculum is to increase Black students' awareness and self-confidence (Grant, 2008). The problem here is not the idea of Afrocentrism, which progressively aims to de-center Whiteness, but the nationalist politics at the heart of this project that fail to interrogate social and cultural practices based on hegemonic notions of masculinity and heteronormativity.

At NCHS, the political struggles initiated by members of the Black Student Union to create a Black Studies Program were driven by the nationalist politics of the Black Panther party which were profoundly patriarchal (Davis & James, 1998). Angela Davis remembers the moments when she initially felt the "stirrings" of Black nationalism through Black nationalist leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, how initially it made her feel "extremely good," later influenced her political practice, but ultimately caused her to question her place as a Black woman in the politicized Black community:

My relationship to the particular nationalism I embraced was rooted in political practice. The vortex of my practice was always the progressive, politicized Black community though I frequently questioned my place as a Black woman in that community, even in the absence of a vocabulary with which to pose the relevant questions. (Davis & James, 1998)

Davis' experiences in the Black Panther party and later in the Communist party parallel those of Kevin who was initially excited about the opportunity to participate in the more traditional African dance classes in ADP where classes were taught by an African woman who used real live drummers. He remembered thinking:

...it was weird because at my other school we danced to an African tape. In a way it wasn't even African. I come to NCHS and they have real drummers and ladies that are actually from Africa! Wow, ooh, dang, that's deep, you know. She has a little accent and stuff... I'm like, "cool." I thought that was real cool.

Three years after he initially joined ADP, Kevin, like Angela Davis, had begun to question his place in ADP on account of the subtle ways codes of masculinity were marked and enforced:

I mean like, and it's certain things, like, a boy can't do dance wise, and to be seen a certain way. Like, if he wants to get on the ground and roll his ass, or whatever, and do something in that sexual nature, it wouldn't be, it wouldn't be like, "Oh that was..." it's be like, "Dude, what are you doing?" You know? As for female to get on the ground and do that, it's perfectly fine. You know. So, it's that thing like, boys can dance but then they can do so much to be looked at as masculine. It's like a weird thing.

Within the nationalist, Afrocentric space of ADP, male and female students were encouraged to perform their race and gender identities in "traditional" ways that reified the notion that African culture and families are uniformly patriarchal, heterosexual, and homophobic (heteronormative). Kevin's story, however, is symbolic of the pedagogic possibilities of queer bodies to disrupt the conventional narrative of African traditions in ways that make it possible to engage even more Black students in ways that are more equitable and socially just.

One of the most significant challenges facing Afrocentric reforms like ADP is to foster student engagement in ways that do not essentialize Black/African communities and exclude experiences that fall outside the hegemonic norms of Blackness. Afrocentric reform efforts that do so are out of touch with Black communities on the African continent that historically and in the present day have made space for Black men, women, children and youth to enact alternative gender and sexuality identities (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Moreover, contemporary urban Black youth cultures around the world include youth who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer. Urban educators' ignorance of and disconnect from the everyday lives of Black queer youth is a serious barrier to the liberatory potential of Afrocentric reform and other culture-based pedagogical strategies like culturally-responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Despite these barriers, I believe there are "queer" possibilities for Afrocentric reforms. These possibilities depend on urban educators' ability to develop an awareness of queer lives, past and present, in Black/African communities, and

to be fearless in their convictions that this knowledge is important and relevant to all their students' education. There are step-by-step practices that support the development of this knowledge. For example, urban educators can increase their knowledge of queer people of African descent by viewing documentary films such as *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, et al., 2005) and *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, et al., 2006), and *Looking for Langston* (Julien et al., 2007), and reading books like *Hungochani: The History Of A Dissident Sexuality In Southern Africa* (Epprecht, 2005) and *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Equipped with this knowledge, they can raise critical questions about gender and sexuality norms in African communities and contemporary urban Black communities. Beyond these practical strategies, however, uncovering the "queer" possibilities of Afrocentric reforms requires urban educators to make a bold and courageous paradigm shift to conceptualize queer youth as an asset, rather than a liability, in their efforts to foster student engagement.

## Endnote

1. The names of the school, teachers and students used in this article are pseudonyms to protect their identities.

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