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Chance: “What is wrong with us Black gay men?”

Noah: “It’s not just Black men. . . . Gay men in general seem to idolize these hypermasculine ideals. For us, it’s homo-thugs. For white queens, it’s the college jock Abercrombie types. . . . We’ve become completely invested in aping hetero-identities.

Alex: “It’s all so boring. Just give me a big ole queen any day!”
—“Don’t Make Me Over,” *Noah’s Arc*, 2005

Straight people don’t know shit about sexuality. Often, the ways in which the dominant (i.e. heteronormative) culture understands sexuality and orientation work to cover up the realities of what is actually going on in people’s sexual lives. For example, sexuality is typically understood through pathologies based on heteronormative ideals. Sexual orientations such as gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer are often questioned and stigmatized in contrast to heterosexuality. Any suggestion that someone is queer, especially if they are male, suggests that what you have been led to believe up until this point is untrue if you did not already know about their queerness. Heterosexuality is treated as normal, understood, and validated by active relationships and children.

For many Black and Brown men in particular, there is often a resistance to engage with experiences

that complicate static ideas of sexual orientation and identity. Specifically larger homophobic and effemiphobic forces inspire many men to resist femme, bottom, or queer personas in casual and professional spaces for fear of being harassed, ostracized, or not seen as sexually attractive. The resistance to identifying as gay, queer, or femme, however, does not keep these men from engaging in queer activity. *Trade* is a term Black queer people use to refer to these men. By using the term trade, I am not attempting to offer another sexual orientation, but rather I use the term as an invitation to denaturalize normative understandings of sexual orientation and practice.

Some of my favorite naive-straight-people comments when talking about men are “He ain’t gay. He got kids”; “He ain’t gay. He married”; and “He ain’t gay. He Jamaican.” All of these are ways people use heteronormative scripts to argue that a man could not possibly engage in sex with a man or transwoman. For me, it is a given that these men are not “gay” as in out of the closet or gay politically to combat homophobia. We would not be having this conversation if that were the case. What the naive straight person means is that there is no way this man could have any sexual experiences with men because their understanding of heterosexuality in particular and sexuality more broadly does not allow room for it. Adrienne Rich discusses this as “compulsory heterosexuality.” In her seminal essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence,” Rich discusses how the heteronormative script functions as a theoretical stumbling block for many straight people because “lesbian experience has been written out of history or catalogued under disease” (13). This erasure is manifested in larger ignorances (and supposed ignorances) that straight culture has around sexuality. At the same time, the erasure of queer people and knowledges also allow straight or straight-passing people the freedom to experiment with queer sex without the stigma of homophobia and suspicion from the dominant culture. Straight people’s assumptions about the naturalness of heterosexuality, the legibility of queerness, and the awfulness of homophobia also contribute to this ignorance about queer sexuality being normalized.

In this article, I use my ethnographic research from Harlem (SGL/LGBTQ) Pride 2017 to critically engage with the discourse around trade amongst Black gay men and transwomen. Much of their feedback coincided with my 2013 Washington DC Black Pride research on *shade*, where my participants saw shade and the interviews themselves to speak back to, to riff off of, or to correct dominant scripts about Black queer people. I asked the participants about their understanding and experiences with trade, and I found that they knew all about how dominant/heteronormative sexual scripts often worked to obscure queer realities and their experiences with straight men. I argue that the ideas captured in these interviews represent a literacy because three concepts came up over and over again that also circulate in academic, pop culture, and my personal discourses.

The three themes that emerged are:

- (1) “Trade as a sexual literacy”: The participants’ comments suggest that to know the slang term, the men themselves, or why the term exists in the culture complicates a simply heteronormative view of the world;
- (2) “The Truth about Straight Men”: The participants’ comments work to correct normative understandings of straight men and their sexual practices; and
- (3) “More than Tops and Bottoms”: The participants comments work to correct assumptions

about preferred sexual practice based on gender performance.

My participants often used personal stories, anecdotes, and or jokes to take me into moments where gender and/or sexuality were functioning in ways straight folks might not expect.

Methodology: Fierce Literacies, Recruiting Participant, Research Site, and Interview Protocol

My work is informed by understanding literacy as embodied, as a way of being and moving through the world. I define fierce literacies as a “type of counter consciousness that allows Black queer people or ‘the girls’ to riff off of static ideas of language and literacy both to communicate with and to create community amongst friends” (Davis 58.) I am also building off of work by Prior and Shipka that encourages scholars to look beyond just alphabetic text when critically engaging with literacy. This project recognizes that amongst close friends, “the girls” often share sexual narratives about sleeping with straight men and speak back to dominant heteronormative scripts or pathologies about sexuality. As with my research on shade, I use the term “the girls” to discuss individuals in the Black queer community: Black transfolk, gay men, lesbians, and non-Black queer people who navigate the same spaces and engage in the same literacy practices. “The girls” is a slang term in the LGBTQ community for gay folk, and I also use it to honor the relationship (and shared oppression) between Black ciswomen, transwomen, and gay men that often exists.

I refer to the stories, anecdotes, and jokes as *literacy narratives* because they point to sexual experience as a site of knowledge. I build on Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetart’s understanding of literacy narratives as an ethnographic method to engage with individual and cultural identity, as well as rites of passage (647). When I use the term literacy hereafter, I also build on Jonathan Alexander’s work on sexual literacies, as expressed in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice*. Specifically, Alexander argues that the stories we tell about sex and sexuality are central to who we are individually, collectively, and politically. Alexander’s emphasis on the importance of stories in community making is in line with how I see stories working in Black queer communities. I consider pullin’ trade as a fierce sexual literacy, and I see the narratives and anecdotes presented below functioning the same way in the sense that they move one’s gaze to that of Black queer people, forcing the reader to (re)see the world around them an began to understand a literacy that is often hiding in plain sight.

While attending the festival, I recruited participants by enacting snowball sampling. Similar to how cliques work outside of research contexts, the participants introduced me to their friends, who were invited to participate as well. I recruited participants who had knowledge about trade as a Black queer term and who were openly gay or trans. I interviewed eight queer people, and each interview lasted between three and ten minutes. I interviewed four of the participants in pairs (Courtney & Victor, and Jason & Oreill) and four individually (Harmonica, Giana, Ashley, and Joseph),¹ and all interviews took place at Harlem Pride, which is a Harlem-specific Pride festival organized and geared toward queer people of color. Harlem Pride began in 2010 as a party and art exhibit. It is also

a part of the larger history of LGBTQ Pride festivals that date back to the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the subsequent protests and festivals that sparked the modern LGBTQ rights movement. I picked Harlem Pride as my research site because it is unique in the fact that it is heavily populated by and geared toward “the girls” who would be familiar with the language and culture.

Due to my memberships in the various Black and gay communities, I have multiple and layered relationships with the people in the spaces I study. Thus, I used existing relationships or pinpointed other Black queer people to implant myself temporarily into small discourse communities and flesh out trade as a literacy. I met Victor, who would connect me with many of my participants while attending Tennessee State University, a historically Black university in Nashville. At the time of the interview, Victor did work with pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and sexual health in the queer community. For these reasons, I knew that he was aware of larger heteronormative forces that inform many Black men’s sexual practices and Black queer cultural understanding of sexuality. Victor introduced me to his friends and colleagues Courtney, James, and Oreill. This was valuable because I was able to talk to Black queer people in conversation with their peers and watch them work to define trade together based on common experiences. I met Joseph by walking up to him at the festival while he was being interviewed by the local news. He introduced me to Ashley, who is white but sees herself as part of the Black queer community, and she introduced me to Giana. I also already knew Harmonica, a well-known drag queen, through a friend from graduate school. Each of the participants knew about trade as a Black queer happening and was either a Black queer or was introduced to me by a Black queer person.

I asked the participants to tell me what they thought trade was, how it was used in the Black queer community, and in what ways did they see gender performance playing a role in how they read Black men. The participants clearly teased out their knowledge about trade as a counter knowledge, or as I call it, a fierce literacy, specific to Black queer people, that runs counter to dominant understandings of sexuality. Several of the participants would either preface or end statements by pointing to common assumptions or misconceptions only to speak what they saw as the real truth rather than the easy or obvious truths that some have been led to believe. I see this ability to read and share truths against dominant scripts as a *fierce literacy*. The participants saw their feedback as filling a void in mainstream discourse about sex. Specifically, there are a lot of media texts and academic discourse about the stigma of being read as queer rather than the experience or knowledge that comes from living a queer life. I have critically engaged with the topic of trade at bars and in living rooms with friends, the work of scholars who discuss sexuality and passing in the Black community, and my participants’ feedback during interviews. These conversations have helped me understand why trade has particular traction in the Black community.² These three research questions informed my research:

- (1) How is/are trade understood in the Black queer community?
- (2) What do stories about trade help us understand about sexual literacies and how they are reproduced more largely?
- (3) How do stories about trade speak back to commonsense literacies of sexual performance tied to gender?

In answering these questions, I see the truths I present in this article as empowering mandates and yet as basic and commonsense. I found that participants repeatedly engaged in the fierce literacy practice of citing heteronormative notions of sexuality often to deconstruct them and narrate their own experiences. Even though Harlem Pride can be understood as a Black queer space, the participants' comments speak to the multiple ways Black queer people create identity and share knowledges in conversation with larger white supremacist and heteronormative forces.

Trade as a Fierce Literacy

To understand trade as a fierce literacy is to understand that it has always been common knowledge within the queer community that straight men occasionally like to sleep with gay men and transwomen when they think no one will find out. For example, in *Gay New York*, George Chauncey writes that queer prostitutes used the term as early as the early 1900s for the male customer of a "fairy" (gay or trans) prostitute, and the term would later be used by many to describe any man who has any sexual interaction with queer people (70). I was somewhat shocked to find out that the term *trade*, as I understood it, was that old. However, I knew that the phenomenon itself was far from new. I am more interested in how Black queer people understand a larger sexual matrix that is often erased by normative discussions of sexual identity and experience. Specifically, E. Patrick Johnson's "Snap! Culture" and Eric Darnell Pritchard's "This is Not an Empty-Headed Man in a Dress" critically engage with the literacies and experiences of Black queer people who push back against homophobia, and normative understandings of literacy, or what Pritchard termed "literacy normativity," to survive.

Chris Bell's chapter "I'm Not the Man I Used to Be" from *Sex and Disability* serves as an exemplar of how to use personal narrative to move the reader beyond normative understandings of sexuality and HIV status disclosure. Bell places his sexual narratives in conversation with contemporary discourses around Black men who have been incarcerated for not disclosing their HIV status. Specifically, Bell narrates several moments picking up male prostitutes, where there is no discussion of whether the guy is straight, nor do these events take place in "gay" spaces. In some narratives, there is barely any discussion at all due to a language barrier. Bell writes himself as not fearless but courageous as he navigates homophobic spaces to procure sex from trade. His narratives also run consistent with other narratives from "the girls" where the emphasis is on masculinity as sexy and trade's resistance to being read as gay. Each of these research projects focus on Black queer sexuality and lived experience as knowledge. In this project, I am interested in how "the girls" make sense of the homophobic and often contradictory messages that circulate in our culture around trade, while still loving and fucking these men.

The fetishization of masculinity in the Black community is at the heart of trade as a literacy. Much research has been done on how the masculinities and sexualities of straight Black men are often misread by mainstream culture and based on white supremacist scripts, including Ronald Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, Vershawn Ashanti Young's *Not Your Average Nigga*, and David Kirkland's *A Search Past Silence*. Each of these works include narratives where Black men (and boys) discuss disdain toward being read as effeminate and/or queer, while this disdain is placed

within a larger history of Black male oppression and literacy. These discussions of larger ambivalence to being read as or stigmatized for being queer tells part of our experience as Black folk. However, there are also Black queer people who have embraced their queer sexualities, otherness, and/or femininity not without trial but with pride.

I see the participants in this way. The participants are often gregarious and larger than life in their telling of stories to do an on-the-spot critique of what the listener thinks they know. Friends and close acquaintances, regardless of race and gender, often share sexual stories to counsel or to bond. I believe that calling attention to Black queer people's stories illuminates points of view and knowledges that may otherwise be unheard. Having knowledge about men who exist within perceived gray areas of sexuality often creates discursive communities within and outside of the Black queer community. Also, passing for straight, or as trade, has a specific cultural capital in the lives of Black men and can often be necessary to one's survival. The ability to pass for straight or to be seen as attractive to straight men is often privileged in many gay groups and spaces. For these reasons, sex stories about virginity loss and hooking up with straight men are often the stories that are circulated and reproduced the most amongst "the girls."

In my research on shade—verbal/nonverbal sparring specific to the "the girls"—I engage it as a fierce literacy in the sense that the practice speaks back to common readings of language or gesture to create new meaning, critique, and entertainment (58). Here, I connect trade as a literacy to this larger fierce literacy framework, tracing the roots of the term's use and explicating its currency within the Black queer community. Passing for straight is a privilege or a dilemma that I do not have. There

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is no stage in life since elementary school where it has not been clear to me that I was read as queer by my peers, friends, and family. At the same time, I cannot say that every single person I have ever met assumed I was gay either. I regularly enjoy gay bars, clubs, bathhouses, balls, sex parties, house parties, feminist discussion groups, pride festivals, and spaces that encourage sexual and queer liberation.

At the same time, I navigate spaces that are read/understood as straight, including the church, fraternity, and even academia more largely. This discussion of trade makes the slippages between seemingly straight and queer spaces more salient outside of the Black queer community.

I argue that trade as a literacy would have more traction in oppressed and poor communities where gender performances are more scrutinized by the white straight dominant culture. Essentially, we are talking about survival. It is the Black queer experience that gives trade complexity and meaning. To suggest that a heterosexual persona is coveted just because it is sexy is to ignore the very real history of homophobia in hiring practices and the ongoing street violence that many Black queer people face day to day. Trade as a literacy occupies the space between cultural/Black/queer

literacies and sexual/queer literacies. In their stories of pullin' trade, Black queer people illuminate the messiness of how we often understand sexual identity and performance as static. Pullin' trade also reminds us of how space and context inform how we understand these things to function. The practices of telling narratives about pullin' trade serve as a sexual literacy and rite of passage into those communities for Black gay men and transwomen. In listening to these narratives, I find myself asking: Why does the term have such resonance in the Black community? Storylines on shows such as FX's *Pose*, OWN's *Greenleaf*, Showtime's *P-Valley*, BET's *Twenties* and the public narratives of famous Black queer people such as Angelica Ross, Lil Nas X, Laverne Cox, and Janet Mock have brought more attention to this phenomenon and how many transwomen are murdered by trade or down-low (DL) men because those men cannot deal with their attraction to transwomen.

The “Truth” About Straight Men: Defining Trade and DL

Sex appeal and masculinity was at the core of all the participants' descriptions of who trade was and how they looked. In “Snap! Culture,” Johnson describes trade as “handsome and *extremely* masculine” (128, italics in original). These two descriptors speak to the idea that the performance of masculinity and perceived heterosexuality is sexually enticing. However, trade's mere presence in queer contexts, like a gay club or a gay man's bedroom, complicates the idea of heterosexuality as a static identity or performance. In Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano's *The Joy of Gay Sex*, interactions with trade often reify heteronormative notions of masculinity, signifying heterosexuality and physical dominance:

Someone straight and potentially dangerous called *rough trade*. Hustlers are known as commercial trade. Both terms naturally connote danger. Two constants emerge: He who is “trade” plays the straight role, and the sex is geared toward his climax, not to mutual orgasm. (287)

While I acknowledge that the authors' description of trade is a little sensational, it points toward this larger fetishization of heterosexuality and masculine personas in the face of homosexual activity. I see connections between Felice and Silverstein's concept of trade and Pritchard's concept of literacy normativity in the sense that they both speak to how gender/sexual customs and literacies specific to the West often have authority and are read as correct.

Within the Black community and in the larger culture, the idea that heterosexuals are people who have sex with members of the opposite sex and that homosexuals are people who have sex with same sex erases the lived experiences and realities of self-identified straight men who have or continue to engage in sex with gay men and transwomen. This erasure works to the benefit of men who want to keep that part of their lives a secret. Thus, compulsory or normative understandings of sexual orientation keep people from being able to see these realities and this contributes to literacy normativity. Specifically, knowing participants pull trade complicates the idea of a masculine performance signifying a heterosexual orientation, one that is resistant to homosexual activity. As a fierce literacy, the phrase “pullin' trade” also playfully signifies off fishing, or the idea that there is a gravity-like pull some gay men and transwomen seem to have that makes straight men not so

straight. The phrase suggests that sexual identity is not static and is informed by our experiences and the people we meet. In order to understand pullin' trade as rites of passage that almost all queer people experience, we have to understand the identity or designation of straight as not permanent or mutually exclusive when it comes to engaging in homosexual activity.

In the early 2000s, the phrase DL would come to describe Black men who have sex with men while performing heterosexual personas in other parts of their lives. The archetype of the “down low brotha,” an otherwise good Black man who has unprotected sex with men and women, became the scapegoat for higher HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women. Formerly used to describe undercover sexual escapades of any kind, “On the Down Low” became a phrase to signify queer possibility and the personal anguish of a “straight man.” The DL gained mainstream attention through the 2004 publication of J. L. King's *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep with Men* and King's subsequent appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. This was followed by Terry McMillan's appearance on the show in which she discussed her relationship with a Down Low man. In addition, E. Lynn Harris novels and countless DL storylines on shows like *Girlfriends*, *Will & Grace*, and *Law & Order SVU* would play a role in cementing the DL in mainstream discourse. Works such as Keith Boykin's 2005 book *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America* and Jeffrey McCune's 2014 *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* tease out the DL phenomena as not specific to just Black men and not responsible for escalating HIV/AIDS rates amongst Black women, but the DL man continues to be viewed as a social pariah. Inspired by McCune and Boykin's work, I think research like this encourages people to have more pragmatic, rather than just compulsory, conversations about sexuality and sexual health.

That said, there may be a slight but wavering difference between DL men and trade. Down low men are invested in giving the appearance of heterosexuality while also having sex with men in private. However, *trade* are straight men who are two steps away from gay activity, who do not necessarily self-identify as gay. The former is based on a lie: “I'm straight. I never have sex with men,” while the latter is most often based on an assumption: “I'm not gay but if I were, you'd be the one.” However, neither trade nor DL men are typically comfortable with being commonly understood as same-gender attracted. Some out gay men self-identify as trade, but most of the time, the term is used to talk about a straight man who “will go.” It must be understood that these phrases overlap, and many people use them interchangeably. For example, later on in this article, two of the participants, Courtney and Victor, discuss trade as contemporary and DL as outdated.

I also want to be clear that trade and bisexuality/pansexuality are not necessarily the same. One who self identifies as bisexual or pansexual claims their queer or non-normative sexual identity. In contrast, trade as a *designation* speaks to our understanding of sexual identity politics. For example, I was labeled gay by my peers long before I understood myself to be gay. Similarly, trade, as a term and an identity, is projected *onto* men by Black queer people. While DL represents sexual identity being hidden, trade speaks to an identity in flux. The participants define the term in a similar manner but also work to complicate heterosexuality and masculinity by telling truths about men based on knowledges and experiences specific to Black queer life. Thus, when the participants discuss trade, trade falls into two categories: 1) men who identify as straight but dabble (or have dabbled) in queer

sexual practices and 2) gay men who purposely or consequently present as straight.

As their responses show, pullin' trade is an on-the-spot literacy, similar to reading and throwing shade, in the sense that it is not a static reading of people or situations but one informed by the material context. Specifically, participants' responses demonstrate that trade/pullin' trade as literacy is not as much about the trade themselves as the knowledge that they exist, which runs counter to heteronormative ideas of sex and sexuality.

Participants on Trade

Joseph was one of the first participants I interviewed. He stuck out at the festival because he was wearing an Omega Psi Phi fraternity hat. I am a member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, another NPHC/ "Divine 9" organization, so the letters stuck out to me. In Black college and Greek life, Que Dogs, members of this fraternity, are often looked at as hyper-masculine. I have even gotten into arguments with members of this fraternity about whether or not they have gay members. For this reason alone, I would consider Joseph trade in my world. So, when I saw him being interviewed by a news crew at Harlem Pride, I knew I had to talk to him as well. I started the interview with the question, "What is trade?"

Like many of the other participants, Joseph sees trade as tied to masculinity or at least a dissociation from femininity. He says: "Trade is intended to be those brothers who were messing around with gay men but didn't want to associate with us on a regular basis." The common theme that connects every participant's discussion of trade is that they—that is, *trade*—are straight masculine men who have sex with gay men and transwomen. Courtney, on the other hand, discusses trade as mysterious unicorns in the sense that people do not think they exist, which adds to their allure. He points to a sense of mystery or the unknown as central to his understanding of trade. He goes on to mention several forms of trade including "Bum Trade," "Dirty Dick Trade," and "Regular Trade," which suggests that there's not one type of trade and that participants knew it when they saw it. In a Black queer context, trade is used as a masculine signifier and as a term for sex work. Even though all of my participants had similar thoughts on how trade is understood today, a couple of the participants also discussed how the meaning of trade has changed over time.

For example, Harmonica states that the definition of trade has expanded, and she thinks now people throw it around. Similar to shade, trade becomes a catch-all and stands in for sexual attractiveness. Ashley heard the term more often in her twenties (the 2000s) than she hears it today. She explains: "The term trade has slowed down from when I was younger and even in the last five years." I don't have any empirical data to support this, but I have peeped this too. I think it is related to the increased visibility of Black queer people in the media. Similar to Joseph, Courtney describes trade as masculine. "You might not even know if they're gay but you look at them and be like 'Oh, that's trade.'" In this statement, Courtney suggests that the man's sexual orientation is unknown yet also suggests an ability to tell one's propensity to engage queer sexual activity. Courtney is discussing an on-the-spot, situated read/understanding of sexuality. He deliberately avoids normative notions of masculinity like chopping wood or playing baseball and instead suggests that he reads masculinity

and potential queerness in men intuitively from how they carry themselves and the context. There is no one way that a man can carry himself that would make sure that he is read straight in all contexts or gay in all contexts. However, normative straight culture works hard to convince us that there are right ways to be a man, which are often informed by nationality, race, religion, etc. While Courtney and Victor may have different reads on who they perceive to be trade, what is more telling is that they/we have a common thought process of how to discern trade and that we know this reading runs counter to how straight people think.

Many people in the Black queer community also tie their understanding of trade back to early definitions of the term. For example, Ashley describes regular harassment that she has received as a white transwoman, what Silverstein and Picano call commercial trade:

When I walk down the street, I get accosted by (teenaged) young men of color looking for not just sex but money. To them their penis sells. They know they're young and will attract whatever crowd, and they don't even think of it as gay or not gay. They just think money.

Them too are considered trades because they're hustlers. They're just tricks of the trade.

In this scenario, masculinity is a commodity to be sold. As in previous comments, Ashley speaks about trade as masculine and suggests that trade do not see sex with men or transwomen as gay in and of it itself, nor do they believe that it signifies a gay sexual orientation. Instead, their focus is on the money that is being exchanged during the interaction. In the words of Method Man, "Cash rules everything around me. Cream. Get the money. Dolla, dolla bills y'all." Exchanges like these are why the term trade can easily be connected to commerce.³ Joseph describes commercial trade as "exactly that. I'm willing to do such and such in exchange for . . ."—he calls attention to bartering as a part of pullin' trade. These exchanges are not always about full on sexual intercourse for monetary rewards. Sometimes they are about bartering for food, shelter, acceptance and/or career advancement. However, when I asked friends Victor and Courtney the difference between trade and DL, they stated that they see trade as more current than DL:

Victor: I think DL is a played-out term.

Courtney: I also think DL is a played-out term, but I won't negate that they exist. One trade might not necessary be gay, but if he is, it doesn't mean he's DL. He's just not going around saying 'Oh, I'm gay.' DL, they not telling nobody....

Courtney points to the overlap between DL and trade. Both identities help tease out that there are larger forces and politics at work, including but not limited to sexual practices, that lead people to claim the sexual orientations they do. In such cases, engaging in same-sex sexual activity does not necessarily influence men to adopt public queer sexual identities. In contrast, I identify as gay for political and sexual reasons. I believe that my queer representation helps fight homophobia and signals to other men that I'm down for a good time. However, that is not everyone's goal. Most people are just trying to survive and don't have time for the politics of sexuality or the stigma of homosexuality.

The participants understand trade/pullin' trade as a phrase specific to the Black queer community and experience. I offer "pullin' trade" to rhetoric and composition as a way to engage with the complex ways that masculinity and sexual identity are read and performed. Pullin'

trade represents a larger sexual/gender literacy that demonstrates how masculinity or perceived heterosexuality are often read as sexual ideals. Jason first saw the term used in Black Gay Yahoo chatrooms he navigated as a teenager. Even though she is white, Ashley sees trade as a Black gay term used to describe primarily Black and Latino men. However, she feels it is necessary to state that these men exist in white communities as well:

If you go to some neighborhoods in Louisiana or Minnesota where it is all white people, there are trades there. . . To them because they're on the top scene and are the ones doing the screwing, they don't consider it gay. It has become an urban terminology that I have learned in the Black community.

Ashley, Jason, and the other participants see trade/pullin' trade as a situated knowledge, or, as I have argued, a literacy specific to the Black queer community. However, one of the controversies of the DL media spectacle of the early 2000s was the suggestion that Black men were the only ones who were secretly sleeping with men while maintaining public relationships with women. While I acknowledge that men of color often feel more pressure to live up to arbitrary masculine benchmarks, Ashley's acknowledgment of white trade is very important in understanding that trade (the people) exist everywhere. Even relationships between lesbians and cisgender "straight" women function in similar ways. For example, the LUG—"Lesbian Until Graduation"—trope speaks to how often college is seen as a progressive space where "straight" women can try on a lesbian identity and take it off in the "real world" when it may not be acceptable anymore.

Lastly, the notion of trade as subjective was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Several of the participants mention that their understanding of trade is individual and situated. Courtney, for example, mentions that he and his friends periodically disagree about who is trade: "One of my friends thinks another one of my friends is trade, and I'm like 'that's a lady.'" Courtney's comments suggest that there is not a common understanding of masculinity within the Black queer community. However, trade is still understood in contrast to a femme persona. Similar to Courtney, Joseph disagrees with his gay-children about who is trade based on femininity. He suggests that our understanding of trade has evolved: "A lot of my kids—I look at the guys they find attractive and go [tilting his head], 'Okay?!?' Some of the guys that I know for a fact topped them, I look at them like... [tilts head]—'Okay?!?'"

Joseph takes on a sarcastic tone to suggest that he questions his gay-children's readings of their partners as trade. Since he sees these men as feminine, he concludes they are not trade. While a lot of this discussion has been about what trade is and is not, I see trade as really about ambiguity. Anyone who is not obviously legible as gay is trade and yet the fact that they are in question at all says that a straight identity may not be so legible. Any gay person can be and may be read as trade by someone. However, I cannot have a discussion about trade without acknowledging the fact that queer people (especially trans people) are regularly targets of violence because a homophobic culture can read them as queer. We must acknowledge that even some straight people have been victims of homophobia because they were read as queer. Then there are all the ways that straight people have bullied each other and taught their kids how to look and act straight even when no one queer was around.⁴ With that being said, the participants' comments both acknowledge common and often

institutionalized literacies about sexuality while simultaneously speaking back to and rewriting these literacies to create space for their truths. Next, I engage with how literacies about trade denaturalize the conflation of gender performance with sexual behavior.

More Than Just Tops and Bottoms

This section focuses on how fierce literacies of pullin' trade speak back to normative ideas of tops and who bottoms during anal sex. The most consistent theme in our discussion engaged who masculine men are and what sexual practices they engage in based on larger Black queer communal knowledges. In his discussion of Black queer people and undesirability, Pritchard discusses how literacy normativity informs our ideas of what is sexually enticing:

Those holding normative standards of beauty, body, and gender attain more power within a public that places so much value and attention on physical appearance and normative masculinity and femininity. Accordingly, others are seen as having less value based on those same standards. Those notions reign over the social experiences of the everyday and permeate every facet of lived experience, including at work, at school, in families, among friends, and online. (*Fashioning Lives* 195)

These normative understandings of masculinity and femininity as diametrically opposed exist everywhere in heteronormative/dominant culture. So, it makes sense that this informs how Black queer people see sexuality. However, my participants also speak back to and rewrite these literacies. They speak back to effemiphobia in Black gay culture and deconstruct sexual and gender identity as tied to behavior. Lastly, the participants discuss how men's gender performances influence their sex appeal. While they were aware of larger readings of gender that render femininity as undesirable and masculinity as appealing, many of my participants went out of their way to tell stories and present scenarios that suggest that these static ways of understanding sexuality were not the norm in their community.

In a lot of ways, trade is defined in opposition to what is considered a butch queen or stereotypical gay man. Joseph states that there has always been a heteronormative and gendered division amongst Black queer people. He explains: "The girls were the girls and the boys were the boys. The trade were the boys, and the girls were the more feminine men." Later on, I asked Joseph if he thought trade or the privileging and fetishization of masculinity was a problem in the Black queer community. He explained that he does not see it as a negative thing, but what he does have a problem with is the effemiphobia in the community:

It seems to be that the more effeminate men are looked down upon. They're seen in a negative light. But like I always tell people, like people told me coming up, it was the more effeminate men (and transwomen) that started the Stonewall Riot. It was those people who were tired of being treated less than while the more masculine/trade-y guys [making air quotes] who wanted to fade into the background and let the police do the things that they were doing to us.

Here, we see Joseph challenging dominant understandings of effeminate men, challenging the

belief that effeminate men are weak. Joseph references the heroic effort of Black transwomen activists like Marsha P. Johnson, Silvia Rivera, Miss Major, and many others in starting the Stonewall Riots, which would lead to the creation of June Pride festivals everywhere, including in Harlem. Specifically, it was both her identity as a transwomen and many other queer people's inability to blend in with heterosexual society that led them to the front lines to fight on behalf of the LGBTQ community.

Oreill uses a scenario that happened earlier that day at Harlem Pride as an example of how effemiphobia functions in the Black queer community.

During the parade, I was standing there with African American (gay) men and these two femme Black dudes walked by and one had on a crop top. The other group was like 'Eww! That's so gross! Why can't they just be men' and I was like that is so messed up to argue that [based off what they are wearing]...

In this example, it is clear that even gay prides are not necessarily safe spaces for men or transwomen to be themselves. Queer people's knowledges of trade trouble the idea of gay versus straight spaces. For the one group of men, femininity runs counter to what they see as acceptable in men. However, Oreill speaks back to this stance in his comments.

When I asked Harmonica if she felt trade had privilege in the Black queer community, she says they do because we let them. Harmonica discusses how gay men and transwomen will raincheck plans they have with their friends in order to hook up with trade:

Some people will cancel their plans with you because trade coming over. We been friends forever. You just met trade last night, but now you gonna cancel all plans cuz he's coming over?

In this example, the opportunity to engage in sex with trade is literally privileged above the companionship of friends. In contrast, Courtney and Victor immediately respond in unison: "I don't think so." Courtney continues to explain why he said masculinity is not necessarily privileged: "Because I've heard people say 'All trade do is mess up your credits and leave you with two kids.'" In this example, Courtney signifies off static gender norms when he embodies a femme or woman ethos to evoke "the ain't shit nigga" trope to describe trade as your typical triflin' man. In this way, trade is/are read as masculine and are categorized with straight men and placed in hierarchy lower than gay men. While their sex appeal tied to masculinity makes these men desired in the club or bedroom, Courtney's comments suggest trade are problematic outside of that. I will be honest—their answer originally flabbergasted me. As a Black gay man, who is often read as femme, I have a lifetime of experience that suggests how masculinity has privilege in the larger world and in the Black gay community. However, Victor and Courtney helped me to not see masculinity and privilege as flat or static.

In Black queer communities and mainstream discourses, it is commonly assumed that men and/or the masculine partner (as if there is always only one) is often the top, the giver or the dom(inant), while the woman or femme partner (as if there is always only one) is often the bottom, the receiver or the sub(missive). People who are sexually versatile or switch are often erased from discourse and literacies about sexuality. Sexual dynamics are not static in white heteronormative or Black queer contexts. One of the most common-sense truths or literacies that circulate about trade is that they are

good looking tops and are good in bed. While not all trade are good looking tops or good in bed, common discussion and the participants' fantasies of trade often came back to these ideas. Courtney and Victor both state that trade do not have to be attractive. Courtney goes on to say, "When you think of trade, you think of someone who has a good stroke game." Courtney's comments demonstrate that literacies about trade are steeped in pornographic fantasy.

Specifically, the idea that trade is ideally a top is as recurrent as the idea that he should be masculine. I asked Courtney and Victor if trade could be a bottom. They both hesitate and Courtney says, "Yes." Then Victor responds, "I feel like after you find out the person's a bottom, they're no longer trade." They both laugh. Similar to Courtney's comments about trade being good in bed,

“Joseph and Ashley engage in on-the-spot graphic sexual imagery to transport the listener to the actual scenario. They essentially tell mini-narrative/scenarios to denaturalize commonsense static understanding trade as tops.”

Victor makes it clear that he sees trade as tops ideally. Again, the fantasy of trade as straight masculine tops with good dick is clear. Both of their comments reflect common beliefs about masculine gender performance tied to topping as a sexual behavior and identity.

Joseph and Ashley acknowledge these beliefs but engage in a rewriting of literacy by speaking back to these ideas. The old adage that you cannot judge a book by its cover informs their sexual literacies. Joseph states that what you see in the street is not necessarily what is going on behind closed doors. He states that, when it comes to how sexual partners determine who is topping versus bottoming, it is more of a "one-to-one negotiation." Specifically, he discusses that someone is not automatically a bottom because they are effeminate or engage in traditionally feminine grooming practices.

Once upon a time, you immediately assume that those people aren't trade. (Yet) they'll turn around and they'll pull out a package and be like BONG! [gestures] . . . and they'll expect you to get down on that, and a lot of guys do. I've seen a lot of guys who are very pretty and will tell you in a minute that they will climb on your back and have no problem addressing that and there are guys who like that as well.

Ashley echoes Joseph's sentiments, saying that she knows really masculine men that are bottoms and very feminine men who "will tear your butt up when the lights go out." Joseph and Ashley engage in on-the-spot graphic sexual imagery to transport the listener to the actual scenario. They essentially tell mini-narrative/scenarios to denaturalize commonsense static understanding of trade as tops.

Lastly, many of my participants work to destabilize the notion of masculinity as desirable. Joseph uses his attraction to his effeminate partner to suggest that not all Black queer people want masculine men:

I love him for that. Everything about him—and what I love is that he is a lot softer and he's a lot meeker. But make no mistake like any other man he's always there for me and he had my back when I needed him.

Joseph essentializes meekness and softness as feminine and loyalty and support as masculine attributes he appreciates in his partner. While he uses traditional readings of gender to describe the attributes themselves, he also deliberately uses contradictory notions of gender to boast about how special his partner is.

I asked Courtney and Victor if they were primarily attracted to trade, and both were resistant to saying yes. Specifically, Courtney discusses liking men who are both masculine and feminine: “I’m attracted to butch queens preferably. Someone who walks on the fence. They not too masculine. They not too femme. They can adapt to any situation.” Courtney confesses a desire for a partner who can both be comfortable at a gay club on a Saturday night and church on Sunday morning. I then kid, “Versatile, if you will,” alluding to the sexual position. Courtney and Victor laugh. Essentially, Courtney wants the best of both worlds, someone who can “play the game” of homophobia. Victor

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goes on to say that he is not really attracted to gender or sexual archetypes: “I think it depends on the person. I wouldn’t say I like a certain type of person. It depends.” Victor’s comments, while somewhat vague, speak to the core ideas behind trade/pullin’ trade as a literacy. Victor and my other participants acknowledge

the role that normative sexual literacies of gender performance and sexual orientation play in constructing the social world around them. They also look beyond, speak back to, and rewrite their own sexual literacies for themselves.

Conclusion: Telling Our Truths

Truth can be isolating. When one knows a truth that runs counter to the common narrative, it makes them an outsider. This article plays a role in bringing these disparate truths together. The participants rewrite sexual literacies in order to narrate their experiences and to speak to commonsense truths in the Black queer community. These truths work to disrupt heteronormative sexual literacies that circulate in the Black queer community and mainstream culture. There has been much discussion about Black men who exist in the gray area. However, much of that highlights Black men’s deception or struggle with self-acceptance. This is not an attempt to out or sensationalize the lives of trade, or reinforce mainstream ideas of gender, which is why they and their perspectives aren’t the focus of this article. The focus of this piece is to get readers to rethink what they think they know about straight men in particular and sexuality more generally. As such, I intentionally shift the gaze from a straight perspective on sexuality and men to a queer one; the knowledges of out Black queer people are centered in this article as experts on sexuality.

Ashley often referenced escalating HIV and STD rates tied to promiscuity as a reason to tell her truths. Joseph described his and his partner’s roles as gay-parents as part of the reason he is in

a position to impart knowledge about how it *really* is. All of the participants seemed committed to speaking back to commonly believed untruths about sexuality specific to Black queer people. The participants demonstrate that being able to read another person's truth or interest, which may run counter to the heterosexual or the masculine personas they present, is a type of specialized knowledge—a literacy. Fierce literacies are about sharing truths and experiences in an effort to correct misconceptions about sexuality. This awareness does not come from just reading queer theory or watching a film, but from practicing and listening to stories about pullin' trade and throwing shade.

Literacies about trade reveal the ways that normative understandings of sexuality often erase a discussion of sexual practices that do not fit neatly into orientations such as gay, straight, and/or pan or bisexual. This examination of pullin' trade as a larger fierce literacy reveals how normative understandings of sexual orientation play a role in maintaining heteronormativity and queer erasure. Trade is deliberately singular (even though it is talking about both a singular person and a collective) because it pejoratively speaks to “how they (collectively) be.” It is a riff off of the idea that all heterosexual men act and think alike. Trade as a literacy reflects the reality that scares “straight” people the most, which is that queer people can tell who else is queer.

NOTES

¹ This study was approved by my university's Institutional Review Board. Participants chose to use their first names in the study.

² I intended to feature videos in this article as I had done with my article about shade, but two issues prevented me from doing so. First, I encountered technological difficulties and had to resort to audio recording in some cases. However, there was another complexity as well. Participants were not as interested in talking about trade on video in a public place as they were when I asked about shade. In retrospect, I understand why people would be skittish about discussing sex and sexuality at a Pride festival, I guess. Nevertheless, I was still able to capture valuable data that I present here without multimedia.

³ Personally, I also see connections between contemporary usage of the term trade and the United States' history of trading enslaved Black men for money as a part of the larger North Atlantic Slave system.

⁴ C. J. Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* discusses how homophobic "fag discourses" are circulated among teenage males.

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