Shade: Literacy Narratives at Black Gay Pride

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KEYWORDS

"Shade is… 'I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you know you're ugly. Now, that's shade."

–Dorian Corey, *Paris is Burning*

My experience with shade started before I understood shade specific to Black queer people.[1] Growing up in my family, the verbal was everything. If you were not quick-witted and could not use your words like weapons…actually I'm not sure what happens because everyone in my family had this ability, regardless of education level. As a young child, my aunts and uncles would say, "he's got the 'gift!'" This often came after someone asked me a question or made a request and then I snapped back with an attitude or witty remark. It was not until I got older that I saw my relatives "getting a dig in" by alluding to someone's poor grades in school, "bad" hair texture, underachieving kids, or weight problem. While I long engaged in this practice with friends and family, I would later come to see shade as "shade"— as a critical literacy in the Black queer community. I use my experiences with family and friends and the video interviews with Black queer people to demonstrate shade as not just a slang term but representative of a larger literacy specific to these communities and heavily informed by context.

When I use the term literacy, I am riffing off of Eric Darnell Pritchard's research along with other researchers who define literacy as a sociocultural communicative practice of meaning making that is not confined to words alone. As Pritchard explains in *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*, there remains a need for

> research on the long tradition of Black queer language, vernacular, and the rhetorical trope of "shade" and "reading" prevalent among Black queer folks, which would extend what we currently know about Black English and expand theories of "signifyin," "masking," and other features of African American language practice. (244)

Pritchard urges us to resist narrow definitions of literacy and to see the complicated, rhetorical, and embodied ways people make meaning. Shade represents one such literate practice. Informed by an oppositional consciousness, it is a multilayered way of communicating that is situated in the Black queer community. Despite significant work on literacy as a situated practice (Brandt; Street; Gee) in the African American community (Banks; Gates; Richardson; Smitherman; Young) and in the LGBT

community (Alexander; Rhodes and Alexander), only recently have scholars looked at literacy at the intersection of Black *and* LGBT people. Pritchard's discussion of "rereading" highlights the multilayered ways in which literacy operates, how its communicative potential is not always transparent to everyone at the scene ("This is Not" 280). In this article, the social space I focus on is the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride 2013, where I discussed shade and shade narratives with seven men and one transgender woman (see Figure 1). I chose Washington D.C. Black Pride in order to talk to out Black gay men and transwomen who were familiar with shade and saw themselves as a part of a larger Black queer community

Figure 1. The researcher, Seth Davis, *left*, and Patrick during 2013 interview. On the left and right sides are the other participants.[2]

I recruited participants who had knowledge about Black queer slang and who self-identified as members of this community.[3] I approached Patrick first because we made eye contact and he did a double take, so I figured he would be open to being interviewed. After talking with Patrick, he recommended I interview some of his friends. I took on a snowball methodology, where my participants then recommended other friends of theirs to interview. I asked participants to tell me what they thought shade was. Rather than providing a definition, each of them told stories and gave examples of times where they either threw shade or felt it. Rather than representing these interviews only via alphabetic representation, I filmed all the interviews as, following Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe, I see video as way to capture *and* present this dynamic literacy in action. The videos are presented here as compilations that open each section. They are important to the claims of this essay in that they illustrate the embodied and performative dimensions of literacy and more specifically explicate its central themes.

I have come to understand shade in several ways specific to the Black queer community and as a practice of survival and self-defense. In the following sections, I turn to my analysis of interviews conducted at the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride festival, where my participants discussed and

told stories about shade. I invite the reader into an ongoing conversation in amongst "the girls" in the Black queer community. I present my analysis as video compilations and prose in three parts: *Narrating Shade, Shade on the Out-side,* and *Shade to Survive.* These themes emerged from the interviews and are in line with how I have heard shade discussed in popular culture and amongst my Black queer peers. I begin first by talking about shade as a fierce literacy.

Fierce Literacies and "The Girls"

I see shade as part of a larger fierce literacy or way of engaging in the world specific to Black queer people and women. For example, in this cultural moment, social media hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BlackBoyJoy, and #TransIsBeautiful are some of the ways Black and/or queer people are organizing, creating community, and talking back to dominant misreadings about who they are. These also inspire my understanding of "fierce literacies"—that is, 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. Shade invites the listener to engage alternative or queer readings of the world in general and dubious statements in particular.

I use "the girls" as an organizing construct for several reasons. Black transwomen coined and defined shade. Colloquially, Black gay men often call each other "girl" and refer to gay men more generally as "the girls." Also, it is a way to highlight the "girlfriend" relationships many of these people have with each other regardless of biological gender. E. Patrick Johnson argues that throwing shade is part of a larger "snapping" discursive culture specific to Black queer people and women and "girlfriend culture." Fierce literacies continue a larger discussion of the ways Black women have used multiple forms of literacy, such as the essay, academic writing, discourse and Hip-Hop as a way to survive and gain agency (Royster; Richardson; Pough; Houston and Davis; McEachern). For example, Montinique Denice McEachern discusses shade as a way to deal with microaggressions from a professor.

> *"I see shade as part of a larger fierce literacy or way of engaging in the world specific to Black queer people and women. For example, in this cultural moment, social media hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BlackBoyJoy, and #TransIsBeautiful are some of the ways Black and/or queer people are organizing, creating community, and talking back to dominant misreadings about who they are."*

> He would get to my name and tumble over the syllables, and each time I would be ready with a read like "I know pronunciation can be complicated, it helps if you sound it out." Similar to the impact of microaggressions, my reads would throw him off but leave him unable to specify what about the interaction made him uneasy. (83-84)

In this passage, McEachern talks back to what Pritchard calls "literacy normativity," which aims

to keep make Black students feel self-conscious about their names and positions in the classroom. Instead, she made her professor feel uncomfortable for being ignorant.

After interviewing participants and observing shade discourse amongst my friends and in popular culture, I have come to understand shade in several ways specific to the Black queer community— and as a practice of survival and self-defense. I turn to my analysis of interviews conducted at the Washington D.C. Black Gay Pride festival where my participants discuss and tell stories about shade. In this article, I invite the reader into an ongoing conversation in amongst "the girls" in the Black queer community.

<div align="center">Narrating Shade</div>

> "If you're gonna throw shade, it's important to know the boundaries between shade and disrespectful. It's right there on the cusp." —AJ

Figure 2. Video: Narrating Shade.
To access the video, click. https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/x8SXk97D. See appendix for transcript.

In this opening video, participants contemplate the meaning of shade: what is it, who throws it, and its meaning. I began by asking participants to define shade thinking that the focus would be a simple matter of definition. What I found, however, was that participants rarely gave a simple definition. Instead, the questions prompted narrative explanations that showed how shade was situated within a larger communicative practice, what we might call a situated literacy. Participants relied heavily on narrative as a method to remember, define, and illustrate shade. Often, they drew on scenes from popular culture, personal stories, and hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate a larger communal understanding of this practice. For most, this was not simply a matter of answering one researcher's questions, but rather something they talked about amongst themselves. More specifically, their response shows how shade is used to bond friends and shun others. Their conversations also provide insight into how "the girls" understand themselves as individuals, in cliques, and as members of the Black queer community.

When Black queer people engage in *reading* and throwing shade, many are consciously connecting with Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which, for many, introduced the term and offered a look into these practices in action. For example, Patrick and Brant immediately reference *Paris* in their attempt to define the term. Patrick, in fact, suggests that one go to *Paris* for a definition. Although they do not explicitly reference the scene in *Paris*, they are no doubt thinking of Dorian Corey famously saying, "Shade is… 'I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you know you're ugly.' Now, that's shade." Here, Corey defines shade through demonstration, and this practice of defining by example was common among participants.

As the video begins, Patrick tells me that the definition of shade has changed over the years. In trying to provide a definition, he references *Paris,* a documentary now three decades old. Like those of a lot of Black queer people, myself included, Corey's explanation heavily informs his understanding of what throwing shade as well as reading shade are and how they are practiced. Following Corey's articulation of shade, Brant compares shade to haute couture and refers to shade as "haute teasing." His movement and gestures work to signify a grandiose posture which signifies a sense of elitism. Brant's explanation, like Corey's, is both descriptive and performative without offering a singular definition.

This turn to narrative is important in illustrating the multiple ways that shade is read and performed. James discusses shade as playful "sass" but also sees it functioning as a way to "cut someone down with words." Mervin echoes this sentiment, attributing shade to the Black gay community while also remarking on its duality: "When gay men get together…you're joking around with your friends…but then sometimes when people are jealous or would be considered haters, they may say things to pull out something negative about somebody." Mervin and James see shade as potentially light-hearted while also acknowledging that it can function negatively. Playfully insulting one's friends about their insecurities, for example, can be fun if you know them well. Mervin states, "They may talk about the way that they look or the clothes that they wear." However, it is easy to cross the line and offend someone. For example, AJ states, "If you're gonna throw shade at someone, it is important to know those boundaries between shade and disrespectful." Essentially, knowing, toeing, and exploiting the line between the two are the hallmarks of a good shade thrower.

Figure 3. Brant discusses the difference between reading and throwing shade.

Brant claims that "in order to throw shade, you have to know someone." He goes on to liken shade to teasing rather than harassing, the latter intending to offend. I then asked him how he sees shade as different from reading. He explores the distinction between the two when he describes shade as an "elevated insult" and teases out the nuance between shade and reading. He uses Abbott and Costello and Shakespeare as reference points to discuss shade, with the latter emphasizing a grand yet subversive read. In this way, Brant's response is informed by Corey's saying, "Shade comes from reading. Reading came first."

It is important to note that Brant was the only white participant in the study. To illustrate shade, he turns to iconic white artists and performers while at the same time, in other parts of our interview, he acknowledged shade as part of a Black queer tradition. Still, he helps us to see shade as a heightened and subversive form of reading. What I appreciate most about his interview is that in giving his explanation, whether he realizes it or not, he is demonstrating shade on an embodied level. If you watch Brant during his explanation with the sound off, or in the images above, you see him sitting as a queen taking on a posture similar to Corey's as he casually yet flamboyantly riffs on shade. Note the grandiose way he frames the discussion by saying "shade to me" and how his hand flourishes, demonstrating a nonverbal performance that enhances his discussion of the differences between reading and shade.

Continuing the discussion about the duality of shade, AJ teases out the difference between shade and disrespect. In his example, calling a friend a walrus is outlandish and obviously playful, but asking what a stranger is wearing more direct. Patrick and Mervin also turn to personal narrative to describe situations in which shade is enacted, and in doing so, they illustrate how shade is a communicative practice that is part of their literate lives as Black queer people. After seeing Patrick talking to guys on Jack'd, a gay hook-up app, one of his friends said he was giving "loose boots." ("Loose" refers to what his friend sees as whore-ish behavior and "boots" is Black gay slang for very or extremely.) His friend's ability to playfully tease him about being promiscuous and get away with it speaks to their relationship and the norms of their clique. Patrick's telling of the narrative as humorous works to suggest this as well. Yet, as I have suggested, shade can also be cutthroat or something else entirely depending on the situation. It is the context as reproduced through these narratives, what I call literacy narratives about shade, that helps us understand the particular situation and thereby the intent. In this way, shade is always a rhetorical practice because of its attention to audience, time, and context.

Consider, for example, how Mervin uses shade as a defense mechanism in his story. Mervin tells me that he just ran into one of his ex-lovers at the Pride event and deliberately did not speak to him, which he provided as an example of shade. By pretending that he did not see his former lover, he was sending a message. The message could be that his life was now so full that he had no time to notice his former lover or it could be read as an intentional slight. In either case, it illustrates the ambiguous ways that shade is understood and performed. In reflecting on this moment, Mervin critiques his actions and suggests that they represent unresolved feelings about the relationship.

I also asked participants who throws the best shade, and the answers varied from specific people to cultural groups. Patrick pointed to older queens (Black gay men and transwomen) as the ones

who throw the best shade because of the wit that comes with maturity. "The older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade and… I've been read by an old queen just as a friend, and it be jokingly, but it's actually really like *wow*, like I would've never thought of that." Patrick professes amazement for his older friend's shade acumen. In his comments, there is a reverence for older queens or the elders as experts as expressed in Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*. Similarly, *Paris* honors the knowledges and experiences of the older queens and housemothers. I have had similar experiences in my family and in the Black gay community, where the older queen had the most bone chilling shade in the room. Even in *Paris*, the house mothers and fathers are the ones teaching "the children."

Donnell and Xion describe white gay men as being their favorite shade throwers. Specifically, Donnell teases out a difference between white gay men reading/throwing shade and Black gay men. While a white gay man may say that someone looks "a mess," a Black gay man might say he looks "turned naked, back." In the Black queer community, the word "back" is a term often used similar to "boots" to mean "very," functioning as an exclamation point. Here, Donnell is essentially telling the person that he looks so bad that he should turn naked instead. He uses the example to demonstrate how white gays "give him his life" because they are often more direct and do not go for the extreme laugh.[4]

AJ answers my question by suggesting that he is the best shade thrower but then points to his friend Mervin. When recruiting participants at D.C. Black pride, I expected to interview only Black and Latino men and trans-women. However, after a couple of interviews, some of my participants, Patrick in particular, insisted I meet Brant "because he's white and throws shade." As I stated earlier, I am not arguing that Black women or queer people of color are the only people who throw shade; however, they are the ones who are most connected with the practice in the public imagination. Patrick began our interview saying that he did not know what shade was. It was only through his telling stories about himself and his peers that a definition emerged. He goes on to say that he sees shade as "calling them out in a smart way" and "saying it without saying it." As I have demonstrated here, participants tended not to give an explicit definition.

Shade on the Out-Side

> "I think that once you go outside the community, it changes the meaning of what (shade) means for us." —Mervin

As suggested in the last section, shade is in vogue. It circulates within the Black queer community and also outside of it. While shade is typically considered an in-house practice amongst Black queer people who know each other well, many of my participants observed how shade was being appropriated in popular culture. When the word and the practice are taken out of the community and even commodified in popular culture, there are consequences: how we understand the practice,

Figure 4. Video: Shade on the Out-Side
To access the video, click. https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/z9BEm2s4. See appendix for transcript.

who we see as authorities on the subject, and our overall experience with it change. Most of the participants express ambivalence about the multiple ways that shade and Black queer life have been appropriated in mainstream white heterosexual culture. They cite examples from their personal lives, social media, and daytime and reality television to demonstrate how shade has been taken up outside of the Black queer community. What I hope to demonstrate here is how shade is culturally situated, how it cannot be understood in static terms, and how it has gone viral.

> *"When the word and the practice are taken out of the community and even commodified in popular culture, there are consequences: how we understand the practice, who we see as authorities on the subject, and our overall experience with it change. Most of the participants express ambivalence about the multiple ways that shade and Black queer life have been appropriated in mainstream white heterosexual culture."*

In recent years, shade has found its way into the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, which defines it as "US slang": "to express contempt or disrespect for someone publicly, typically by subtle or indirect insults or criticisms." But as I have shown, it is a practice that goes back decades, and its appropriation is not new either. The most famous example is Madonna's 1990 hit song and video "Vogue," based on the dance form of shade birthed out of the Black queer community. More recently, it has become popular on reality television such as *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Shade is also taken up across social media; my participants, and specifically AJ, Donnell, and Xion, discuss how digital

spaces are often ripe place to throw shade without having to deal with the consequences.

Patrick talks about seeing the Black gay lifestyle merge with mainstream society and mentions Beyoncé's and Jennifer Lopez's music videos that feature the nonverbal/dance form of shade: voguing. Patrick goes on to mention the singer and reality television star Tamar Braxton's use of Black queer slang such as "Girl, get your life" and shade as examples. Similar to Brant, Patrick does not just reference Braxton's appropriation of gay lingo, but he also performs it. He takes on an over-the-top tone and manner to illustrate how it is done. He then expresses ambivalence about how shade is being appropriated in popular culture: "It's good because it is getting us out there and it's sad cuz it's kind of our identity that's being kind of taken." His comments about "us" and "our identity," and his overall concern with the effects of this appropriation suggest what some might call a Black queer nationalism, the desire to name and hold on to specific practices, texts, and spaces for the survival of Black queer people. Even though I see shade as wed to Black women's speech acts and literacies, I can relate to Patrick's ambivalence over Black gay language being used in spaces where "the girls" are often not welcomed.

Other participants pointed to examples of Black queer culture being appropriated in television and music. In order to discuss shade in mainstream culture, Brant tells a quick narrative about how shade is one of many Black queer cultural texts that has been appropriated by white people. He mentions *Paris* and voguing as two of several Black queer cultural texts that existed first amongst Black queer people before finding their way into Black communities at large and being appropriated by the larger white mainstream culture. He jokes "Then Madonna took it and made it 'Things for White people.'" We both laugh at the absurdity of his statement said in jest, especially as it runs against the history that he just sketched. Still, Madonna's influence in the mainstreaming of the dance drawing on Black and/or gay culture cannot be overlooked.

AJ mentions *Real Housewives of Atlanta, Married to Medicine,* and *Bad Girls Club*, which all have majority Black female leads, as reality television shows that have incorporated shade and other Black gay lingo into cast discussions, programing, and advertisements. In a reality television context, shade or throwing shade is the perfect phrase to denote the subversive insults and statements that are at play as people are put into situations with people they do not like, where they have to constantly discuss each other's personal business. In this way, shade thrives on reality television, and many of these shows' proximity to Black gay meccas such as Atlanta, New York, and Washington D.C. can also explain how the term shade has so much traction in these heterosexual spaces. The widespread circulation of the term has made it trendy for many people outside of the Black gay community. For example, AJ states, "I think it's something that's become really popular in the culture now. I even have some straight male friends say *Oh, that's the shade.*" In this way, straight people are appropriating the term to describe a phenomenon. They evoke and play with the ethos of a Black queer person. Shade becomes a discursive olive branch of sorts to engage with a Black gay person(a) and Black gay culture more largely.

Donnell and Zion mention TMZ, Joan Rivers, and Wendy Williams as mainstream media entities who use Black queer language. Donnell states, "Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny." We go on to talk about the fact that Joan Rivers, who would famously joke about her

own appearance and plastic surgeries, was funny and good at throwing shade because she could make fun of and throw shade at herself. Xion goes on to mention Wendy Williams and how she plays with people's accusations that she is a transgender woman by joking during her show that she has to get out of her drag after filming. "I thought that was hilarious. It's the shade within itself," Xion says. Even on an aesthetic level, drag makeup and culture have been appropriated by mainstream makeup and media entities. *RuPaul's Drag Race* features challenges in every episode that educate the viewer and the queens themselves about the Black gay roots of gay culture and white mainstream culture.

Several of the participants are uneasy with Black gay culture in the mainstream. For example, at the beginning of this section, I quote Mervin's statement that he feels that the meaning of shade and other Black and/or queer cultural texts change when they are co-opted by white culture. At first, when I ask if shade should be used outside of the Black queer community, he states that no one should throw shade, taking into account the negative forms of the practice. When I clarify that I am talking about white appropriation of shade, he explains, "Once you go outside the community, you're changing the definition of what it means for us, and I find that that is an issue with a lot of the things we do." The "we" he refers to I assume is Black gay people, but he could easily be talking about the ways Black, Latin, gay and other minority cultures are routinely appropriated. He goes on to say, "Pretty soon there will be a whole different definition to the term shade." Language and literacy more generally are not static and evolve over time. However, Mervin is speaking specifically about the ways white heterosexual culture often oppresses Black and Brown queer people and their cultures, while simultaneously aping and commodifying our cultural productions for higher profit.

Brant discusses shade's appropriation by straight people by telling a narrative about two of his female friends (one Black and one white) on Facebook asking what shade was. He forwarded them an article that defines the term. He goes on to tie shade to a larger history of drag in the Black community. I hesitate as I ask Brant if he feels shade is a "Black thing." I hesitated because I did not want him to feel uncomfortable about being asked about something that is marked as Black. I did not want him to think I was challenging his authenticity or right to use to the term. In retrospect, his attendance at Black Gay Pride showed how he was comfortable with Black gay culture even if he had not reflected on his position as a white gay man in this community.

Brant states that he would not say that shade is still just a Black thing and says, "There are cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another." So, in a sense, it is understandable that there is some overlap and that white and/or straight people often use ethnic cultural terms or engage texts that are trendy without knowing about them. He playfully teases, "No one can be educated on the history of shade unless they're writing a doctoral thesis on that." For the record, I caught that shade, and it is a dissertation and an article, not a thesis. I laughed, though. Brant discusses shade's origins in the Black gay community and explains how the larger gay (read white) community has taken up Black gay culture. He states that white people do not use shade unless they are quoting or evoking Blackness. When he says this, his body language and arms gesture towards the embodied and performative nature of shade, as in when white people use shade as a term, they are often referencing shade in a Black context or from a Black person even if they do not say it. This exists in a larger conversation about cultural appropriation, specifically where white

people often have more freedom to evoke ethnic personas than do ethnic people.

Lastly, I ask participants if they see a lot of shade on social media and digital spaces. Most report that they see a lot of shade in outlets such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. James and I discuss Twitter as a shade breeding ground because the character limit forces people to cram their read into 140 characters. However, he goes on to say that he does not look for shade in social media. In response to the question, Xion yells, "Yeah! They read for filth!" as she and Donnell discuss the various shady memes and conversations that they have observed on social media. Xion discusses how people manipulate arrows in the comments section to bring attention to a specific person in order to throw shade. Then, Donnell discusses the use of "#iDied" as phrase to signify that an image or statement was so funny and/or ridiculous that it literally killed the viewer on sight.

Both of these are examples of how Black queer people actively manipulate language and digital spaces using very few characters. Donnell goes on to use an example of a meme of a girl with short hair squeezed into a ponytail with the phrase "Bitches be like, 'My hair growing.'" Mervin then teases the meme out. The punchline of the joke is that many Black people share the cultural knowledge or memory of a girl who was trying to grow or give the Eurocentric illusion of long hair but clearly had short hair. Mervin goes on to laugh at the scenario. "You look at 'em like 'You know damn well your shit ain't growing. You lying like shit.'" AJ, who works with queer youth, discusses the ramifications of shade and cyberbullying. "It's really sad cuz I work with the youth and a lot of times they won't throw shade to their face, but they'll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone." These typically in-house conversations now take place with a global audience of more than Black queer people, thanks to the Internet and social media. This definitely impacts how the shade is received and makes it more extreme. It is the difference between literally the whole hallway laughing at you and what feels like the whole world laughing at you via social media.

Shade to Survive

"Not everyone can throw shade at me. I wouldn't allow it." —Patrick

'Figure 5. Video: Shade to Survive
To access the video, click. https://ensemble.syr.edu/Watch/Ji36PeZt. See appendix for transcript.

    In earlier sections, we saw the different ways shade has been evoked—from playful shade to shade as "the ultimate," as Donnell and Xion refer to it. Participants often moved beyond the notion of shade as just verbal sparring, seeing it rather as a rite of passage among friendship groups, a sign that you can take the heat and are part of the community. Still, for some, shade is a byproduct of insecurity within the community, often suggested by larger racist, classist, transphobic, effeminophobic and sizeist ideals promoted by the dominant culture. In this way, shade is a tool for survival, simultaneously working to mock the oppressive forces at work.

    In the "Ugly Side of Shade Culture," Jamal Lewis writes about shade as a protective armor used to combat oppression. "Its armor," he writes, "protected me from bullying and the harsh realities of gender-based violence and body shaming throughout middle school, high school, and my early years of college." He continues by saying that he does not see shade as positive, noting that he cannot recall shade "ever being a fun thing to do." He writes, "I later freed myself from this armor because it began to feel toxic—it wasn't healthy, even in instances when I used it to defend myself." Former NFL player Wade Davis and managing editor of *The Feminist Wire* Darnell Moore (Moore and Davis) discuss shade in a similar way in their *Huffington Post* conversation "Tongues Untied: Shade Culture—Throwing Shade, Reflecting Light." Davis does not see shade as mean-spirited but rather as a way for guarded individuals to protect themselves:

> I realized that many of our young people use shade to engage each other because many of them have been kept at a distance by people in their own lives. I found most of their shade

> performative, meaning they were just doing it to gain favor or the attention of another, and it had very little to do with intentionally wanting to hurt the person being shaded.

I am divided when it comes to shade. I love *talking shit*. Rather than relying on typical scripts— "Good Morning" "So how's that dissertation coming?"—I and the participants in the study see throwing shade as an art form and as a way of building connections. My friends and I have fun riffing, signifying, and playing with language. Still, I can think of many instances in my life where shade has gone wrong, and I have also used shade as a crutch instead of talking to people directly about the things that were bothering me. I titled this section "Shade to Survive" to highlight the way that the participants and I have used shade simultaneously to get a laugh, build friendships, and as a form of protection. Darnell Moore asks:

> But what are we trying to protect ourselves from except the possibility of connection and love? Maybe shade is the result of our fear that if we are too nice or too open or too vulnerable (God forbid), others will hurt us.

While I appreciate Moore's sentiment, I also recognize the brutal realities that many Black LGBTQ people face on a daily basis.

At the start of the video in this section, Patrick speaks to some of the messiness of shade, how it does not fit neatly into a negative or positive box. When I asked him if throwing shade is always a negative thing, he put his shades on like it was a music video and answered "No." To be honest, I thought the question was a bit redundant because we were just talking about shade in the context of his friendship group. His response, however, illustrated the complexity of shade. He said, "It's a way to confirm your friendships" showing it as both strengthening community and as a survival tactic. His response speaks to the intimate cliques to which many of my participants and many gay men belong. Nothing is off limits among participants who rely on their wit and candor to throw shade among their friends.

This makes a clear in-group and out-group when it comes to shade because one's friends can typically broach delicate subject easier than someone on the outside. Patrick speaks to this differentiation by stating that not just anyone—that is, people who aren't his friends—can throw shade at him because he "wouldn't allow it," meaning everyone knows not to try it with him because he would "clap back" against it. Here, Patrick suggests he can check or discipline anybody who shades him outside of his clique. His attitude speaks to the larger fierce or grand persona that informs the practice of throwing shade. However, he enjoys shade when his friends throw it because he recognizes "the art of shade is wit" and that everybody cannot do it. Following Lewis, Davis, and Moore, these comments remind me of how nebulous the intent of shade can be and how the practice can often be informed by real hurt and insecurities, which causes rifts in relationships.

An interesting finding of my interviews was that the participants often read themselves or their situations. For example, Xion describes her plight as a D.C. performer. Looking at the stage where she is scheduled to perform, she and Donnell laugh with the realization that few people will be there and that Xion will likely be coming home with little in tips.

> Xion: I can come out and say, "Oh, I just feel like doing this event. As a performer, I'm gonna make $50."

Donnell: Okay!

Xion: In the back of my head (long pause). Shade is, look at the crowd, look at the population I'm serving, look at where the stage is. I don't see it happening.

Shade is evident to those who understand the impossibility of Xion making $50, considering the location of the stage and the sparse audience. Donnell cosigns and respond by affirming, "You gon' make your fifty dollars" because it is clear given the circumstances that she is not. Similar to the performers in *Paris*, Xion and Donnell, like many Black queer people, often signify and play off of situations by throwing shade.

In this example, Xion and Donnell evoke a "laugh to keep from crying" rhetoric to cope and have fun with even disheartening situations. They go on to discuss shade being informed by context and intent. In order to explain shade, many of my participants attempted to remember instances where they threw shade or shade was thrown at them. However, Donnell provides examples of shade in action when he throws shade at Xion. He calls Xion "Erykah Badu" because she is wearing a gele similar to the singer's. By saying this, he is playfully teasing her for looking like Badu, which could be an insult to some people especially in a culture where Blackness and Afrocentrism are regularly critiqued.

Xion makes it clear that she is not one of those people and appears to take it as a compliment by quickly responding, "I live for Erykah." Another read of Donnell's shade is "I see you think you look like Erykah Badu, but you don't." Donnell goes on to compliment Xion on her style, suggesting that the shade he was throwing was for fun and not designed to hurt her feelings. He explains that they

Figure 6. Donnell enacts Xion throwing shade.

are friends and that if someone else threw shade at him, he would cut them up. He goes on to say, "When she gets up in them, she's cunt." In this statement, Donnell clears up any misunderstandings about his true feelings about Xion by suggesting that when she gets dressed up, she is ultra femme.

Xion and Donnell also talk about the performative aspect of shade when they discuss how one detects it. Specifically, Xion states that "It's not what you're saying but how you convey it" and that it's the force you put behind your words and the setting that signifies the perceived intent of the message.

Donnell, as illustrated in the montage above, also points to the nonverbal dimension of shade using Xion as an example. He states that he can tell when Xion detects and throws shade just by how her body moves: "Now when she throws shade, she doesn't just do it with her face she goes…." Then Donnell (in character as Xion) begins contorting and making noises as if his body is shifting in order to throw shade. He continues, "and I be like 'Xion! Stop!'" Xion nods and confirms, "My whole body

reacts."

Because Brant's friends are Black, he is part of the friendship network of the participants in this study. When I tell Brant his friends say that he is the best shade thrower, he blushes and is obviously flattered by Patrick's notion of him being the best shade thrower in his clique. However, he goes on to say that he is someone who deflects a lot but does not mean harm when throwing shade.

> When I throw shade, I may present myself…as being regal, distancing myself a little from it, a little bit, because I don't wanna look like I'm trying to hurt someone's feelings. So when I making fun of you…I do it in this overt very grandiose way. So it looks like I'm presenting a joke instead of like I'm hurting someone's feelings.

I can relate to Brant's hesitation and sensibility to throwing shade and receiving shade because throwing shade often creates a hostile situation between people who do not know each other or at least do not know each other "like that." He offers a Facebook example that walks the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate shade. Weight and size can be sensitive issues in the queer community. Brant's and the other person's candor suggest a congenial relationship but they do not confirm it. While Brant states that the exchange was lighthearted, the move to present oneself as being unbothered or immune to the shade is common in the Black gay community. Brant states that his friend's response was meant in jest, but his demeanor suggested that it might have hit deeper. Brant's desire for his friend to enjoy getting the bigger laugh is at the heart of throwing shade. However, throwing shade is like Russian roulette in the sense that it is hard to gauge how far is too far and what insult will deal a destructive blow or get your ass whipped.

Concluding Thoughts

Since 2013, when I first started working on this project, mainstream audience interest in the lives of Black queer people has increased. June 2019 was the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, a rebellion against police brutality in Greenwich Village that sparked the gay liberation movement. The documentary *Paris Is Burning* is gaining new audiences everyday via Netflix and YouTube. Reality television shows such as Vice's *My House*, FX's *Pose*, and MTV's *Are You the One* have recently focused on Black queer people and their points of view. In particular, reality television is where the term shade thrives as a way to point out that which cannot be seen or repeated. Even before I started working on this project, shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* introduced genderqueer friends Dwight Eubanks, Miss Lawrence, and Derek J. Many episodes highlighted Black queer lingo and how it travels from the gay scene to straight spaces. Specifically, the close relationships between the Black female cast members and their best "Judys" demonstrate how Black women and Black queer people experience life in similar ways and share a common literacy.

One of the contributions of this research is that I was able to investigate how shade functions in a particular friendship group. Patrick and the other participants' shade narratives speak to how shade functions as rites of passage into his peer group and the larger Black queer community. The participants discuss shade's origins and its practice as a litmus test or entrance exam other queer people must pass to enter their clique. Many of the participants shared pop culture examples, shade

stories, and anecdotes in order to tease out throwing shade as an on-the-spot literacy—that is, a language practice that is impromptu and in response to a particular situation. Additional research is needed to explore the literate practices amongst Black queer friendship groups in order to more deeply catch literacy in action over a longer period of time as it is born out of "the girls'" lived experiences.

All of the questions that I asked participants were practiced on my friends and family before I went to Washington D.C. Black Pride. I mention this because fragments of my life and links to pop culture have allowed me to understand and explicate shade. I identify as a Black gay man and member of the Black queer community. I believe that it is necessary to know this in order to understand my relationship with the participants, the communities in which we participate, and the texts examined. I live in and navigate the spaces where my research takes place. I see myself as one of "the girls," and this research as linked to my own rite of passage.

I am reminded of the words of painter Kehinde Wiley, who in a PBS documentary discusses the film *Paris Is Burning* and the 1980s ballroom scene as inspirations for his work. Specifically, Wiley talks about voguing as one of the few tools at the disposal of disenfranchised Black queer people to make fun of and speak back to white mainstream society: "They were also I think in a way making fun of *Vogue* magazine, making fun of the powerful. It's always been the clown who could make fun of the king, in front of the king and that type of clowning and aping is something that exists in that work as well." Wiley's discussion of voguing, the dance form of shade, reengages what I find most interesting about shade, which is that it is both a product of Black queer folks' relationship to white supremacy and homophobia and a tool for me and many other Black queers to navigate potentially hostile places.

As I have argued throughout this article, shade is not merely a slang term. It is a part of a larger fierce literacy of practices Black queer people use to survive and navigate the world. This article has illustrated how shade and literacy are more generally understood via conversation and has offered some insight into shade as a Black queer cultural happening and practice. In order to truly understand shade as an embodied literacy of survival and a rite of passage, we must engage with the history of racial and sexual oppression and violence against Black queer people in the United States since 1619, when the first Dutch colonizers brought the first enslaved Africans to America. In *Paris*, a voiceover discusses the ways

"Even though Black people in many ways have been stripped of our African languages and cultures, I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival that has existed within the Black queer community, connecting us back to a larger Black oral tradition."

Black people have been stripped of their culture and forced to assimilate to white ideals of language, beauty, dress, professionalism, and decorum in order to survive a larger white supremacist society:

> And when it come to the minorities, especially Black, we as a people, for the past 400 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had

everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive.

However, what must be understood is that Black people have not simply assimilated to whiteness. We, as Black people, have figured out ways to maintain, mix, and mesh who we are in order to survive in hostile spaces. Even though Black people in many ways have been stripped of our African languages and cultures, I argue that shade, as a form of signifying similar to the dozens, is a literacy of kinship and survival that has existed within the Black queer community, connecting us back to a larger Black oral tradition.

NOTES

[1] I use the terms queer and gay interchangeably throughout this article. Most of the participants who appear in this study did not identify as queer. I use queer as an umbrella term to include transwomen and gay men because I believe it is necessary to queer understandings of the Black oral tradition that include Black queer lives.

[2] Center photograph by Marshall A. Lattimore.

[3] This study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University.

[4] Note that we're two Black men at a Black gay pride event talking about a Black cultural phenomenon and still, Donnell ranks white gay men above Black gay men.

APPENDIX I

Throwing Shade in the Park Transcripts

Narrating Shade

Patrick: No, I say OK, well I can tell you that over the years the definition has changed. Cause if you watch movies like Paris Is Burning they have like kind of definition of it. I can't tell you exactly what it is.

Brant: Shade is... It's sort of like an elevated way of... to me. It's like a heightened sense, like, haute (like haute couture) It's like haute teasing.

James: I mean its sass. I think it can be playful when you're trying to like rag on your friends and/or sometimes in the Black gay community it's kind of a way to someone down. Cutting them down with words.

Mervin: What I think shade is is... usually when gay men get together. It depends. There are two different variations. One can be like joking around, kind of cracking jokes, being lil shady, throwing shade at your friends, but it can be in a humorous way but then sometimes I think when people are jealous or what we consider haters they may say things to try to pull out something negative about somebody. So maybe talk about the way they look, the clothes that they're wearing, something negative that can just make them look bad.

AJ: I think shade is a form of expression that is within the Black gay community of kind of making fun of each other or joking with each other in a playful way. I think it is important to know if you are going to throw shade, you need to know what those boundaries are of shade and disrespectful. I think it's right there on the cusp and I think it's a form of communication that is really popular in our community.

Brant:
But I feel like for people to do shade well, you have to know someone and so I always want to say that it is more akin to teasing then harassing or like being belligerent towards someone.

Seth:
OK. So, like what would you say the difference between shade and reading is?

Brant:
I feel like with reading its sort of... It's more... I would say that it's like slapstick and sort of like you're going for like the quick joke. With reading, like you just want to pull out, pull it out really quick...

Seth:
More direct?

Brant:
Right. But with shade it can be more. It can be longer. I feel like with reading it's like Abbott and Costello and with shade its sort of like Shakespeare. The idea is the same. It's entertaining. You're gonna laugh. But It's like the context, shade gives it more depth.

Donnell:
When you throw shade, just like she said it's how. It's the setting. the place, the time, what you're doing at the moment. It's like all of that crap. If I threw shade at her now, as you know, this my sister so I wouldn't throw shade at her to like to belittle her and disrespect her. I just play with her and she throws shade back. It then turns into what she called a Kiki and then we'd be like, oh bitch, you tried it and you know, it makes you like check yourself. You know what I'm saying? If she said I look a mess or something, just throwing shade. I'd be like, "hold on, wait a minute, you're playing games." And It's out of fun, but if we was to see a random walk by we'd be like, "Look at this mother fucker. Her wig is laid like Whitney Houston's third cousin. Like have you seen that on YouTube? You know what I'm talking about?

Seth:
Where is that from?

Donnell: Just like turning it. Huh?

Seth: Where is that from?

Donnell: It's on YouTube. If you look at "Whitney Houston's third cousin," like the shit is funny.

Xion: I think overall, it's just like not only when you see something you just can't take but... What am I trying to say? Especially... a lot of times also in this community especially being a Trans Woman, when you see something or you know something about a person that you know it's very sensitive to them or it's like a part of their self-esteem or anything and you purposely throw that out there to damage them, that's just like shade overhaul.

Donnell: That's the ultimate shade. If you will... We call that the ultimate shade.

Brant: I feel like shade can be really, really damaging. You can see things that like really hurt a person's feelings. If you take from the small attributes of a person and make them big, I think that's part of what shade is a sort of like taking little itty-bitty clues about who a person is and how their personality is, and how they look and making a big grand grandiose statement about them.

AJ: There is the shade you can throw with your friends. "Girl you look real big like no legs, lookin a walrus or something. Something with your friends... and then there's the shade from people you don't get along with. They look in the street like, "What is he wearing?"

Mervin: For example, I'll tell you an example here at this event we're at. This Black Pride event. There are a few guys here that... There's one guy in particular I went on a date with, whose here, the date didn't go so well but I just don't feel the need to speak to him. And I see him and he sees me. So, in a way I was throwing

shade because I've just decided not to speak to him when I walked past him. It's like really when its gets to the bottom like, why am I doing that? It's kind of a little immature, but at the time it goes back to again insecurities. The date didn't go the way I wanted it to do. So, I feel like I need to do what I can to make him feel a certain way.

Seth: ...to feel like you felt about the date.

Mervin: Exactly. I think that's what people do. They throw shade to make people feel the way that they feel. Even if they didn't do anything to them, initially, if they feel bad about not having designer clothing or having a great job, they'll find a way to make you feel bad by throwing shade.

Seth: Who would you say throws the best shade?

AJ: Who throws the best shade? Well me, of course.

Patrick: I want to say like... the older queens actually have the actual art of shade like its evolved over the years and I think that the older queens have that old style of reading and throwing shade. It's just I've been read by an old queen as a friend and it be jokingly, and it's actually really like wow. Like I wouldn't have never thought about that.

Seth: Tell you me what groups throw the best shade do you guys think Black men, Black gay men, throw the best shade or Black women?

Donnell: Black gay men are funny but those White men...

Xion: The White corporate queens give me my life.

Donnell: They funny. They feel as though like, "Bitch, you can't touch me" and like don't get me wrong they cool. Like everybody is cool. Shade is funny regardless. But to Black people, it's like their shade is more raunchy. They just out there to get you but with White people

	it's like "Bitch, you look a mess. "Like you think about it and you're like who would say that.
Xion:	Exactly.
Donnell:	Black people be like, "Girl, she look turned naked." "Like, he look ugly back." Like shit like they, they add extra little words to make it funny.
AJ:	I don't know. Personally, my best friend Mervin, who is over there, throws a lot of shade. He's really well at doing it.
Patrick:	But it's basically just calling somebody out about their flaws in a way that... I can't describe it... like in a way that you like for instance, to give you an example, my co-worker like we work together and I was on Jack'd and he was like...
Seth:	What's Jack'd?
Patrick:	Jack'd was like a social media website, or social media application on your phone. Basically, like to meet other guys or talk to other guys whatever. And so, I was on Jack'd and he was like just giving like (I was) giving like... loose boots, which means basically that I was just for the most part, just being just loose with myself like talking to guys I don't even know about. you. Telling them all about me and I just think that it's an art of basically telling people about themselves and just kind of calling them out in a cute smart way and I think...
Seth:	So was him calling you loose boots… was that shade?
Patrick:	Yeah, that was shady.
Seth:	Now why was that shady?
Patrick:	Because my thing is if you don't have something nice to say, don't say it all, but he could have easily been like, "Oh, you a hoe or you're being whorish" but he

said it... Using shade is like giving "loose boots" It's like a jargon.

Seth: Its saying it without saying.

Patrick: Essentially.

Shade on the Out-side

Patrick: Like in today's society, like our lifestyle, like the black gay lifestyle is being merged with mainstream society. So, when you see dances, like, you know, Jennifer Lopez just had a video come out. Look it up. And there's voguing in it. And Beyoncé has those techniques in her videos. And I mean, I just think that shade is included in that merge. "How is it being used? I mean just look at the way Tamar Braxton talks.

Seth: How does she talk?

Patrick: I'm just like, "Girl, get your life!" It's just like it's a merger. I can't explain it. It's good because it's getting us out there. But it's kind of sad because it's our own kind of identity that's being kind of taken.

Seth: Do you see shade being used like on television or like in the larger society?

Brant: I do think that. I think that um... I mean... obviously it's like with shade and reading. Those things were sort of popularized by Paris is burning in the early nineties, with like voguing and when, when, so that stuff was sort of presented to larger society or even just LGBT people because obviously like voguing and the ball scene came from the African American community and then it developed into being embraced by the gay community. Then Madonna took it and made into like, "Things for White people."

AJ: I've realized that even in pop media, especially the reality TV shows, they've taken the black and gay language and they've incorporated into the Real Housewives, Married to Medicine, Bad Girls Club, and all these reality TV shows where they use the word shade a lot. They say like, "Oh, that's a shade!" or "Why you throwing shade at me?" I saw in the reunion of the Housewives of Atlanta. I think it's just something that's really becoming really popular and it's in the culture right now. I even have some straight male friends say, "Oh, that's the shade." So, I think it's starting to evolve into its own, you know.

Donnell: TMZ

Xion: All of the housewives.

Donnell: TMZ

Xion: Wendy Williams is cute shade.

Donnell: What's that Bitch? Joan Rivers. She throw ultimate shade. That bitch funny. You can't tell Joan Rivers nothing. You look at her and you're like, "Look at your face!" Peeled. Like your face is pulled back for three gods.

Seth: ...but she shades herself about it.

Xion: Yeah, exactly.

Donnell: She shades herself about it, but she like, "I don't give a fuck. I did it. I know I did it but it ain't nothing that you can tell me that I cannot tell myself but Imma go in on your ass. Who else I like? Willie Williams! shady.

Xion: She shades herself too and I've realized it recently. I know in a lot of the media people or people in general just like the whole "She's a trans sexual" allegations like the other day on her show she was like "I can't wait to get back stage, to quit, and get out of this

drag." I thought that was hilarious. Like that's shade within itself.

Donnell: That's funny. And everybody always say Wendy Williams is a drag queen.

Xion: (indiscernible)

Donnell: Getting rid of the Adam's apple and all, bitch. Just peeling.

Seth: Do you feel like shade should be used outside of the black gay community or what?

Mervin: I think it is but it is also not. What do you mean "Do I think it should be used?" I don't think it should be used at all to be honest.

Seth: Interesting point. From what I was thinking of... is like seeing like maybe a straight white guy talking about throwing shade.

Mervin: I don't know because I think that once you go outside of our community it starts changing what it means for us. I find a lot of times, that's a big issue with a lot of things that we do. Its starts one way but over time when it gets into mainstream, it starts to look a lot different and people start to interact with it a lot differently. So, I do feel like if the white community or other communities get a hold of shade (heterosexual community the white community), they definitely change the idea of what we see shade as. Ya know and pretty soon it will be a completely different definition to the term shade.

Brant: It's hard because it's sort of like things like RuPaul's Drag Race have made using the vocabulary very trendy. I think it gets muddled a bit now but I think you see it. I see one of my friends I'm from North Carolina. I went to college in Greensboro, North Carolina, and she posted a thing the other day that was like "What is shade?" This straight woman had

had an experience with shade obviously. I don't know what it was, but she heard the word and he didn't know what it was. And she was embarrassed to ask and she said that on Facebook in her Facebook status. And another straight African American woman was like, "Yeah, I don't know. Can someone explain this to me? And so, I found this article online that was like, "Straight people, this is what shade is..." So, I shared it with them. Um, and so I think that it's something that people are getting to be aware of even though it's obviously been around much much longer. So, it's because we have outlets like things like RuPaul's drag race that help popularize like drag. There's other parts of drag and I think that I think drag in the African American community have a very specific relationship. They kind of like mold together to integrate into the larger society.

Seth: Okay now, I'm going to have to go for the obvious question: Do you consider shade to be a black thing or what's that?

Brant: I wouldn't say that now. I wouldn't say like, oh well like, "black people throw shade," but I feel like I feel like they're cultural borrowings that we have as minority groups that we share with one another. I think, and this is obviously based on very little... you can't be very educated on the history of shade unless you were writing your doctoral thesis on it. And so, it's my understanding that that sort of something that came from like a subculture of African American LGBT people and then it was popularized by all gay people. So, I don't think, I would say "Shade is for Black people" now. But I would argue that it was. And maybe... I don't know White people that say like shade without them somewhat evoking something that's very, like, that's separate from them. Does that make sense? They'll say like, "Oh, she's throwing shade" but it's clear they're quoting like, I don't want to use this example so much but RuPaul's Drag Race or trying to quote other things that people say without knowing

the context of it.

Seth: Do you ever see shade on social media?

James: I mean recently I guess it's more like twitter. I don't understand. I mean it's just like by saying your little things like "This person is no one" or you'll be hating. People are doing it on twitter. That's what I see more of. I'm not technically on Facebook cause twitter I mean it's where you can say the least amount of things possible. So, it's like just something quick.

Seth: So it's kind of a breeding ground for shade since you have to be abbreviated in first place. Okay. What about Instagram? Are you on Instagram?

James: I am on Instagram. But I'm not, I mean I on it. I just when I get a picture, I do it. I mean I don't personally see a lot of people doing it but I don't look for it either.

Donnell: Yeah, the they read.

Xion: All the time they read for filth.

Donnell: Definitely when they tell people that their hair is laid like Nene Leakes.

Xion: Or sometimes I'll see sometimes on Instagram or Facebook. If somebody says for example, I comment on your status and one of your friends so-call themselves throwing shade at me because (indiscernible), they make little asteroids going up and do an LOL or do something about the person up without mentioning them. To me, I think that's so much shade but it's funny.

Donnell: Now when people say, "I died" like "I nearly died", I laugh so hard. I'm sorry, God. Throwing shade is like "bitches be like my hair growing". They got the small little ponytail, ya know.

Xion: All those Instagram pictures are shady.

Donnell:	I be like, "That's some shady shit." That's funny. You think about it and you think about a bitch in your neighborhood, or like a girl in your neighborhood, or somebody in your neighborhood say they hair growing and you look at them like, "You know damn well your shit ain't growing. You lying like shit. No, you had to perm it to get that small ponytail." Like, that's throwing shade. I just threw shade.
AJ:	It's really bad because I work with the youth and a lot of times they won't throw shade to their face but they'll go off on a Facebook status real quick and talk about someone... or posting text message conversations stuff like that to hurt somebody. I think that's when we cross the boundary from shade to disrespect. I think it's a very fine line and people like to take advantage of crossing that line. Because when they take it too far and someone calls them out on it, they can say "Aww... I was joking. I was just throwing shade" and they don't get held accountable for what they say.
Seth:	Do you see it on twitter?
AJ:	Definitely. Twitter, Facebook, all types (indiscernible).
Seth:	Okay, Well I definitely appreciate your help. Great Interview.

Shade to Survive

Seth:	Is shade always a negative thing?
Patrick:	No, I think it's just like for instance if you have a good friend and you're talking to them and you're being shady towards each other it's just kind of like, it's really just a way to, I guess, confirm your friendships, if that makes sense. Not everybody could throw shade at me. I wouldn't allow it. Some people say it and I kind of clap back. I have an issue with it. If it's somebody close to me or someone I trust, or a friend and they're being shady, it's cute. I actually enjoy it. Because the art of shade is wit.

Seth: So, everyone can't throw shade, then?

Patrick: No, not everyone can throw it. Some people are a little too dense in the head to do something like that.

Donnell: And in D.C., we call it slicing. Slicing is nothing but to hype it up.

Xion: I think sometimes... I know myself I tend to throw shade or kiki to just make situations better. Like I could come out and say, "Oh, I just feel like doing this event as a performer, I'm gonna make fifty dollars.

Donnell: Ok.

Xion: In the back of my head, shade is: look at the crowd, look at the population I'm serving. Look where the stage is. I don't see it happening but sometimes as friends we kiki and ha-ha to pacify the situation almost like making jokes out of it so that nobody feel crazy... (indiscernible)

Donnell: Bitch, you know damn well you ain't finna make fifty dollars with these little bit ass people but you gon make that fifty dollars. Like ya know just slicing it. "You gon make that fifty." See that hand. "You gon make that fifty dollars." You know how like slicin it.

Seth: That was the... that's the shade right there.

Donnell: That's the shade

Seth: Okay.

James: I have a lot of straight friends and heterosexual friends that...I think it's more like special to gay culture in a straight world they don't know what shade is. Like it's an insult. Like I guess if you say something that's kind of tongue and cheek or just rude. So, I think that in the gay world to make it playful or make it a little but special I guess that's why it's called shade.

AJ: To me shade is very interesting because I think that there is a level of playful joking around with shade, but when I'm really looking at shade, I'm looking at the root of where it came from and a lot of times I feel like it's... you're doing that compensate for your own things that you might be self-conscious about or things that you're uncomfortable with

yourself. You will deflect that and throw shade at somebody else. So, you're not looking at yourself, if that makes any sense. And then you play it off by making it into a joke. Even though sometimes there's some truth behind it.

Mervin: I think there are a lot of insecurities in our community. I think it stems from all we have to deal with outside of our community. And then within our community there are a lot of guys who are under a lot of pressure to look a certain way, dress a certain way. They have to wear certain labels. They have to hang out with certain people. And if they don't do these things often times or if they can't do these things, sometimes times they can become shady to other people who can or who are considered attractive and what we consider to be attractive.

Donnell: If I was to look at Xion and be like, "Bitch, look at Erykah Badu." Because she got the wrap on her head. You know what I'm saying? That's throwing shade. But at the same time...

Xion: Which is a kiki for me because I live for Erykah

Donnell: Basically, she lived for Erykah, but at the same time I'm looking at Xion like "That's my bitch." I like the wrap. It fits you. But you know if you say something funny out the mouth to me bitch, Imma cut your ass up. I don't know if we can curse or not but...

Seth: Oh no, no, definitely, definitely.

Donnell: ...but it is what it is. That's the way I am

Seth: Its's part of it. It's part of it.

Seth: Now why do you think people throw shade?

James: I think people have different motivations, I guess. I mean I think like I said, it's like if it's a friend, like sometimes you can rag on your friends if they're not wearing like... if they're looking a little rough or whatever. Then, I mean Sometimes there's just like a way of playing with them. I don't know, I mean other ways? Like I mean I guess that's the thing if it's your friend, playing around, but then that could easily turn into something else f your intention is different.

Seth: Now who throws the best shade? Like what type of person? What

groups?

James: Well people here in D.C. throw a lot of shade. I just move out from California. Yeah, it wasn't too much shade being thrown over there. So…

Seth: Why do you think that is?

James: So, I think it's just laid back. California's very laid, very relaxing and people I mean it's just I guess they have other things to do then do that. But here I notice especially a lot of the gay black guys. They, they can throw. They can throw it. Definitely.

Seth: How does it make you feel? Ok, because it's very interesting because you're white, but your black friends pointed you out as like a master shade thrower. Like what do you make of that?

Brant: (chuckles) I don't know… but wouldn't say (chuckles) It kind of embarrassing. Um, I don't know. It's harder for me because I don't think that sometimes I'm like, "Oh, it's my intention to throw shade now." But again, as someone who deflects a lot, who teases other people because I have, I have, I am sensitive. So, people tease me all the time about lots of things. So, I have to learn to tease other people and I, I think that because I don't. It's very interesting. So, I tease people without really meaning to hurt anyone's feelings. I don't like to hurt anyone's feelings. So. when I throw shade I think, I think I might present myself in that way like what I said, being regal and sort of distancing myself from it a little bit because I don't want to look like I'm trying to hurt someone's feelings. So, when I make fun of you, I do it in this very overt grandiose way. So, it looks like I'm presenting as a joke instead of like trying to hurt someone's feelings. Does that make sense?

Seth: Yes. Okay, then that makes me ask do you ever throw shade in combat then, in verbal combat?

Brant: Um, not really. I'm not very combative. So, it's hard. Like if someone gives me… like if someone makes fun of me, I will. I will. So, an example. Someone on Facebook. I keep using Facebook. I hate being digital generation. They were like, "Oh, I'm finally back at the gym. #Shredded" And so I commented, "Shredded, as in you shredded up your gym membership end now you're finally getting to go back" and everyone was like said that was shade, but I was like, "Oh no, I'm just

making fun of the words that you used." And so, then he replied with, "Yeah darling, I'll see you at Dunkin donuts tomorrow morning" because I go to Dunkin donuts every single day. And so, like he got me and that's hilarious. So, I won't really combat with someone if they get a good one on me because I want them to be like… if you get me, you could have that. Because I am going for the laugh. If a lot of people will laugh at something, if it's at my expense, I will bow down and be like "Yes, go ahead." Because that's what… I want everyone to have a good time.

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