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What Child Is This?: Closely Reading Collectivity and Queer Childrearing in Lackawanna Blues and Noah’s Arc

Vincent L Stephens, Bucknell University
Collectivity is a deeply embedded strategy in African American culture that has historically functioned as a response to challenging social and economic conditions. From the mid- to late twentieth century and beyond, African American “families of choice”—intimate associations of biological and nonblood relatives cohabiting and sharing household responsibilities—have been a primary mode of collectivity that has challenged the hegemony of the heterosexual nuclear family. The nuclear structure’s preeminence as an exemplar of U.S. affiliative ideals belies the postwar economic and racial biases that limited its material accessibility, engineered the failure of such structures to foster stability and health, and obscures the functionality of other household models. Renewed critical attention to the alternative modes of kinship African Americans have cultivated is essential to understanding how diverse households provide emotional and material sustenance.

“What Child is This” examines two cultural depictions of African American “families of choice” in order to challenge two modes of white sexual normativity. First, my reading of the “othermothering” and “exchange relationships” represented in the autobiographical telefilm Lackawanna Blues challenges white heteronormative logic that black conformity to the nuclear family will resolve racialized economic and social gaps. Second, my reading of same-sex couple parenting in the series Noah’s Arc is a rejoinder to “queer negativity,” a white homonormative strain of queer theory opposed to various forms of sociality but lacking critical attention to the historically subversive role of alternative kinship structures for African Americans. Both readings address the devotion of nonbiological adults to child figures within these families and elucidate the enduring utility of extended family households as unique nexuses of care for African American adults and children.

Conceptualizing Collectivity

Cornel West’s provocative statement on the value of “black culture” warrants close critical scrutiny for its encapsulation of collectivity’s symbolic utility for African Americans:

The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. In other words, traditions for black surviving and thriving under usually adverse New World conditions were major barriers against the nihilistic threat. (40)
This excerpt’s ideological essence could be interpreted either as a nationalist statement rife with essentialist presumptions or as a benign statement of cultural pride. I read it as an acknowledgement of the psychological and behavioral toll of white supremacy, racism and class subordination. West places African American “counterpublic” formations, generated by African Americans for their sustenance as integral to “African American identity” and acknowledges the “linked fate” of blacks, tied to a shared national experience. Significantly, the quotation does not imply that all blacks have or have had an interchangeable experience; there is room for variance. The compelling subtext of his statement is that black racial pride is not benign or ornamental but the embodiment of the specificity and urgency of institution-building among African Americans. The import of his statement here is significant, since the social gaps and the resultant psychological nihilism he addresses in the larger article remain integral to African American life.

Communal values, particularly “service and sacrifice, love and care,” are important because African Americans have generated traditions worth acknowledging as a heritage. Understanding community in terms of the intimate relations formed through erotic relationships, friendships and living arrangements localizes and grounds community. The United States is arguably transitioning from traditional to modern and postmodern intimacies, and a hallmark of this transition is a social recognition of the pluralized ways people form and sustain intimate relations (Plummer 8-9). This transition raises important questions about the ways certain intimate relations are socially valued over others.

The heterosexual nuclear family comprised of a man and woman who divide gender roles and reproduce has been the central social ideal of intimate relationships since the post-World War II era. Regardless of divorce rates, expanded economic options for women, and the increased visibility of “alternative” intimacies, the nuclear family endures as the intimate norm. Politicians have skillfully employed “traditional family values” rhetoric to garner social support from voters fearful of nuclear family instability and the visibility of intimate alternatives. Much of their ire has been directed toward legislative battles to expand marriage and/or household recognition rights. Despite the pluralizing of intimacies and the weakening nuclear family, white conservatives, such as former vice president Dan Quayle, and some prominent African Americans, like Bill Cosby and Colin Powell, have repeatedly invoked the “traditional family” as the solution to social gaps between African Americans and whites.1

The hostility directed toward alternative sexual intimacies, especially gays and lesbians, and the nonnuclear familial arrangements long practiced among African Americans, privileges the nuclear family and its heteronormative core. Heteronormativity can be understood as “... the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite,” which “maintain the dominance of heterosexuality by preventing homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted or go unmarked or seem right in the way heterosexuality can,” thus allowing heterosexuality to operate hegemonically (Corber and Valocchi 4). Increasing hostilities toward intimate change are rooted in longstanding affective investments in a sexual normativity that oppresses multiple strands of intimacy, including African American kinship networks and same-sex coupling. Since homosexuality is always racialized sexuality and African American kinship patterns have always been marginal by U. S. heteronormative standards, the present essay unmasks the ways sexual normativity has obscured collectivity as a resistive strategy in the lives of two “alternative” intimate groups with important overlaps, black gay and lesbian communities and African American extended families.2

The essay interrogates sexual normativity by defining and affirming the relevance of black collectivity to contemporary black critical discourse on family structure and queer theoretical discourse on communality. The lack of attention paid to black
extended networks in black cultural criticism privileges the nuclear family to the exclusion of alternative kinship traditions. Similarly, queer theory’s tendency to focus on sexuality and gender over race instead of in relation to race obscures the importance of collectivity for black gays and lesbians. The emergence of the queer “anti-social thesis” is a particularly important critical strain the essay addresses. I interrogate the construction of sexual normativity and unique alternatives to it through a close reading of HBO’s 2005 adaptation of Lackawanna Blues, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Jr.’s autobiographical play and selected episodes of Noah’s Arc (2005-06), a series on the Logo cable channel that depicts the lives of four black gay men living in Los Angeles, including a couple raising a daughter. Both feature important elements of black collectivity that highlight the need for critical attention to alternative intimacies that counter the racial and sexual biases of sexual normativity. The “queer children” who emerge from the collective efforts of black adults is a crucial element I explore.

African American Collectivity and Queer Counterpublics

African American collectivity is a resistive strategy that emanates from the intimate spheres of family, friendship and local communities. The difference between being classified as black and choosing to identify as black, and the political importance of collectivity to black-identified Americans, is central to understanding African Americans’ embrace of racial identities and communities as strategic. First, racial classifications of blackness differ from an individual’s self-conscious choice to identify as black, notably when “one begins to make choices, to formulate plans, to express concerns, etc. in light of one’s identification of oneself as black” (Gooding-Williams 23). In post-civil rights-era America, identifying as black occurs with some recognition that racial classification may have been employed to distinguish and oppress certain bodies. But the potential for said bodies to express agency and subvert racist mechanisms involves a conscious choice to embrace blackness as an identity (Marable 295). Self-identifying as black is merely a starting point for articulating concerns that uniquely pertain to black people and catalyzing action.

Second, racial collectivity has served as a core mode of confronting systemic racism. Gooding-Williams notes how “...many of the most politically salient modes of being a black person involve the assignment of a collective significance to being black...” (24). The collectiveness he describes relates to “linked fate ... a felt connection to others of one’s identity group based on the belief that their fate will impinge on one’s own, [and] operates to tie individuals together on the basis of being subject to a certain kind of treatment, which of course does not entail any concept of an essential core” (Alcoff 319). Clearly there are consistent and demonstrable forces of oppression that target specific groups and inspire organized resistance against shared discrimination.

The mobilization of collectivity as resistance is best understood in the context of counterpublic formations. I define Lackawanna Blues and Noah’s Arc’s depictions of communal networks as representing “subaltern counterpublics” based on Nancy Fraser’s interrogation of Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the bourgeois liberal public sphere, which she characterizes as bourgeois, masculinist, and racially and ethnically exclusionary (117). In response, she has conceptualized those subaltern counterpublics in which “members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics.” These formations are notable because they “signal that there are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their...
identities, interests, and needs” (122). Family living arrangements are a central site for African American resistance to hegemonic U. S. notions of familial and gender propriety. The “families of choice” in both programs challenge the inherent advantages attributed to the nuclear model and their critical import is best understood in the context of the racialized nature of familial intimacy in postwar America.

Racializing Intimacy in Postwar America

National memories of the postwar era typically include fond memories of widespread economic prosperity and expanding family options but they must be tempered by attention to racial stratification. Scholars have routinely asserted the enduring iconicity and centrality of the “nuclear family” ideal despite its fading relevance and the deeply flawed presumption that there was ever uniform access to the ideal. Race is particularly important to the distorted memory of the nuclear family since several racialized processes limited the access of ethnic minorities to suburban home ownership.

Understanding “race” as a concept signifying and symbolizing social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of bodies illuminates social stratification (Omi and Winant 55). A central component of the conflicts and interests they allude to involves the social value placed on the ways different communities execute their intimate lives. The racialized processes that fostered the construction of the nuclear family as the national ideal included the limited access blacks had to home mortgage loans and the enforcement of segregation in the newly built mid-1940s suburbs. The three racial characteristics they outline are that racial signification is a social and historical process, a core element of social structure and a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion (Ibid.). These characteristics conceive race as a social construction and a structure governing access to social ideals.

Racism has consistently hindered ethnic minorities’ access to housing through racial zoning and restrictive covenants that made home ownership primarily accessible to the white middle class. Before 1930, suburbs in urban areas with minority groups present were racially and economically exclusive; this trend continued in the postwar suburban boom (Jackson 241). The GI Bill theoretically provided veterans with access to low-interest mortgage loans, but black veterans were disproportionately “dishonorably discharged from the military and had less access compared to white soldiers” (Sacks 126); the black veterans who were eligible for benefits faced housing restrictions. The racial zoning of housing dated back to the industrial era and after the Supreme Court declared zoning unconstitutional in 1917; the private real estate industry also enacted “restrictive covenants and other private deed restrictions to prevent integration and consequently enhance the material rewards of whiteness” (Lipsitz 25). Postwar suburban developments, such as Levittown, employed “restrictive covenants” for years, while the Federal Housing Authority’s (FHA) underwriting manuals openly insisted on racially homogenous neighborhoods. Their loans were made only in white neighborhoods despite a 1948 Supreme Court decision rendering such covenants as illegal. “Redlining,” a code for assessing low property values (dating back to the 1930s) applied to racially nonwhite or mixed working-class neighborhoods, and was another significant restrictive practice that impeded minorities’ access to home loans and mortgage insurance. Race clearly operated as a structure in the ability of minorities initially to access the elements of the intimate ideal.

The relationship between “race” and my critical attention to black collectivity is the way racialized processes of economic and social exclusion amplified the need for compensatory intimate strategies. V. P. Franklin described the unique salience of
self-determination to African American liberation when he noted: “At the core of the racial consciousness that developed among Afro-Americans in the United States was the cultural objective of black self-determination, which operated in a dialectical relationship with white supremacy.” He is alluding to a collective strategy evident in epic events ranging from slave rebellions to civil rights era struggles for legislative and social reform. In more complex ways, the intimacies African Americans formed and institutionalized were particularly integral to their quest for self-determination in response to white supremacist notions of proper intimacy.

Anthropological and sociological research on African American families illustrates the historical endurance of a communally based conception of family among blacks and its role in resistance to white supremacy. During slavery, African American families extended the West African family tradition favoring blood ties (consanguinity) over marital ties (conjugal), and operated in extended family models. The model involved numerous levels of resistance, such as providing care for those forcibly separated from loved ones, and relations that culminated in work groups and organized insurrections (Sudarkasa 114-15).

African Americans continued to resist real-estate biases in individual cases that span from the postbellum period to the postwar home-building boom. However, activists systematically publicized restrictive housing practices during the 1960s civil rights era. Between the late 1950s and ‘60s, many ethnic minority groups became increasingly urbanized via mass movement into public housing. In the urban neighborhoods where ethnic minorities were able to settle they frequently faced “urban renewal” efforts (i.e., the building of highways) that divided their communities and generated “an ideological assault that labeled their neighborhoods slums and called those who lived in them slum dwellers” (Sacks 129). Consistent governmental efforts to define African American families against the societal norm of male-headed nuclear households compounded the stigma of these labels.

Social scientists have explored the prevalence of matriarchally headed households and the African influence on U.S. familial patterns since the 1930s. Further, since the postwar emergence of the nuclear family, social scientists and lawmakers have consistently characterized African American families as pathological and disorganized. The U.S. Department of Labor’s 1965 study *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (“The Moynihan Report”) is the most blatant example of how social scientific perceptions informed national policy. Two excerpts are instructive regarding “commonsense” perceptions of African American households and family propriety in gendered terms:

> [T]he Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

> . . . it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. (29).

These quotations are troubling for standardizing male dominance and denigrating black motherhood. Further by attributing the economic and social burdens of black men on black women it elides institutional racism prevalent circa 1965. Anthropological and sociological breakthroughs in the 1970s shifted the kinship discourse on black families. Notably they questioned the usage of the nuclear family as a universal family model, rejected the correlative definition of African American families as pathological and advocated for the critical recognition of the uniqueness and validity of distinct African American kinship patterns including transformations of West African structures and the centrality of extended family relations for African Americans.6
A useful definition that recognizes the complexity of familial definitions is Billingsley’s definition of “African American family” as “an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation; sustained by a history of common residence in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structures both internal and external to itself” is crucial for grounding family patterns in a racial and national context (28). By defining African American variations on marriage as a union “between groups of people” rather than just “two people,” and noting the more widespread prevalence of formal adoption among African American families than white families Billingsley’s definition, illustrates a variation between races in the intimate arena of family and household. His focus on informal adoption and appropriation (“unions without blood ties or marital ties”) to black extended families is germane to understanding collectivity as an enduring component of black intimate lives (29-31). These eclectic strands reveal how the extended family model and the collectivity it represents have continued to serve as a central site of intimate resistance amid the social organization of racialized bodies in the U.S. These frameworks are essential to understanding the potential for “queer families” that operate outside of nuclear family logic to nurture children and provide a collective environment for African American adults in Lackawanna Blues and Noah’s Arc.

Lackawanna Blues: Queering “Care” through Collectivity

Lackawanna Blues depicts the benevolent relationships that occurred among Lackawanna, western New York State’s post-integration era black community, and connects the decline of black neighborhoods to the modern decline of communal values. The story began as a one-man play based on anecdotes Santiago-Hudson shared with Public Theater director George C. Wolfe about growing up in Lackawanna from 1956 to the early 1970s. The story focuses on how Ruben’s troubled parents entrusted him to the care of Rachel “Nanny” Crosby, a business owner who ran a boarding house and restaurant storefront at 32 Wassoon Ave. After an acclaimed theatrical run, Santiago-Hudson adapted the play for television, where it first aired on HBO on February 12, 2005.

Othermothering and Exchange Relationships

My reading addresses the narrative’s aestheticization of the African American postwar collective ethic and its challenges to heteronormativity by focusing on “othermothering” and the “exchange relationships” that occur in Lackawanna.
“Othermothering” is an African American female kinship practice in which women other than biological mothers mentor and bond with a community’s black children, (Hill-Collins 180, 189-90). Othermothers, like Crosby, are part of a chain of “exchange relationships,” which are integral components of “domestic networks” of care in black urban communities. Within many of these communities, a communal “folk system” is valued over an official legal system in providing child care and the abundant possibilities for friends to act as “kinsmen” based on their ability to form reciprocal relationships. Lackawanna exemplifies how “othermothering” and “exchange relationships” widen the lens of what constitutes care.

The Lackawanna adaptation is organized around Ruben Jr.’s flashbacks of Crosby, who lies sick in the hospital with the adult Ruben by her bedside. From the opening credits, which feature a montage of communal photos, to the closing shots of the adult Ruben surveying a decimated contemporary Lackawanna, the narrative employs seemingly nostalgic devices to signify a loss of black communal values. The underground economy and adult cohabitation of the 1950s and ’60s in Lackawanna countered the dominant culture ethos of the era, centered as it was on private homeownership and contained family units. An economic and social awareness of blacks as a distinct social class undergirds the memories connecting emotion to social context.

From the montage, the camera directs the audience to a black after-hours club whose mood is disrupted when Ruben's mother Alean and his father Ruben Sr. turn to Crosby to deliver their baby. It is clear from her makeshift midwifery that they turn to her because she is competent and trustworthy. Crosby houses social and economic outcasts including veterans, the mentally ill, amputees, and so-called “ramblers and drifters.” Though herself hardly wealthy, she charges low rates for her residents, and often forgives late payments. The high likelihood of unmarried young couples, like Ruben’s parents, raising children without formal legal recognition and an abundance of shared property necessitated the intervention of extended family and communal members to assist with economic resources and childcare. Also, segregation limited economic opportunities for African Americans, including their access to the prosperity and status associated with the postwar nuclear family ideal. Given these contexts, it is not surprising that marriage had more limited value as a guarantor of stability. These contexts are essential to understanding Hill-Collins’s social positioning of nonbiological female caretakers like Crosby as important actors in black social history.

In addition to delivering Ruben for Alean and Ruben Sr., Crosby eventually becomes Ruben Jr.’s daily caretaker while his mother waitresses. After Alean experiences a series of legal troubles and begins a descent into drug addiction, Crosby demands that she allow her to raise Ruben full-time. In a particularly poignant scene she subtly acknowledges late 1950s racism when she declares to Alean, “It’s hard on little black boys out there. Now that boy is something special and whatever he wanna be I’m gonna see that he get that chance” (Lackawanna). Nanny’s declaration and the other residents’ “investment” are rooted in a historical awareness of the “out there”—social factors structured against the progression of young black men.

This scene is not an isolated example of nobility but a savvy recognition of struggle. The narrative is quite sympathetic to Alean's economic status and her struggle to balance her immaturity with her identity as a mother. Similarly, Ruben Jr. is torn between an obligation to honor his biological mother and recognize Crosby’s influence. Though Ruben’s father visits, the narrative frames Ruben Jr.’s ultimate care as a struggle between women, perhaps reflecting the ethos of the era. Crosby initially
defers to Alcan’s judgment, but when her influence seems harmful she asserts that young Ruben’s welfare must be the priority. This is hardly an easy choice but the notion that the boy could potentially transcend the era’s economic and social challenges inform Crosby’s judgment. Though Crosby was Ruben’s primary caretaker, Lackawanna strongly depicts the positive influence of communal adults on Ruben. For example, Otis, a blind bluesman, teaches Ruben about E7 blues chords, and Mr. Paul reflects on then-recent black history, including the Brown decision and Jackie Robinson’s integration of major league baseball. The young narrator particularly idolizes Ricky, a “butch” lesbian whom he refers to as “the coolest,” based on her slick sartorial style of dress and assertive personality.

Ricky’s presence is particularly important to understanding the inclusiveness of the African American collective ethic. Lackawanna’s pre-integration-era context fosters the inclusion of black gays and lesbian within the overarching black collective/communal context. Ricky’s communal location does not mean that the historical Ricky never faced homophobia, but within the context of segregated postwar African American communities, there was no clear alternative “gay community” for Ricky to enter. In noting how “gays and lesbians represent every imaginable cultural group, and they bring this traditional cultural orientation with them when they enter into gay/lesbian culture,” Marlon Ross also acknowledges gay and lesbian pre-adult socialization as a process largely structured around racial, ethnic, and religious social organization (502). His contention that “gay cultural affiliation is both secondary (always succeeding acculturation in some other racial, ethnic, religious group) and also invisible,” applies to gays and lesbians of multiple races but does not dictate their dispensation of racial and ethnic culture in favor of a racially unmarked gay and lesbian community. For queers of color, “...same-sex desire was a matter of finding a way to reaffirm continuity, rather than a matter of breaking with a dominant culture in order to gain a new identity through an awakened consciousness shared with others of a similarly oppressed status. After all, how could black gays break with dominant culture, since they had never been part of it?” (505) This argument is pertinent to Ricky and the gay-male-centered Noah’s Arc, since both focus upon specific African American communal formations that challenge white familial and communal constructions.

Lackawanna’s appreciation for the ways communal adults can safely mentor children and the unorthodox cultural knowledges Ruben’s “teachers” impart signify an implicit ethic of trust among Lackawanna’s segregated community who, as Santiago-Hudson has commented, “were people who influenced me in a positive way” by allowing him to feel “that [I] was special, that [I] could do something good in this life” (Foster C20). The importance of intracultural transmissions of black cultural knowledge is also a core value the film invokes with everything from anecdotes community adults share with Ruben to cultural signifiers like fried-fish dinners and group call-and-response scenes in two juke joint scenes.

Part of the narrative’s critical importance, however, is its engagement with external cultural perceptions and experiences beyond the neighborhood. At various moments in the story, national and local issues arise, including the way various boarders reference contentious relationships with whites. The story’s ability to reframe the supposed “shame” or “dysfunction” of black cultural kinship in relation to white heteronormative culture crystallizes in a key scene where a white male and female social worker arrive to assess the school-age Ruben’s progress. The female social worker questions Crosby’s educational depth, and she shamefully admits to her third-grade education but comments that her husband Bill, who is nearby, completed the sixth grade. Unimpressed, the social worker asks Ruben about the living conditions. He replies, “I have a lot of fun here. Everybody is my friend. They teach me stuff. Sometimes I teach them stuff.” The male social worker responds, “Stuff? Like what?” When Ruben describes his knowledge as playing harmonica, learning about the Negro Leagues, and other forms of subversive knowledge the female social worker asks,
“Would you like to live in a regular house?” A puzzled Ruben says, “What’s regular?” in which the male says, “You know, a regular old family with a yard and a garage and . . .” Ruben notes that Crosby’s house has a yard, and her husband Bill has a garage, to which both social workers scramble to get Ruben to agree to visit other homes. At this point, a seething Bill throws them out.

Once Ruben questions what constitutes “regular,” and asserts that his family possesses the material trappings the social workers trumpet, the racial subtext is amplified. The social workers are clearly prejudiced against the racially and familial “queer” environment. Ruben’s complex sense of cultural education and the open-ended family structure he inhabits reveals the limits of their underlying assumptions about postwar family propriety. Anxieties about Ruben’s ability to reproduce normal structures unlike his current situation haunt the shame underlying their reference to a “regular old family.” Crosby’s defiance of gendered and familial expectations of the era include her unusual marriage to a man seventeen years younger, and her economic autonomy may have also informed their concerns about Ruben’s family environment.

Ultimately, despite the private consumption ethos of the “nuclear family” era, Crosby was committed to sharing her resources with the local community. That 32 Wassoon became a repository for “ramblers and drifters” speaks to Crosby’s awareness that the socially vulnerable had limited refuge in 1950s America. When Ruben Jr. asks Crosby, “How long have you been helping people?” she replies, “There’s always been a part of me that wanted to try to fix things. People. Try to make ’em feel whole again. . . .” Crosby briefly relays the story of her leaving her job in Virginia and about the premature death of her three year-old daughter Lillian from pneumonia. Ruben wonders aloud why she has never discussed Lillian before, and Crosby notes, with difficulty, that even though God took her, “he filled my life up with so many others. But most of all . . . most of all . . . he gave me you.”

Crosby’s generosity was shown principally to blacks, but was also more broadly inclusive. For example, in one of Lackawanna’s later scenes she offers shelter to Laura, a white woman, and her two sons after she flees her abusive husband, Jesse. The next day, when Jesse arrives with intention of removing Laura and their sons, Crosby directly confronts him and sends him away. Clearly the collectivity Crosby practiced toward her community was imbued with a sense of racial and gender injustice, and included support for a variety of people who needed support but did not reside in the boarding house.

I focus my critique of white heteronormativity on Lackawanna Blues because Santiago-Hudson wrote the play with a critical eye toward the diminished ethic of care within contemporary African American life. The film ends with a before-and-after shot of Lackawanna then (i.e., in the 1950s) and now. In reflecting on this scene the author significantly roots the story in contemporary crises, noting, “There was a time when the African [American] community always looked out for others. There was never somebody going around hungry. Never was there somebody sleeping in the streets in our community. Now we’ve gone our separate ways. It’s that I’m gonna get mine’ syndrome that came in during the ’70s and ’80s, and it’s just gotta stop” (Charleston 6E). He also frames the play as “a reminder of a time when we took care of each other; I’m saying, ‘Don’t get so far removed and so content that you forget to reach out’ ” (Miller 34). As a cultural artifact, the autobiographical Lackawanna exists on a continuum with a number of African American fiction narratives, such as Toni Morrison’s Sula and Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place. Each depicts African American collectivity in the pre- and post-integration eras and the centrality of exchange-based relationships in child-raising and adult relationality at a time where biological/conjugal relationships were present but a network of care and support was more salient.
Noah's Arc Black Gay Men and Black Collectivity

Noah's Arc asserts the importance of collectivity for African American gays and lesbians which counters recent queer theoretical suspicion and dissent toward social structures like kinship networks. The critical link between Lackawanna and Noah's Arc lies in their repeated emphasis on the importance of collectivity for the survival of adults and children and the counterpublic challenge to normativity they represent. Noah's is the first TV series to exclusively focus on black gay men (hereafter referred to as BGMs) as a discernible community. Collectivity, among the core characters and within a black gay communal milieu, is integral to the series. The Los Angeles-based ensemble comedy/drama focuses on the friendships among Noah, a struggling screenwriter; Alex, an HIV/AIDS educator who runs a nonprofit clinic called The Black AIDS Institute (BAI); Ricky, a clothing store owner; and Chance, an economics professor. Noah's career aspirations and romantic relationships anchor the series, but each character has a substantive storyline. In addition to home and work environments, the series places the characters in the heart of L.A.'s black gay community, including scenes shot in dance clubs, a private sex club, a drag ball featuring black male and female performers, and a Black Gay Pride beach picnic. Noah's Arc aired for two seasons on Logo from 2006-07. Nine episodes aired in season one and eight in season two; my episodic analysis is based on viewing the series in original broadcast form and reviewing it on DVD. A feature-length film, Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom, was released in late 2008.

The characters' collective values emerge through various “exchange relationships.” The friends have a tight network of support, evident in rituals like periodic Sunday brunches, various scenes in which characters seek advice, and scenes in which characters assist each other, and cope with romantic difficulties. The series also consistently integrates the collective work needed to address the uniquely important role of HIV/AIDS education and prevention for BGMs and Latino gay men. BAI's genesis and the activities within the clinic are inseparable from the sexual and racial politics of HIV/AIDS activism. In episode five of season one, entitled “Nothin' Goin' on But the Rent,” Alex's white boss confronts him after he administers an HIV/AIDS test to Fernando, a male Latino teenage prostitute. His boss notes, “We're obligated by our funders to promote abstinence and family values, not sweep up street trash in some diluted attempt to save him from the inevitable overdose.” This exchange motivates Alex to declare the Institute's ethic: “Dedicated to fighting AIDS in the black and Latino community.” Ricky questions the clinic's location on the corner of “hustler and whore,” to which Alex responds: “I gotta go where the need is.” The group immediately volunteers their services to the clinic, including grant-writing assistance and volunteering, which is perhaps the series' ultimate depiction of “exchange relationships.” The BAI becomes a regular fixture in the series as do discussions of safe sex and the high infection rates among gay men of color. Both the BAI and the “safe sex” motif represent internal advocacy among the characters, and metacommentary for the show's audience.

Representations of BGM collectivity are urgent for their ability to depict experiences otherwise neglected and misrepresented in politics, media, and scholarship. Noah's Arc was created by openly gay black director and screenwriter Patrik-Ian Polk, and adheres to Muñoz's definition of “black gay male cultural productions” as ambitious endeavors whose “tasks” include

the (re)telling of elided histories that need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces, including, but not limited to, states that blindly neglect the suffering bodies of men caught within a plague, the explosion of “hate crime” violence that targets black and gay bodies, and a reactionary media power structure that would just as soon dismiss queer existence as offer it the most fleeting reflection. (Muñoz 57)
The series eschews generic storylines by grounding itself within a proto-activist context that tells overtly racialized narratives informed by racially specific crises that challenge media stereotyping and represent BGMs as extending the African American collective tradition. This extension illustrates the usefulness of the series for critiquing “white homonormativity” in popular representations of gay men and queer theory.12

Just as Lackawanna represents intimate patterns counter to the normative (i.e., white) nuclear family model, Noah’s Arc contrasts with “white homonormative” depictions of homosexual erotic, familial, and friendship relations. Though the mid-1990s and early 2000s were widely perceived as eras of increased gay and lesbian visibility, representations of gay and lesbian African Americans in TV and film have been limited to a few supporting or guest characters with rare exceptions.13 These depictions routinized gay and lesbian communities as the province of white culture and mostly tokenized ethnic minorities. The import of racial representation is not merely “multiculturalism,” but rather the ways in which minority representation stimulates attention to the unique, historically mediated concerns of minority cultures within an “alternative” intimate communal context.14

Growth in gay and lesbian media visibility has coincided with the mainstreaming of “queer theory” in academe and its normalizing of whiteness. Queer theory was erected across disciplines as a response to heteronormativity (Corber and Valocchi 4). In their attempts to challenge heteronormativity, however, queer theorists have frequently failed to acknowledge how blacks and other ethnic minorities were never part of the U.S. heteronormative ideal.15 The lack of critical attention to the ways “queers of color” have negotiated racism and homophobia has spawned numerous critical addenda to queer theory, including “black queer studies,” “disidentifications,” “quare,” and the “queer-of-color” analytic.16 Despite such frameworks that locate queerness within a racialized context, queer theorists routinely overlook the importance of race and ethnicity for queers of color.

The most recent critical obfuscation is the queer antisocial theory movements whose chief architects are Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. Their respective works, Homos and No Future, propose a theory of queer individualism in which “queerness” encompasses a process of rejecting communality and sociality but not claiming an alternative sexual identity to straight or gay categories. Antisociality lies in the post-structuralist rejection of identity as essentialist and the suspicion that investments in identities, and related elements like “culture,” “heritage,” and “tradition,” are the core elements of social discrimination.17 Thus, for antisocial theorists a truly “ queer” perspective is one that rejects “identity” and “community.” Though antisocial theories aim to interrogate discrimination, they actually reinforce the normalizing of whiteness in queer theory by assuming that all communities ultimately suffer when they embrace sociality. No Future is particularly critical of the national social investment in children as the nation’s future as it portends that adults simply reproduce current prejudices in children through the communal model and forestall any social progress (Edelman 11).18 My reading responds to this claim by exploring the critical implications of how Chance and his partner Eddie co-raise Kenya, who is Eddie’s biological daughter.

Raising a Queer Child in a Queer Family

In Noah’s pilot, “My One Temptation: Part One,” we learn that Eddie and Chance decide to move in together and co-raise Kenya after dating for six months. Kenya is an integral part of the series in introducing audiences to Chance’s transition and providing an opportunity for him to locate child care as a viable option within the BGM milieu. Kenya is present in six of the nine season one episodes, and she provides opportunities to witness Eddie and Chance’s parenting; their family is also
the rare example of a BGM “family of choice.” The phenomenology of this is also important in contributing to an understanding of how race and sexuality are integral to the socialization of children. Children are raised by racialized and sexualized adults, and parental identities affect children’s sense of social location. The attention children give to their individual and familial social location and their ability to understand these arenas as sites of contestation are uniquely centered. Noah’s viewers get a glimpse of mundane childrearing and the extraordinary way racial and sexual politics inform parenting decisions. In the first season, Kenya is often in the backdrop but her presence stimulates important conversation on relational possibility.

For example, in the pilot Kenya stands beside Eddie on the porch of his home to welcome Chance as Alex, Noah, and Ricky move Chance’s boxes. In this sequence Chance is encouraged by Noah’s comment that “I think it’s all so romantic. Y’all a family now,” and annoyed by Ricky’s comment, “And I always thought that being gay we got to avoid all of that bull.” Characters affirm and question the possibility of BGM coupling and family building in this exchange, which establishes a core theme of the series—the refusal to privilege a singular intimate ideal above others. These themes gain momentum in the third episode, “Don’t Mess with My Man,” after Chance discovers Eddie is cheating on him. Chance retaliates by driving his minivan—the quintessential symbol of modern family transport—into the front of the house where Eddie is philandering. By episode six (“Writing to Reach You”), Chance and Eddie have separated, but when Chance announces at a brunch with Alex, Noah, and Ricky that he must depart early to pick up Kenya from ballet, an interesting exchange occurs. Ricky says, “God, didn’t your obligations to that child end with your failed relationship with her father?” to which Chance responds, “It doesn’t work like that, Ricky. When I moved in with Eddie, I wasn’t just making a commitment to him. I committed to his daughter, too, and why should Kenya have to suffer because her father is a philanderer?”

The key element in Chance’s retort is the notion of Kenya’s “suffering.” Chance recognizes the potential devastation of abruptly disrupting a child’s sense of stability and the potential feelings of dejection and separation she could experience. It is clear in the first season that Chance and Kenya were bonding, and that she was beginning to integrate him into her sense of self based on his references to shuttling Kenya to her various extracurricular activities in episode three. Implicit in Chance’s response is the ethical question facing gay couples with children. Chance’s choice to maintain a bond with Kenya despite the couple’s relationship status is particularly poignant in the context of national gay and lesbian struggles for unmarried partners to gain legal adoptive/custodial rights. Chance’s refusal to discard Kenya symbolizes a broader ethic of care in which parental investment exceeds the “official” obligations presumably inherent to biological and adoptive parenting.

This ethic is more overtly racialized in the second season. In season two, Kenya, who is present in five of the eight episodes, has more scenes with Chance, whom she refers to as “Daddy Chance.” For example, in the second episode Chance and Kenya have a gentle discussion about why she is no longer sleeping in Eddie and Chance’s bed—she accidentally slaps them in the face with her arm (“It Ain’t Over ’til It’s Over”). Chance also feels authorized to ground Kenya in episode four after she abruptly kicks off her shoes when he tries to get her dressed for school (“Excuses for Bad Behavior”); later in the episode the school calls and asks him to pick her up because she has punched a classmate. After Chance arrives Kenya explains that she was defending her two fathers when a classmate mocked her for having a “fake mommy.” Chance tears up and hugs her in response. Whereas a typical TV series might feature a parental scolding, the unusual context of her fight symbolizes a small but significant resistance to homophobia by a young person that solidifies Chance and Kenya’s bond. By virtue of Eddie and Chance’s relationship, Kenya is, or is likely to be perceived as, a “queer” child from a “queer” family whose home environment lies outside the racial and sexual social constructions of normal families.
The gay parenting context also exhibits an overt racial dimension in episode eight of season one (“I’m With Stupid”) and episode three of season two (“Desperado”). In “Stupid,” Alex and his boyfriend Trey, Ricky, and Noah are seated on a pew at Eddie’s black Christian church listening to a sermon on nonjudgment, next to Chance, Eddie and Kenya. During the sermon Noah says he has not attended church in years, Alex is annoyed that the group has never visited his church, and Ricky mocks Alex’s church which he identifies as an all-inclusive church attended by openly gay, lesbian and transgender members. In response to Ricky’s assertion that black churches are hypocritically homophobic, since they are stocked with closeted members, Chance responds, “Look, I know there are a lot of problems with the black church. But it’s the one way I can stay connected to my childhood, my upbringing. Especially since my parents retired to Florida. Eddie and I feel it’s important for Kenya to have a strong spiritual base” (“I’m With Stupid”). Chance recognizes pockets of homophobia in black churches, but still intends to remain actively connected to the tradition. The notion of black churches as an important communal and spiritual space for children and adults is crucial to Chance’s and Alex’s responses.

The importance of black Christian churches as places for spiritual nourishment, political organizing and social refuge was particularly relevant to postwar civil rights organizing. The participation of black LGBT people in religious communities that employ fundamentalist interpretations forbidding homosexuality exemplifies how racial solidarity has often been more accessible to and crucial for African American LGBT people than a presumed accessibility to “gay communities” devoid of racism. As Ross has noted, racism and de facto segregation complicate the presumption that it is most pragmatic for LGBT people to abandon presumed heterosexist and/or homophobic ethnic spaces for generic “gay communities” (505). The racialized nature of gay communities and their frequent failures to insulate ethnic LGBT people from social and systemic racism is integral to ethnic LGBT people’s often difficult choices to participate in ideologically conflicting ethnic spaces. Though Chance alludes to religious homophobia, it is inaccurate to presume a blanket level of homophobia in black Christian churches. Ultimately Chance’s desire to stay connected to the familial and communal context of his religious upbringing reflects a strong sense of his cultural self and a desire to maintain its relevance to Kenya. The “strong spiritual base” Chance references is not merely about religious practice, but is also an extension of the racially communal values he presumably internalized from his church.

Though Chance, Eddie, and Kenya’s family life is integral to the series, it does not privilege couplehood and child-raising over other affiliative forms. In season two’s “Desperado,” Chance challenges two married women’s perceptions about his and Eddie’s family. Eddie and Chance invite Eddie’s supervisors Clayton and Roger, and their wives Vonda and June, to their home for dinner. During a conversation between Chance and the wives, Vonda asks if Chance is worried about the harassment a child with two gay parents might experience. Chance questions the social assumption that gay men are not “real men” because they are presumed to not raise children. June then affirms Chance and Eddie for defying the “the stereotype of gay promiscuity,” to which Chance laughs, clenches his teeth and asserts, “We’re not going against anything. We just did what we wanted to do, this is not a judgment against anybody else’s choices” (“Desperado”).

June’s admiration for gay coupling and child-raising is clearly a response to a general stereotyping of gay men as “promiscuous” and “irresponsible.” It can also be understood as the logical extension of mediated images of BGMs, including the proliferation of “down low” (DL) discourse, and late 1980s/early 1990s minstrel-like portrayals of Negro Faggotry. The “DL” refers to black men who have sex with other men but are unwilling to identify as “gay,” engage in long-term relationships or affiliate themselves within gay communal milieus. This emergent stereotype of black men who have sex with men (MSMs) as nomadic sexual predators, and enduring...
images of BGM as effete fops obsessed with style and pleasure are both variations on the theme of gay hypersexuality and their failures to be “proper” men. Both stereotypes have been presumed to correlate with the rise of HIV/AIDS rates among BGMs and black heterosexual women. Chance interrogates June’s presumption by centering “choice” rather than privileging certain choices. His response illustrates the diverse relationships from which gay men can choose, and counters the stigmatization of homosexual sex outside of monogamous coupled contexts. Through the juxtaposition of Ricky, who is unapologetically promiscuous, with Eddie and Chance, the series espouses inclusiveness about affiliation. In doing so, it counters the external valorization of the nuclear family and rhetorically stymies intimate privileging within same-sex sexual relationships.

The BGM “subaltern counterpublic sphere” Noah’s characters represent responds to the racialized social privileging of heteronormative relations and symbolically resists media constructions that conflate gay identity with whiteness and simultaneously essentialize BGM sexuality. It also presents BGM sexuality as operating within the collective contexts historically integral to African American strategies of resistance. Clearly, collective values are prominent in the series’ exchange-oriented friendships, consistent attention to the high HIV/AIDS infection rates for gay men of color and depiction of queer parenting.

Eddie and Chance’s parenting depicts the potential for a child raised by queer parents to be exposed to a range of contexts, including social collectivity of African American life and the realities of homophobia that filter down to children. Chance’s gradual bond with Kenya embodies an ethic of care that asserts the positive and transformative role nonblood adult caretakers can play in a child’s life. Chance’s unbounded commitment to Kenya, the couple’s investment in connecting Kenya to black collectivity and Chance’s unique response to Kenya’s defense operate in the spirit of collectivity unbound by biological or legal obligations. Kenya’s confrontation of derogatory comments about her “queer family” is the culmination of her transcendent bond with Chance and a subtle indicator of the way queerly raised children could potentially challenge homophobia. In this regard, she complements Lackawanna’s Ruben, who idolizes his lesbian mentor and defends his “queer family” when it is challenged.

Intimate Collectivity and Black Self-Determination

Collectivity has served as a central mode of subaltern counterpublic resistance to the racism inherent to the white heteronormative ideal and white homonormativity. The elasticity inherent in Andrew Billingsley’s conception of African American families as networks of “intimate association” is characterized by a sense of collectivity. Thus, the “intimate associations” I have analyzed in Lackawanna Blues and Noah’s Arc represent an important branch of the long-standing tradition of African American self-determination.

African American “queer families” like Crosby’s and the fictional Eddie and Chance’s are best understood as representations of an ethic of care and solidarity with immense potential to challenge racism, homophobia, familialism and other forms of social prejudice. These queer families are useful as sites for understanding how queer intimate environments can stimulate new discourses about intimate possibilities. Critical work on representations of alternative intimacies engages with the ways popular culture contributes to the modernization of intimacies and can illuminate the possibilities of this work in scholarly forums with activist undercurrents, such as the Council on Contemporary Families (www.contemporaryfamilies.org).
The neoconservative privileging of nuclear families is laced with moral prejudice toward so-called “alternative lifestyles.” However, to be truly credible, these adherents must engage with the rich range of “intimate associations” African Americans have generated for the sake of nurturing and supporting adults and children. The diverse intimate juxtapositions in Noah’s Arc and Lackawanna Blues are also important for interrogating queer antisocial proponents. Their thesis fails to reconcile “queer” sexuality—nonreproductive sexual modes that do not yield new and future citizens and are thus “antisocial”—with queer-intimate formations. The nonbiological child-rearing and female-headed household structure in Lackawanna Blues clearly existed outside of the social ideals of their era. Ruben’s identity as a child citizen was nurtured in a collective environment where care and nurturance were more pertinent than the biology and legality favored in the social ideal. Lackawanna’s genesis was a desire to reassert collective values in the public sphere by depicting the queer family of Ruben’s youth, which clearly made him a more progressive citizen than the heteronormative citizen Edelman imagines. Similarly, Noah’s Arc initially presents Kenya as a child adjusting to Chance and vice versa, but gradually her consciousness as a queer child emerges, and Chance articulates a queer sense of commitment that defies the biological and legal logic of the nuclear ideal. Kenya’s absorption of the collective ethic as exemplified by her parents’ friendships and their volunteerism is a crucial site for imagining the contours of the future through a racialized, queer critical lens.

Understanding the roots of African American collectivity provides a fuller context for assessing the concept of racial heritage. The intellectual pursuit to reduce social stratification and its effects must acknowledge the diverse histories and strategies citizens have employed for resistance. Social and political attempts to standardize a national “way of life” via the nuclear family and ostensibly “radical” critiques that universalize social experience are inadequate responses to intimate plurality. Willful choices to embrace identity and community are crucial to understanding the American society blacks inhabit and the forces that its self-determination strategy has continued to combat in various forms. The impetus for “The Moynihan Report” and the basis for antisocial theories seem to stem from a rather prescriptive political slant. Neither of these operates from a nuanced understanding of the richness of black family traditions. Their flat conceptions of the “ideal family” and the “ideal strategy” for queers and queer contexts are constructed around whiteness as a universal lens devoid of attention to black self-determination and the value of collectivity. Ultimately a conception of black sexuality and black family must account for and recognize the strong degree of queerness inherent in the cultural valuations of both in relation to U. S. constructions of normative sexuality and so-called “traditional families.” In this respect, Cornel West’s reference to the genius of black ancestors can be extended to contemporary formations and understood as the outgrowth of resistive strategies based in an ethic of resistant intimate collectivity.

1. In 1992, former U. S. vice president Dan Quayle attributed the L.A. riots and other forms of social unrest to young people socialized outside of traditional nuclear families. In a speech at the 2000 Republican National Convention, former Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, “We need to restore the social model of married parents” who would be “bringing into the world a desired child, a child to be loved and nurtured, to be taught a sense of right and wrong, to be educated to his or her maximum potential in a society that provides opportunities for work and a fulfilling life.” Similarly, in a 2004 speech, Cosby included unwed mothers in his rant against the black underclass, noting: “No longer is a person embarrassed because [she is] pregnant without a husband” and “Five or six different children—same woman, eight[,] ten different husbands or whatever. Pretty soon you’re going to have to have DNA cards so you can tell who you’re making love to . . . you could have sex with your grandmother . . . you keep those numbers coming, I’m just predicting.”
2. Ferguson argues that “heteronormativity” was the outgrowth of United States industrialization that involved the employment and racialization of “surplus populations” (i.e., African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos) to contribute to U.S. capital (14-15). Implicit in this “integration” was the “exceeding of local and regional boundaries,” a “disruption” of “social hierarchies of race, gender, age, and sexuality,” and a “context for the emergence of new social arrangements, identities, and practices” (16). The state found myriad ways to discipline and regulate these populations through “Americanization programs, vice commissions, residential segregation and immigration exclusion” all efforts to “press nonwhites into gender and sexual conformity despite the gender and sexual diversity of those racialized groups” (14).


4. See Lipsitz 26 and Sacks 127.

5. Lipsitz also describes “Steering”—directing minority buyers to homes in minority neighborhoods and “blockbusting,” where realtors encourage white homeowners to purchase homes for small amounts and sell them to blacks at significantly higher costs, are additional practices that limited minority access to suburban settlement (26). Also see Sacks 129.


10. In an interview, Wolfe, who is openly gay, noted how Ricky’s acceptance must be understood complexly: “I think the big joke in the black community is: ‘We don’t want no homosexuals around here—Junior, come in and take off your dress and let’s eat dinner!’ What’s said to the public has absolutely nothing to do with the cultural truth of the moment. It’s not so much an energy of forgiveness as that the community was smart enough to incorporate everybody—because you didn’t know who was going to provide you with a resource that you need to move forward with your agenda” (Stockwell 48).

11. Noah’s Arc first season episodic broadcast information: “My One Temptation Part 1” (19 Oct. 2005); “My One Temptation Part 2” (19 Oct. 2005); “Don’t Mess with My Man” (26 Oct. 2005); “Don’t Make Me Over” (2 Nov. 2005); “Nothin’ Goin’ On but the Rent” (9 Nov. 2005); “Writing to Reach You” (16 Nov. 2005); “Love is a Battlefield” (23 Nov. 2005); “I’m With Stupid” (30 Nov. 2005); and “Got ‘til It’s Gone” (7 Dec. 2005). Noah’s Arc second season episodic broadcast information: “Housequake” (9 Aug. 2006); “It Ain’t Over Til’ It’s Over” (16 Aug. 2006); “Desperado” (23 Aug. 2006); “Excuses for Bad Behavior” (30 Aug. 2006); “Give It Up” (6 Sept. 2006); “Under Pressure” (13 Sept. 2006); “Baby, Can I Hold You?” (27 Sept. 2006); “Say It Loud” (4 Oct. 2006).

12. I modify Duggan’s critique of “the new homonormativity,” a neoliberalist strategy whereby mainstream political gay and lesbian organizing reasserts “heteronormative assumptions and institutions” centered on privacy and consumption, to address the surreptitious way white supremacy operates within queer theory (50).


15. See note 2.
Antisocial Homosexual," critiqued the racial politics and psychoanalytic roots of antisociality, including Timothy Dean, "The future, a notion which he defines as "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 3, 11). Several scholars have and limited by a social investment in teleology embodied by the symbolic employment of "children" as on the idealized by-product of coupling—children. Edelman argues that politics is discursively defined (53). Edelman builds from Bersani by focusing on the futurity implied by the political and social emphasis on the idealized by-product of coupling—children. Edelman argues that politics is discursively defined and limited by a social investment in teleology embodied by the symbolic employment of "children" as the future, a notion which he defines as "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 3, 11). Several scholars have critiqued the racial politics and psychoanalytic roots of antisociality, including Timothy Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual," PMLA 121.3 (May 2006): 826-28; and José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," PMLA 121.3 (May 2006): 825-26.

16. In response to racially and sexually discretionary queer theoretical models, Johnson proposes the theory of "quare studies," which emphasizes "the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians and transgendered people of color while simultaneously amounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world" (127). Critiques of racial and sexual oppression are featured throughout the anthology. Reddy locates "queers-of-color" as "subjects located at the intersection of multiple hailings" who "theorize the ways in which the conflicting, noncorrespondent, and overlapping constitutive interpellanations of race, gender, and sexuality form cultural subjects whose potential lies precisely in their 'confusion' or 'fusion' of more than one determination within a singular subject" (367). Ferguson's "queer-of-color-critique" is the core critical project of Aberrations in Black, his analysis of American canonical sociology's simultaneous construction and pathologizing of African Americans as insufficient within national white, heteropatriarchal ideals.

17. Bersani proposes "a concept of the sexual that might be a powerful weapon in the struggle against the disciplinary constraints of identity" (101). He argues that the increased social visibility of gays and lesbians in the 1990s was accorded based on the familiar and recognizable nature of conformist social issues like marriage and fears that a recognizable communal identity could generate modes of suppression and erasure (12, 31-32). Arguing against this trend, he suggests gays and lesbians employ their sexual identity as an anticommmunitarian site of social opposition beyond the tolerance model of identity politics (53). Edelman builds from Bersani by focusing on the futurity implied by the political and social emphasis on the idealized by-product of coupling—children. Edelman argues that politics is discursively defined and limited by a social investment in teleology embodied by the symbolic employment of "children" as the future, a notion which he defines as "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 3, 11). Several scholars have critiqued the racial politics and psychoanalytic roots of antisociality, including Timothy Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual," PMLA 121.3 (May 2006): 826-28; and José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," PMLA 121.3 (May 2006): 825-26.

18. Edelman defines "the Child" as, "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" which "serves to regulate political discourse . . . by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address" and argues for a notion of queerness which "names the side of those not 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (11).

19. Weston notes how such families "embrace friends; they may also encompass lovers, coparents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and offspring conceived through alternative insemination. Although discourse on gay kinship features familiar symbols such as blood, choice, and love, it also redirects those symbols toward the task of demarcating different categories of family" (3) and explores gay and lesbian families of choice to trace "the ideological shift in which many lesbians and gay men began to portray themselves as people who seek not only to maintain ties with blood or adoptive relations, but also to establish families of their own" (17).


22. Riggs connects the stigma of black heterosexuality with the queerness of black male gay sexuality, noting:

Indeed the representation of Negro Faggotry disturbingly parallels and reinforces America's most entrenched racist constructions around African-American identity. White icons of the past signifying "Blackness" share with contemporary icons of Negro Faggotry a manifest dread of the deviant Other. Behind the Sambo and the Snap! Queen lies a social psyche in torment, a fragile psyche threatened by deviation from its egocentric/ethnocentric construct of self and society. Such a psyche systematically defines the Other's "deviance" by the essential characteristics which make the Other distinct, then invests those differences with intrinsic defect. Hence, Blacks are inferior because they are not white; Black Gays are unnatural because they are not straight. Majority representations of both affirm the view that Blackness and Gayness constitute a fundamental rupture in the order of things, that our very existence is an affront to nature and humanity. (391)
Also see Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005).


24. According to 2000 U. S. Census data, black same-sex households comprise 14% of all same-sex households in the United States, and though black female and male same-sex couples have a smaller annual median income than both black opposite sex couples and white same sex couples, they are more likely to be parents than the latter. The study reports black lesbian couples as having a 61% rate of child-raising, as compared to 46% for white lesbian couples, and a 46% rate for black gay male couples, as compared to 24% for white gay male couples. See Alain Dang and Somjen Frazer, *Black Same-Sex Households in the United States: A Report from the 2000 Census* (New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Black Justice Coalition, 2004), 5-6.

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Contributors

Julie Buckner Armstrong is an associate professor of English at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, where she teaches African American, American, and women’s literatures. She is editor of *The Civil Rights Reader: From Jim Crow to Reconciliation* (U of Georgia P, 2009) and coeditor, with Susan Edwards, Houston Roberson, and Rhonda Williams, of *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom’s Bittersweet Song* (Routledge, 2002). “Mary Turner’s Blues” is derived from her most recent book, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (U of Georgia P, 2011).

Kevin Birmingham is a lecturer in history and literature at Harvard. His work explores race and aesthetics, the history of literary obscenity, and the avant-garde. His essay “‘History’s Ass Pocket’: The Sources of Baldwinian Diaspora” appears in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (U of Michigan P, 2011).

Bartholomew Brinkman is the 2011-2012 NEH Post-Doctoral Fellow in Poetics at the Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University. He has recently published articles in *Modernism/modernity, Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*, and coeditors with Cary Nelson the *Modern American Poetry Site*. He is currently completing a book manuscript, “Poetic Modernism in the Culture of Mass Print.”

Mary Paniccia Carden is professor of English at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses on American literature. She is the author of *Sons and Daughters of Self-Made Men: Improvising Gender, Place, Nation in American Literature* (Bucknell UP, 2010) and coeditor of *Doubled Plots: Romance and History* (UP of Mississippi, 2003). She has written widely in American literature in such journals as *Contemporary Literature, Twentieth Century Literature, Modern Fiction Studies, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies, Clio*, and *Journeys*.

DéLana R. A. Dameron’s poetry has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South, PMS: PoemMemoirStory, 42opus, storySouth, Pembroke Magazine*, and *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*. She has received fellowships from the Cave Canem Foundation and Soul Mountain, and is a member of the Carolina African American Writers Collective. Dameron, a native of Columbia, SC, currently resides in New York.

Trevor Dodman is an assistant professor of English at Hood College in Frederick, MD. His teaching interests include modernism, the novel, and contemporary global fiction. His publications explore trauma, violence, masculinity, and collective memory. His current book project, “Transatlantic Shell Shock: Narrative, Identity, and National Memory in the Wake of the First World War,” reads American and British World War I novels in the company of hospital records, medical studies, military histories, mass media accounts, battlefield guidebooks, and physical memorial spaces.

Kwoya Fagin is a South Carolina native and MFA graduate from the University of Alabama. She is also a Cave Canem Fellow. She resides in Birmingham, Alabama.

Paul Alan Fahey writes and resides on the central California coast. He would like to acknowledge Paul Raffaele’s splendid article, “Keepers of the Lost Ark?” (*Smithsonian*, December 2007), which provided the catalyst for “The Monarch across the Street.” *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, by Ryszard Kapuscinski, was also helpful in supplying psychological details on Haile Selassie and his court near the end of the monarch’s reign. Paul is currently editing an anthology, *The Other Man*, a collection of personal essays about being the other man, suffering the other man or having one’s life or relationship affected by him.