

Spring 5-5-2016

Standpoint: Black Queer Southern Revelations

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Mitchell Joseph Sewell

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ThesisWhy Was This Necessary?

As I sit down to write this, I am not entirely sure what I want to write or what it is that I would like to say. Having created an outline prior to writing does not particularly make this task any easier nor does it expedite the process. “Where does your inspiration come from?” I prefer to answer the question with a cliché, underwhelming, and non-profound, “It just sorta happens.” This is true to a certain extent; my writing does just sort of happen. In all honesty, if I could forgo classes and my job and just get paid to write, I would in a heartbeat (fingers crossed for my career aspirations). In an interview I did with a friend for their YouTube channel, they asked me that exact question. I responded by saying I write a lot about topics related to feminism, racial justice, gender, and sexuality. I do indeed write a lot about topics related to feminism, racial justice, gender, and sexuality, but that does not wholly answer the question. So, where does my inspiration come from?

This project is something I have been excited about since its inception. Since I had the pleasure and privilege of taking a class with Dr. Ed Madden (SCHC 480, Debating Same-Sex Marriage) and have seen the scope of what can be done with poetry, and how poetry can be used to build a bridge between personal experience and universal themes, a little seed was planted in my mind and has been germinating since spring 2015. I am amazed at myself that I have managed to cultivate this seed into the blossom it is now (with plentiful amounts of help along the way). This class I took with Dr. Madden was about the rhetoric and arguments for and against same-sex marriage (SSM). Having taken the class in spring 2015 only for SCOTUS to rule SSM as the law of the land later

that summer felt like an incredible twist of fate. Originally, I intended for my thesis project to be a collection of one-act plays around the central theme of being black, queer, and southern, in relation to a theatre production we saw as a class before SCHC 480 began. I will address later in this why I changed my method of delivery.

In that class, we read *A History of the Unmarried*, a book by poet Stephen S. Mills, a book I go back to every now and again because it is where this project started. While my project is based in spoken word poetry and Mills' book is a merging of personal experience with universal themes, exactly what I was hoping to do and am hoping I have done. In this thesis, the question, in several parts, I will be attempting to answer is as follows: How does one use personal experience as a way to understand the world? Does my experience lend itself to theory?

I got into writing spoken word poetry late September/early October 2015. I haven't been writing for long. I've always dabbled in writing poetry but I didn't really make it a part of my life, a part of who I am, until last year. It was per the prompting of my friend Brandon that I decided to pick up a pen and put some words on paper. Doing spoken word poetry has been an incredibly positive, cathartic, and therapeutic experience. That made itself clear very early into my time writing. I was using my writing to process and make sense of my experiences and thoughts. I am far from the first person to have this realization and to use my writing for this purpose, but it occurred to me, why can't I use this concept for my thesis project? I was already planning on doing a thesis about the experience of being black, queer, and southern but I wondered to myself, why don't I make it about my experience? After all, I am black, I am queer, and I am southern.

The last of the three was the hardest to conceptualize. For my entire life, I have distanced myself from a southern identity. I was raised in Northeast Florida (Jacksonville, specifically), which is not inherently southern but has very southern pockets and has plenty of people who will proudly and loudly tell you how southern they are. I was raised around such people. My best childhood friends, my granny, and my aunts /my mom's best friends (whom she has affectionately dubbed "The Sister Girls") were and are all incredibly southern. However, my mother was born and raised, and spent most of her young adult life, in North Philadelphia. My father was born to Jamaican parents in London and moved to the Bronx in New York City when he was about 12 years old. My two older siblings and I were all born in Philadelphia (something I will proudly divulge regardless of whether or not you asked). My nuclear family, while we have adopted southern mannerisms and patterns of speech since our migration to Florida 17 years ago, at its core, is Northern. Or, at the very least, we are *not* southern.

But, coming to a southern university has made me southern, or, at the very least made me identify with southern living and southern culture. Whether it's the copious amounts of sweet tea, the seemingly compulsory act of holding the door open for people behind me, or the ubiquity with which the word "y'all" leaps from my lips, I have certainly been molded into something resembling a southerner. For a long time, I actively resisted this, and I think that it was because I had an ever-present family to act as a buffer. Without them, I have succumbed to a bit of a twang (my family in Philadelphia says I have an accent) in my voice and in my thinking. Also, a connection to community is something I could have gotten anywhere, but I feel as though being at a large southern university has instilled in me a desire to be connected to my surroundings in a way I

would not otherwise have. Being here has also transformed my identities as a black man and a queer man.

I'm certain I would have naturally come into my own as a black man and a queer man, regardless of setting. However, something about being at a southern university has made this different for me. I came out as gay at school and my mom toward the end of my freshman year of high school, at 14 (I came out to my mother a second time at 18, then my family). Starting about a year and a half ago, I started claiming the identifier "queer," a blanket term used when referring to the LGBT+ community (PFLAG National, 2016). I did this because, although I understood my sexuality as gay from age of 14, I realized my sexuality was more fluid than I previously thought it was. While who I sleep with is very important, I have always understood that there is much more to being queer than that. In my final semester, I took a class titled Feminist Theory (WGST 307). In said class, we discussed queer theory. A basic principle of queer theory is that, "queer" means existing in a way that is non-normative in the margins of society (Mann, 2016). That's part of the reason I decided to write this project. I understand my world as being on the outside looking in on what is normal, normative, and mainstream. I'm always in favor of queering my worldview. What was most amazing to me about this section of this class was how easily the analysis of queer theorists could be applied to race. With this project, one could say I racialized my queerness and queered my race.

My blackness is probably the identity I have come into the most out of all of the intersecting identities involved in this project. By that, I mean I have a better understanding of blackness, in my own terms, more so than being southern, queer, or a

male. For me, blackness is very similar to how I understand queerness: existing in a non-normative fashion that places you in the margins of society.

Neil Hilborn (who coincidentally enough is white) has a poem titled “Motown” that sums it up in a decently succinct fashion: he opens the poem by repeating a quote from Roger Quenveur Smith: “They like black music but they hate black people” (Hilborn, 2014). It’s really interesting the way white supremacy works. White people love consuming black productions (art, fashion, speech, etc.) and even have an obsession with controlling the black body (i.e. incarceration rates of black people) or destroying it if it refuses to be controlled. However, white people hold contempt for a black person. They like black bodies but they hate black people. I want to be clear in that I don’t believe white people, or whiteness, is inherently insidious and evil. The problem is white supremacy. This is what pushes me to the margins of society. What I like to call the White Supremacist Capitalist Cishetero Patriarchy (borrowed from bell hooks’ concept) describes such a small portion of people in the United States: white, capitalist, cisgender, heterosexual men. Comparatively, there are more people who don’t fit that description than those who do. Hell, around half of millennials don’t even identify as heterosexual (Laughlin, 2016). Granted this statistic, as any, should be taken with a grain of salt, as only about 30% of the time does what someone reports as their sexuality match their behavior (Mann, 2015). What is important about that it demonstrates a flexibility and fluidity that is going to be key to ending the White Supremacist Capitalist Cishetero Patriarchy. To me, blackness is resistance. My ancestors survived the middle passage, slavery, the Jim Crow era, and countless instances of dehumanization and brutalization so I could be here. Blackness is resistance, resilience, and refusing to give up. Then when

you queer that blackness, you get something that, by its pure existence, is mesmerizing. If queerness is about existing on the margins, and blackness is as well, there is a certain level of resistance and resilience that are present and must be for those identities to persist and thrive. Black queerness and queer blackness, I feel, magnify that resistance and resilience.

Identity is important. It's important not just for me, but for people in general. It's important for people who don't realize they have identities (whiteness, maleness, straightness, etc., as the default), just as it is important for the people who fully realize every identity they encompass. As important as identity is, it's just as important, if not more, to understand how these identities interact with one another. Legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," a theoretical framework that represents the ways marginalized and privileged identities interact with one another to reproduce systems of inequality and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). That is to say, a white woman will experience misogyny differently than a black woman will and things like that. Crenshaw's theoretical framework has wholly informed the work I have done at USC as a LGBT Peer Advocate and has also helped me to understand how the world functions.

I would love to live in a world where distinctions like race and gender do not matter. However, that is not my current reality. I live in a reality in which my right to vote is under attack, people who look like me are experiencing extrajudicial executions in a public fashion, and people are constantly looking for ways to discriminate against me and get away with it (Liptak, 2015; Mapping Police Violence, 2015; Driessen, 2015). In an age where white, straight, cis men claim their right to free speech is being suppressed,

I always have to wonder why they act like free speech doesn't free them of consequences and why they think free speech has always been allowed equally. My current reality is that I pay taxes to a country that used to consider me property, and there is probably a sizeable number of people who consider me to be 3/5 a person, if that. I still experience white women clutching their purses to their bodies very tightly when I walk on the elevator, earphones in, minding my own business. According to a recent Center for Disease Control report, 1 in 2 black gay and bisexual men will contract HIV in their lifetime (2016). The correlation between being a person of color and poverty is a major factor in this prevalence. We are nowhere near a poststructural setting where identity does not hold any significance. Unfortunately, people look at you and see your blackness, whiteness, maleness, or anything else, and think they know everything they need to know about you based solely on that. That's why I created this project. Identities matter, my blackness matter, my queerness matters, my black queerness matters, and my queer blackness matters. I'm beyond the point in time where I am going to let myself be made to choose between my identities. I don't wake up in the morning and decide "I'm going to be black today, I was queer yesterday." They're with me always. I'm going to say so and make sure people understand that. As I state in my poem "I'm Just Really Stressed Right Now", "As hard as it is sometimes/I let myself be" Riki Wilchins said in *A Certain Kind of Freedom: Power and the Truth of Bodies*, included in *Reading Feminist Theory* by Mann & Patterson, that "...what isn't named doesn't exist. What is named must therefore exist." (2002, p. 343) If this is true, then I must speak. I must name myself; otherwise I cease to exist.

Through the Looking Glass: Personal Experience as a Lens of Understanding

Taking WGST 307 Feminist Theory, has exposed to me a lot of different kinds of schools of thought about feminism specifically and life in general. In one specific section of this class, we discussed standpoint epistemology through readings written by Dorothy E. Smith (from *The Everyday World as Problematic*), and Nancy Hartsock (*Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?*) (2016, p. 204-209, p. 210-212). We also examined intersectionality theories framed through pieces written by Crenshaw (*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*) and Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*) (2016, p. 264-273, p. 273-276). What was so amazing about reading the readings for our section on standpoint epistemology is that I learned wording to put to my thoughts that I have always had. It's an incredibly validating experience to realize that not only have other people already thought about what you're thinking about, but they have developed an entire practice around it. The purpose of standpoint epistemology is to assert that there is no objective truth and that everyone's understanding of the world is influenced by their position in society, typically conveyed through their identities. We, as a society, tend to understand the unmarked white, cisgender, heterosexual man's viewpoint as being the only purely objective viewpoint. Standpoint epistemology says that this is untrue and this person's position in society as a white, cisgender, heterosexual man influences the way they understand the world and the knowledge they produce. I always like to say "Science is only as good as the people who do it" and I've gotten into many an argument with students in STEM majors because of this. The ones I've argued with lack the ability to

understand the ways in which my worldview differs than theirs because of the marginalized identities I embody.

This is the reason why it is so important that standpoint epistemology be paired with intersectionality theory. Collins, in the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), writes that the matrix of domination “describes the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (p. 228). Epistemology is about the way knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is valued over others’ knowledge. Intersectionality theory is about the way in which power is enacted on certain types of knowledge producers. For example, in the excerpt of Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* that Mann and Patterson pulled for *Reading Feminist Theory*, Collins writes, “Subjugated knowledges, such as a Black women’s culture of resistance, developed in cultural contexts controlled by oppressed groups. Dominant groups aim to replace subjugated knowledge with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups’ lives simplifies control” (2016, p. 275). This is why whenever I am describing microaggressions to people representing the dominant group(s), I am often met with invalidating statements such as “I don’t really know though,” “It can’t actually be that bad;” or my personal favorite, “I think you’re just overreacting.” They can’t see these kinds of statements as true because we are conditioned to believe that subordinated knowledges are invalid. That is a large part of the reason why I decided to name this project *Standpoint: Black Queer Southern Revelations*. In a way, I am paying homage to the people who developed this school of thought that has become so integral to the work I do and the way I view the world, but also to emphasize the fact that I am giving voice to myself and people like me. If my

personal is going to be political whether I like it or not, I am going to control what is being understood about me.

The phrase “The personal is political” has been used in feminist circles since the late 1960s and early 1970s, although nobody knows for sure where it came from. Some people, like Carol Hanisch, attribute it to Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (2006). Others attribute it to other radical feminist groups like the Redstockings. What is understood is that this phrase is meant to highlight the fact that aspects of women’s personal lives like access to birth control are political issues. I have adopted this phrase for this context for reasons that I feel are obvious. As a black man in the south, and a queer man in the south, and a black queer man in the south, my personal is political. It’s not just who I have sex with and how we have sex (although a large part of my existence as both black and queer is boiled down to sex) that’s made the subject of debate by people with institutional and political power that I don’t have. It’s whether or not I deserve protection from employment discrimination, housing discrimination, or even whether or not I deserve physical protection. If I am seen as a threat to the people who are paid to ensure my protection before I am seen as human, how is the personal going to remain personal? If I am cast to the margins of society because I don’t desire a heterosexual marriage (or any marriage for that matter), how is the personal going to remain personal?

So what does any of this have to do with my poetry? My poetry and the way I interpret my standpoint as a black, queer, southern man are intertwined. Although I haven’t been writing for long, I have always been using my poetry as a way to process emotions, make thoughts concrete, and try and put to words feelings that I have difficulty

articulating. So in regards of how my standpoint informs my poetry, more than just the subject matter, my standpoint is represented in my poetry in its performance. One of my favorite things about performance is when someone comes up to me afterward saying something to the effect of “You put into words something I’ve been feeling but wasn’t able to say.” More often than not, whether it is me saying that to a performer or someone saying it to me, there is a shared inability to fully articulate what is being felt. In my poetry, I strive to give voice to both the voiceless and what is difficult to or even unable to be voiced. That being said, one thing I struggle with in my writing is when I encounter something someone shows me or tells me and I want to write about it, I have a hard time discerning whether or not I should. As far as I understand it, some stories are not mine to tell. For example, I’m currently trying to figure out how to write a poem about HB2 in North Carolina, a recently passed law targeting trans people (and LGB people as well but puts trans people at the most risk), barring them from using public bathrooms designated with genders that match their gender identity, as well as the recently proposed similar bill here in South Carolina state legislature. Hopefully by the time this is completed, it will no longer be a concern. I’m struggling to write this poem because I am not trans, so while I am concerned for the safety and wellbeing of trans people, I feel as though I cannot access the emotion necessary to give weight to this issue simply because it is not my story. Granted, I don’t necessarily need to be emotionally connected to that degree to write the poem. Just because I cannot empathize does not mean I cannot sympathize. One of the most effective ways an ally can engage in allyship is to use their position of dominance to speak to others in a position of dominance to highlight the importance of the subjugated knowledge produced by those with whom they ally themselves. I often run

into the question of where the line is between using my privilege to speak to other men about sexism and other cis people about cissexism, and speaking for or over, as opposed to with, those with whom I ally myself (women and trans people).

It was once said to me by Dr. Todd Shaw that stories may not be ours to share, but sometimes they are gifted to us. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* by E. Patrick Johnson is an excellent example of just this concept. In this book, Johnson travels all around the south interviewing black gay men as young as traditional college age to elderly gay men in their 70s and 80s to ask them about coming out, religion, their lives, and other things (2008). The men who Johnson interviewed for this book gifted their stories so Johnson could write this book to help increase knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a black gay man in the south. With any story I am gifted, that is my goal: to spread that knowledge, be it subjugated or not, and help give the person who gifted me that story a platform to make sure their story is heard and felt is what I feel is part of my duties as a poet, writer, and activist.

Turning Standpoint Into Theory

Suzanna Walters, in her work included in Mann & Patterson's textbook *Reading Feminist Theory*, ends a section of her critique of queer theory *From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)* with, "...Again, personal transgression or predilection has metamorphosed into political and theoretical action. Sexual hobbies do not a theory make" (2016, p.139). Walters writes this passage in fear that "the personal is political" is becoming too large a point of emphasis and that a personal experience does not constitute a theory. In order to properly discuss this, we have to first understand: why is the

personal political? To be marginalized is to have to justify your existence. In my class with Dr. Madden examining SSM, we talked a lot about the concept of the “counterfeit,” the idea that same-sex relations, in any fashion, were thought to be unreal, invalid, and counterfeit. A simple example of this is the ever present “Well how do you know you’re gay if you’ve never had sex with a woman?” This question has larger implications, pointing to the fact that non-heterosexual sexualities are illegitimate, reproducing the belief that heterosexuality is not only superior but is the only sexuality that is real. Homosexuality, or simply non-heterosexuality, is seen as illegitimate because of heterosexism, and heterosexism perpetuates the belief that homosexuality is adverse. The personal is political because people don’t understand how, or even believe, that two women can have sex with one another, or that bisexuality exists. When people try and legislate that belief, your life becomes the pawn in a chess game being played by people who don’t know the first thing about you. Unfortunately, that is the reason why the personal will never be 100% personal. Even if we get to a point where people are no longer trying to write discrimination into the law books, on any axis of identity, we will always have those people who want me gone because of my queerness or my blackness. I believe people are socialized into these beliefs, that they are not inherent. The systems that cause the beliefs can be eradicated but the beliefs themselves will never be eradicated because you can’t destroy ideas and discussing whether or not you can or should enters into an area of ethics for minds different than my own. As one of my favorite writers, Oscar Wilde, said, “I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to make an ass of yourself.”

So even if personal experience does not constitute theory, it is still important on a personal level. The concept of White Supremacist Capitalist Cishetero Patriarchy I mentioned earlier is something I conceptualized through my own experience. It was certainly sparked by hooks' concept of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (n.d., p. 1). I developed my own concept, theory if you will, because I needed something that fit my own worldview and my own day to day living. So while personal experience may not be good for universal theory, it is good for just that, the personal. After all, standpoint epistemology is about your own unique social situation in the world. It sounds redundant to say I have my own theory for my own world, but that doesn't mean my own experience can't be used for developing a theory applicable to the world as a whole. This is why works like *Sweet Tea* are so important: so you can synthesize the experiences of people with shared identities and examine them for common themes and events to determine if that is applicable on a large scale. So while my own life and work may not be suitable to create an entire theory or school of thought, knowing it could be a part of something larger and useful to dismantling these interlocking systems of oppression is just as satisfying and significant.

Where Do I Go From Here?

The work is never done. As long as being a black queer is related to my oppression, my work is not done. This likely is not the last project I will undertake around this theme. I am not done examining the ways in which White Supremacist Capitalist Cishetero Patriarchy impacts my life. I feel examining these ways through poetry has given me more freedom and a wider range of tools than I would have had if I had chosen a sociological study or a literature review. As long as it is necessary for this

work to be done, I will be doing it. Like any other kind of understanding, mine will change and evolve over time but I feel safe in saying that standpoint epistemology and the theory of intersectionality will always remain key to who I am, the work that I do, and the art that I create. Do I hope for a day where my personal is no longer political? Of course. Until then, and continuing afterward, I am going to be making my blackness queer_and queering my blackness, all as a reluctant (and sometimes willing) southerner.

Poetry

Baby Hair and Afros

So I woke up this morning to the sunrise in my mind's eye
Because there are no windows in my bedroom
The glow of the Vizio on the bottom of my tv resembled the orange glow
That shone off the living room table whenever my mama
Would make me dust with furniture polish on a Saturday morning
And it shone with a glow that looked the fire inside my belly
That makes me feel like a dungeon dragon
That got me feelin like Avatar Roku

My hair is sitting in my durag
And it'll be the last thing on me to wake up
I am not a morning person
It takes my spirit an hour and a half to join the physical world
And that's if I'm lucky
It takes a while for me to muster up the wherewithal
To spend another day dealing with stigma
That comes with this hair
That comes with protein growing out of my head that's as naturally occurring
As the breath that breezes out of my lungs
This hair that's natural to its roots like Alex Haley
Because of all that things that come with natural

Natural is divinity
Natural is descended of Gods and Kings
And I ain't talkin bout that bullshit movie
Where they decided Christian Bale should play Ramses
Excellent Bruce Wayne, terrible Egyptian
Because ancient Egyptians weren't white
Their hair looked a lot more like mine than Christian's
Besides, look at the sarcophagus
They go to sleep with their hair wrapped

Natural is power
Because I live in a world where the act of wearing my hair as it grows out of my head
Is considered revolutionary
My dad is always asking me when I'm gonna cut my hair
I tell him to ask Samson what happened
When Delilah cut his hair

Natural is resilient
For over 15 years I've watched the women at my church try
And run combs through little girl's hair

For 15 years I've watch that hair resist
It don't budge
There's a metaphor in there
You try to separate us and we just hold onto one another tightly
Wrapped up inside one another because there's strength in numbers

Natural is versatile
The possibilities are endless
Don't ask her if she grew 18 inches of hair overnight
Black people aren't superhuman
But we are damn near it

My hair and I aren't that different
My hair may be nappy but I stay woke
My hair isn't the only thing about me that's kinky
We both dehydrate easily
We both love sleeping on silk
We are both dark and soft and messy and beautiful
So ask me again why I won't cut it

Can I Kick It?

You ever watch a MMA fight?
UFC
World Extreme Cagefighting
Strikeforce
Pride Fighting Championship
It doesn't really matter which
The premise is the same for all of them

You got 2 people
2 bodies
Locked
In a cage
Solely for the purpose of hurting each other
To leave the other person
To leave the other body
Broken
Bruised
Bloody
For the sake of spectacle
Sport

There's this thing that used to happen
Back when it was legal in this country
To own a person
Specifically a black or African person
Where the enslavers
Would literally breed the bigger, stronger enslaved bodies with one another
To create stronger and tougher enslaved bodies
And when the enslaver had a black or African body that was particularly
Strong

They would take that body and make it fight
Other enslaved black or African bodies
2 people 2 bodies
Pitted against one another
For the sole purpose of leaving the other body
Broken
Bloody
Bruised
For spectacle

I started learning mixed martial arts in January
After years of wanting to learn how to
Work an armbar
Throw a roundhouse kick
Slap on a triangle choke
And it's been one of the best experiences of my life

But I finally understand now why I've always been
Mesmerized
By fighting sports
It's in my blood
Blood that's been spilled
On dirt
Streets
Floors
Ships
Plantations
Jail cells
Hospital rooms

Some days
Stepping out of bed feels
Like I'm stepping into the cage
But it's weird not having a weight division to fight in
Because you're weighed down by all the bodies that came before yours

I think that's why I decided
On Tae Kwon Do
As my base discipline
Your legs get really strong
When you walk around every day
Carrying ghosts
I ask "Can I Kick It?"
They respond "Yes you can"

What My Mama Taught Me

The idea that my mama isn't very nurturing
Was born of a conversation that she had with me and my brother
In which he said
"You're not very nurturing. It's not a bad thing, it's just who you are."
And... I think my mama took it kinda hard
Because that was a few years ago
And she still mentions it in conversations
She'll say "I know yall don't think I'm very nurturing"
But I think what my mama heard
And what I hear when she says it
Is, "I know yall don't think I'm a very good mother"

Which couldn't be further from the truth

I don't know how many cookies she baked
Between my premature birth and 3rd grade
But what I do know
Is that if I had a dollar for every time
She tied my shoe, cleaned my booboos, kissed me good night
Helped me with my homework, and put my needs
Before her own
I'd have enough to finally give her what she deserves
I can't afford the world
But eventually
I'll be able to afford that cabin in Connecticut

To quote Drake, "I'm just worried about my mama worryin less"
Because when someone gives you 21 years of the best
The least you can do is say thank you

And honestly, so what if my mama isn't nurturing?
She is so many things
And she isn't so many things

My mama is better at embarrassing me than anyone else
She is where I learned it
It's impossible to embarrass me, ask my friends

I've watched my mama pray for other people like her life depended on it
Like her life was on the line
And while we don't see eye to eye on Christianity
I'm certain someone heard her

I'm a 21 year old black man

How else would I be here?

My mama is up every morning at 4 AM
So she can give the sun permission to rise

She goes to a job where she's the brightest star in the sky
That nobody can see because of all the light pollution
All because she loves her kids

My mama goes 0 to 100 real quick
Will read you for filth while she pours you a drink
She is the first revolutionary I ever knew
Because she lives in a world that tries to pass her off as a note
When she knows she wrote the whole damn song

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation,
And that is an act of political warfare”
That quote is attributed to Audre Lorde but I'm not so sure I didn't learn it from my
mama

My mama smells like cocoa butter and resilience
Like relaxer and wisdom
Like oven roasted chicken and elegance
Like black olives and pain
Like Skin So Soft and healing

My mama has taught me how to keep my head up
How to wash my clothes
How to make some bomb diggity pasta
How to hide away love for when you need it most
What it means to forgive
And that it's okay to come home

My mama taught me that when a black woman speaks
You shut the hell up and listen
And my mama made my first name Mitchell
After my dad's mom told her not to

Watching her, I learned what it is to rearrange atoms
If it means giving your kids a chance
I swear, my mama is an alchemist
The way she can turn an empty fridge
Into a 3 course meal
I could watch Chopped
But I'd rather watch my mama do magic

Being an Honors Student can't teach me
How to grit my teeth and work for someone who's bad at their job
But my mama has taught me that nothing
Has to be permanent
That circumstances don't have to be permanent
That a little elbow grease and incense can change your life

And my mama taught me what the difference is
Between a mother
And a mama

Know Yourself

I was born 3 months premature
According to my mama, I had a 20% chance of survival at birth
Whenever I have to share an interesting fact about myself
That's my go-to
Mainly because I'm not great under pressure
I love basketball but you don't want me taking the last shot
Some people become diamonds under pressure
I prefer to stay charcoal
And if you've ever seen a charcoal sketch, you'll know why I say that

My favorite color combination is navy blue and cherry red
I love black cherries and maraschino cherries and I despise bing cherries
Even though I'll still take one from my mama if she's eating them
I love navy blue because it reminds me of my dad
I hate sky blue because it looks undercooked but I wear it anyway
Because it looks good on me

I love the aesthetic appeal of chevrons
I prefer my coats and blazers have elbow patches
If I can, I handwrite before I type
And despite how good I am at it, I abhor public speaking
Something about having all eyes on me makes me unable to function
Even if those eyes aren't on me
And I've only managed to convince myself they were

Despite the best efforts of fundamentalist Christians
White domestic terrorism
The KKK
Metropolitan police departments
The Republican presidential candidates
And the musical stylings of Iggy Azalea
I have always managed to be my own worst enemy

I couldn't be any less concerned about masculinity
Hegemonic masculinity is a game for white dudes
And it's a game I'm never going to win

I'm also a hypocrite
I love having a beard, I like sports
I prefer to be physically larger than my sexual or romantic partners
As much as I hate the restrictive and oppressive nature of masculinity
I hate even more that I don't know who I am without

Whenever I see a police car

I get this feeling where my whole body quivers at once in rhythm
Pins and needles shoot out of every extremity
As if someone ran a current through my bones
Fear is a conditioned response
It doesn't matter that I'm a student at the number one Honors College in the country
It doesn't matter who my grandmother is
I'm a monster underneath this mask
A beast resembling a man
It doesn't matter because the only thing that matters certainly isn't black life

I'm tired
I'm tired of old, rich, white dudes inventing reasons
For brown people
To die
That we can stomach violence predicated upon children
Foreign and domestic
I'm tired of being asked why I don't salute a flag
That was stitched together by the exploited and unpaid labor of my ancestors
I'm tired of being made to feel like I have to pick
Which identity is most important to me

I'm also happy
I'm happy that I'm 21
I'm scared to be so close to graduation
But I'm excited for the uncertainty
I'm still learning how to be in love with myself
If I can be in love with myself
I'm in love with a beautiful artist
And I'm in love with being in love

I'm grateful my early adolescence was so shitty

I really enjoy cheap wine because it gets the job done
And I really love expensive cheeseburgers because sometimes
A little pomp and circumstance is a good thing

Sometimes I wish my parents were more queer friendly
But then I feel bad because they could be so much worse
Other people's struggles do not negate my own
But maintaining perspective is easier said than done
Even when you have 25/20 vision
Especially when other people's thoughts are so opaque
I'm learning MMA because if they're going to lie
And say I was armed after they murder me
I may as well make my body a weapon
So I can make honest people out of them at least once

That and I've always lowkey been interested in fighting sports
I wrestled in high school
The most important thing I learned
Is that you cannot make anyone do anything

I weigh 185 pounds, give or take 5
I'm 5'10" when I wear my boots
My arms stretch to next Tuesday
I talk with my hands
And sometimes I accidentally hit the people I'm talking to

I've never gotten a parking ticket because I don't own a car

It's not very hard to annoy me
I have several nephews and a niece
I don't want kids for the next 10 years
But hanging out with them makes me want to skip the next ten years

I'm a very easy man to please
I like scented candles, bath bombs, and chocolate
At the same time

I dream of piloting an X-wing
Despite being profoundly afraid of heights and moving at high speeds
I can be kind of impulsive, particularly about tattoos
I don't know what my first word was
And I don't like to think about what my last will be
I claim Philadelphia because that's what's on my birth certificate
Even though that's not where I was raised
I have an affinity for falling for boys that are bad for me

I'm the most complex person I know
While I'm also the simplest person I know
I asked my friends to describe me
Because sometimes I forget who I am

Some days I am a 5000 piece jigsaw puzzle
Where some pieces are missing
And a few wet from the tears of the person putting it together
And some days I am a stained glass window
Filtering light, trying to make it more beautiful
Being unsure if I'm actually doing so
And if I'm lucky every now and again I get to be
A BIC pen, simple and functional

I'm the son of a man who's better

At spelling out "I love you" with his bare hands
By rearranging the stars
Than he is at forcing air past his vocal cords
And forming the letters with his tongue

I'm the child of a woman
Who wants to hold onto her family as tight as she can
And the older I get
The easier it is to let her

I'm the brother of a woman who doesn't know how to love half heartedly
And I'm the brother of a man who makes sure my ego doesn't grow too big too soon

I realized around 13 years old
Why I love impressionist art so much
It's a mess when you examine it closely
But it's an organized mess

I want to make sure queer adolescents don't ever
Have to feel like I did
Because in 21 years, I've learned
I'd rather be burying the hatchet than burying a body
That it's better to fold your cards than fold in on yourself
And that sometimes nobody can hug you
Like an oversized sweatshirt can

I'm Not Down For the Brown

I don't remember a great deal about it
 Loud pop music
 Alcohol flowing
 Queer people everywhere
 But what I do remember is this feeling

"I'm not down for the brown"
 A punch. In. The gut.
 I wasn't asking you on a date
 I wasn't even attracted to you
 (And I'm still not for that matter)
 But you felt it necessary to make space for white supremacy

"I'm not down for the brown"
 An incredibly appropriate thing to say to a stranger
 We met, what? 10 minutes ago?
 Because your best friend is a good friend of mine
 And it wasn't even organic to the conversation
 But there's always room for anti-blackness

"I'm not down for the brown"
 I don't know why I was so surprised
 Lord knows I'm not right now
 Freud would have a field day examining my defense mechanisms
 Not letting myself think I'm too attractive
 Because there's no way other people will agree, right?
 I'm actually surprised when people call me cute

"I'm not down for the brown"
 How dare I believe I'm worth something
 I forgot all black men, black people, are the same
 Meanwhile, your empirical research must be so well conducted
 With your n=1 convenience sample of that one time
 You maybe thought about possibly swiping right on that black guy on Tinder?
 Or, potentially responding to the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 black guys sitting in your inbox on Grindr?
 Ya know, the ones without face pictures and no listed stats
 Because otherwise your filter will block them so you don't have to?
 Which is why said black guy doesn't show anyone his blackness,
 Just so he can receive an iota of attention from a system of beauty standards
 That couldn't give less of a damn about his black ass?

"I'm not down for the brown"
 What makes you so certain the brown is down for you?!

I live in a world where I am royalty
Descended from kings
And I am relegated to being the whipping boy
Because mythical norms have the bar so high
I could be in the NBA and I still couldn't get over it

"I'm not down for the brown"
That's fine because my eyes are as radiant as your stupidity
My lips are big from a bloodline built on protest
The lines on the palms of my hands prove I was sketched by God
My melanin glows in the sun
Your porcelain skin resembles a toilet which would explain the shit spewing from your mouth

"I'm not down for the brown"
I'm not down for my life being at risk
Because I played my music too loud
Or I left the transit station
Or because I sold untaxed cigarettes
Or because I had a BB gun
Or because I had a BB gun in a Walmart
Or because I was sleeping on my couch during a raid
Or because I was pulled over for a "routine" traffic stop
I'm not down for having 1 million of 2.4 million people incarcerated
Look like me
Or that kids who look like me are more likely to get expelled than graduate
Or that when people see me, they just see a big dick

"I'm not down for the brown"
That's fine
I'll take my brown, find my friends, spend my night gettin' down
In this place where I am not made to feel welcome
When you don't get invited very often
You learn to take the party with you wherever you go
I'd invite you to join but
You're not down for the brown

I'm Just Really Stressed Right Now

I am an angry ass black man
I may or may not look threatening
It depends on who you ask
I learned a while back that
I don't have a permit but
If I'm apparently walking around with all this anger
I may as well make a weapon of it

I've probably been angry for about 21 years now
It's my default setting
But I've gotten really good at masking it as something else
"I didn't get enough sleep last night"
"I'm kinda stressed right now"
I could put it on my resume
Like the Joker said
If you're good at something
Never do it for free

It's like
As a child
When you'd be perfectly fine
And your mama would tell you
"You betta not be catchin an attitude"
Which would then in turn spark an attitude
And you'd get in trouble for having an attitude which you didn't originally have
All because your mama was trippin over some petty shit

So when someone is like
"You betta not be catchin an attitude"
I've learned to say
"So what the fuck if I am?"
As if I don't have a reason to be?
Even if my anger isn't righteous
Even if it isn't justified
Every action has an equal
And opposite
Reaction

If I am angry, it's because when I was born
I was tattooed with a target from head to toe

It's because when I was a teenager
I spent 3 years of my life
Wishing for new skin
Different skin, better skin
Lighter whiter skin
As if that was going to solve the problem
But when you're suffocating
You will grasp for whatever air
You can get your hands on

If I am angry, it's because I always have to be something
I always have to be angry
I have to be lazy
Dangerous
Unintelligent
I always have to be so many things
But I can never just be

If I'm not smiling, I'm angry
I have so many reasons to be angry
But I have so many reasons to be so many things
I'm tired
I'm sleepy
I'm joyful
I'm hungry
I'm a person

There was a point where the last thing I wanted to be considered was angry
Jumping through hoops
To be seen as acceptable
Palatable
Respectable
"If I speak in a more articulate fashion
If I do these AP classes
If I
If I
If I"

But now
Now I'm angry
They're going to call me angry anyway
So I let myself be angry

Annoyed
Upset
Pissed

I let myself be sad
I let myself be happy
I let myself be indifferent
As hard as it is sometimes
I let myself be

Black Boys

I know black boys
Who are dipped in coffee
Honey
Hazelnut
Butter
(Peanut, almond, cookie, and Country Crock)
Whose skin is dark like the ink on this paper
Whose skin is lighter than Steph Curry
In a spotlight
With skin even and smooth like Coltrane
With skin rough and blemished like the mountains they've moved
And they all beautiful as hell

I know black boys
That have galaxies behind their eyes
Brown nebulas
Full of stars burning bright
Stamped with greys and greens and purples
That make Van Gogh look like a sketch artist
And will have Starry Night look like a drawing you tape to the fridge

I know black boys who are misguided
Who don't know where they are going
What they are doing
Why they are doing it
And who they are doing it for
Not because they want to
But because nobody ever taught them
How to read a map

I know black boys
Who go to work like Rihanna
Who work two jobs and collect one check
Who work security whether they want to or not
Because as soon as they leave the house
They have to be on guard

Black boys who do thankless jobs
Black boys who run that shit
Black boys who are being exploited

Because we have a history of performing
Unpaid labor

I know black boys who ain't shit
Who ain't no good
That don't never do something for nothing
That feels the world owes them everything
When they haven't even tried to do anything
Who want what ain't theirs
And don't care who they have to hurt
To get it

And I know black boys
Who will give you their shoes
While walking with 2 feet
Of snow
Black boys who will fight you for suggesting
They do something for themselves before
Doing something for someone else
Whether they need it or not
Black boys who are bad at taking advice
Regardless of who gives it to them

Those black boys that got the Midas touch
And those black boys who get down and get funky
Who dab to everything
And the ones who don't got a lick of rhythm in one
Of their 206 bones
I know them too

I know black boys
Who can create something profound
And arch your back
Using only their tongue
And I know black boys who make the Earth gyrate
When their feet hit the ground
So they walk on their toes
I know black boys who live inside their own mind
And I know black boys that spend every day
Wishing they were Goku
Black boys that would rather listen to The Velvet Underground
Than Tupac
Black boys that don't understand AAVE

And black boys that code switch like
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

I know black boys
Who read all the time and never have anything to say
Who don't ever read and will teach you
Everything you need to know
Who curse you with their smiles
And bless you with their tears

Black boys who are afraid
Black boys who are superheroes
Black boys who are trying way too hard to be men
And black boys who have always been men
Because they never got to be children

I know black boys who create whole universes in the lines on their palms
Who spend their days building
Coalitions
Bridges
Building up others
And spend their nights turning up
Winding down
Shedding their skin
And healing their wounds
Singing praises in a 5 part harmony
Finding solutions
In a bottle of Henny
Rolling joints
Rolling their eyes
Rolling their bodies while Fetty Wap whines in the background
Citing Cam'Ron like he's an existential philosopher
Arguing over how Reconstruction economics still affect the South
And then arguing over whether the Deadpool would beat Deathstroke in a fight

Black boys are something special
An arrangement of abstractions
Personified in atoms and flesh
Heard in screams and in whispers
Felt in handshakes, on and off the court

I'm one of those black boys

Well-Meaning

There is a difference
Between being not-racist
And being anti-racist

You may be wondering
“Wow, Joseph. I didn’t realize that.
What’s the difference?”
Thank you for asking
Allow me to share

Not actively contributing
Or so you think
To a cultural mindset
And a social context
That disadvantages, degrades, and dehumanizes
People based on the color of their skin
Versus actively rejecting ideologies that state
That one type of body is better than another based on skin
Is the difference

There is a difference between not perpetuating beauty standards
That declare black girls to be ugly
Which is a gahtdayum lie
And asking yourself why
Every black girl you’ve ever wanted to put your mouth on
Has the same loose curl pattern
Light skin
And Coke bottle silhouette

Being not-racist
Is not being anti-racist

Being not racist is
“Yeah, I have a black friend”
Without having stopped to ask
why you only have one
Being anti-racist
Is wondering why you got promoted over the black woman whose desk is next to yours
Who has been here 3 years longer
Has 2 kids
And 1 more degree

Being not-racist means
“I don’t understand why they interrupted Bernie Sanders.
Interrupting Hillary Clinton is disrespectful. They’re
On our side.”
Instead of joining them in protest

And granted
Interrupting a candidate in protest
Takes a lot of guts, time, and prep
Fair

But anti-racism is not
Quoting Martin Luther King Jr.
Once a year
Out of context
On Facebook

And anti-racism is not
Just skipping the N-word
On your favorite Jay Z track
And let’s be real
Even that’s probably asking too much

Anti-racism is not distancing yourself
From Donald Trump
Because you’re one of the good ones
Anti-racism is asking your uncle
Why he thinks the only people emigrating to the United States
Are Mexican or Syrian
Brown

People love to say that America is the greatest country on Earth but never think to ask
For whom?

And anti-racism is not
“I don’t even see you as black”
Because if you have to erase my existence
To see me as human
Then I’d rather you just not see me at all

Being not-racist means being selfish
Centering yourself in conversations that aren’t about you

“I didn’t do that though”
“I wasn’t even alive when that happened”
“I would never do something like that”

I love “I” statements as much as anyone
But your white tears
Do not matter more than the very real consequences
Of your refusal to recognize your complicity
In this system of interpersonal, economic, and psychological
Violence, inequity, and inequality

Your white feelings
Do not matter
More than black lives

I’m not going to shoulder your guilt
When I already have the weight of the world on my shoulders
I do my squats
But my thighs aren’t that strong

Congratulations
You voted for President Obama
Twice
But you said nothing when your mom started complaining
About having a nigger in the White House
As if that’s the first time
Who do you think built the shit?

Inclusion is not integration
Inviting me to a seat at the table
Means nothing
If I’m the only person at the table who looks like me
Even if I am your black friend
Racism is not going anywhere
Until white people collectively accept culpability
Because being not-racist
Is trying to argue that any group of people of color is
“More racist” than white people
Instead of wondering why racism exists to begin with

There’s more to racism than you not calling me a nigger
Even though you probably want to

There's more to racism
Than the KKK
Strange fruit is no longer hanging from the poplar trees
That we know of
But that's because it's been picked
And now
It's being stopped and frisked
Sitting in prison because of a mandatory minimum
Being assaulted, suspended, and expelled
Lying in the street lifeless for four hours

There is a difference
Between being not-racist
And being anti-racist

Being not-racist
Is being more concerned
With being called a racist
Than not being racist

Parenthood

My parents were not prepared
For a child like me
I'm not sure my family
In general
Was prepared for a child like me
And the reason I know this is because
Now I'm a man
(Whatever the hell that means)
And hindsight is 20/20
And I see things now that I didn't see in 2006

Like, now I know that people are sometimes
Hateful for no good or real reason
And it's not my fault
That I didn't do anything to earn it
Back then, I thought it was my problem to solve
And that it was my parents' fault
For having a baby that was so darkskinned
For cursing me with all of my melanin
Skin that I never asked for
And I never told them about it

I never told them about how
Every day for 3 years
I was compared to
Shadows
Oil slicks
3:15 AM
I joke about it now because
I laugh to keep from crying
But I didn't tell them
Because I didn't think I could
When you're constantly told
"Stop whining" when you're very young
You learn that you're emotions aren't valid
When you get scolded for speaking up
Whether it's baseless or not
You lose your voice

I don't hold anything against them

3 kids
2 jobs
1 mortgage
That's a lot to worry about

My parents weren't prepared for a boy like me
A boy that wasn't concerned
With everything a boy is supposed to be
A boy that turned out to like other boys
A boy that caused trouble cause he thought too much
And asked too many questions
Not because he enjoyed it
But because he didn't know any better
Because he was a square peg living in a round hole
And as far as he could see
His hole wasn't even considering
That it could try and grow corners

There was a point in time where I would hop out of bed in the morning
Like I had a spring in my soul
And I would summer in my own mind
Vacationing in my thoughts, my imagination as my destination
But when I was made unable to sing out
I started to fall silent
And eventually I entered the winter of my discontent
But now, when I think about it
I'm glad my parents weren't prepared
Because that helped them do a full revolution around their son

I learned that if you have something to say
"Don't be a coward" as my mama likes to say
Say it
Make them hear you
Make them listen
I hate the sound of my voice
But it's like a fingerprint
It is distinct
It is mine
And you're going to know I was here

So now here I am

21 years old
Preparing to graduate from college
And I'm just now learning
That as much as my parents were unprepared for me
Is as unprepared for them I was

I suppose I wasn't prepared
For parents who change with the weather
With foggy minds and clouded judgement
Sunny dispositions casting shadows on me as I walk through the door
Wondering why there's a bowl in the sink
Or if I think I could have swept the floor
Or why I didn't put the trash cans on the curb
Which, if I had knew how to listen, I would have realized probably sounded a lot more
like
"Goddamn my boss is an idiot"
"I have no idea where I'm gonna get the money to pay this bill"
Or "I'm afraid for the safety of my queer son"

It's been said to me before that parents
Envision a specific life for their child
And when their child finds a different life for themselves, the parents have to mourn
But children also have to mourn
When they envision having a certain kind of parent
And realize their parent is not who they hoped they'd be
Life runs on compromise

What I'm saying is
That I am an adult now
And I am complicated
And my parents have always been complicated
And I'm just now seeing that
The same way they are just now seeing it

Tips for a Successful Interracial Relationship

- 1) First and foremost
 - You are under no circumstances
 - Ever permitted
 - To say the n-word
 - I don't care if it's soft a or hard r
 - Shortened or elongated
 - Don't breathe it
 - Don't think it
 - Don't mention it

Even if you're thinking about all of those times I've affectionately asked you
"Nigga, are you crazy?"
- 2) I am not going to
 - Teach you how to Dougie
 - Milly Rock
 - Jerk
 - Cat Daddy
 - Lean wit it or Rock wit it
 - Stanky Leg
 - Or Dab
 - I don't know how to do some of those myself
 - I just learned how to Wop this morning
 - Milly Rock on any block?
 - I can't Milly Rock on my own block
- 3) When you catch me doing any of those dances
 - When I'm cooking dinner
 - Don't let me know you saw me
 - Let me think
 - That you think I can't dance either
 - That way
 - When we go visit my family
 - You don't have to sit by yourself during the cookout
- 4) Speaking of which
 - Understand right now
 - My mother is never going to call you my boyfriend
 - Only "Your lil friend"
 - Even after we share a house, 2 kids, a bank account, a business, and a life
 - You are my lil friend

To my dad
 You'll be my roommate
 To my brother
 You'll be white boy
 Until the day he calls you homie
 When he calls you homie, be happy
 And to my sister
 You'll be her new brother

- 5) When they ask you
 Who's the man and who's the woman
 Don't be a smart ass
 My mom doesn't take to being disrespected in her house
 Just say the typical
 "We're both men, that's the point"
 Then let them teach you how to electric slide
 And before any of this
 Remind me to teach you to throw and catch a football
- 6) Understand that
 While I am your window into blackness
 You're still on the outside looking in
 Be aware of how much space you take up
 How large your white voice is
 The heaviness of your white footsteps
 Be careful where you place them
 Consider that yours
 Are not the first pair of white hands to touch a black body
 To touch this black body
 Keep that in mind as you decide what do with them
 Be careful where you place them
- 7) Know that you can say something that is racist
 And know that you can do something that is racist
 And when I point this out to you
 Know that I'm not calling you racist
 Know that you can perpetuate antiblackness without being antiblack
 When I call you on it
 Don't hear "I don't love you anymore"
 Hear the opposite
 "Because I love you, I want you to do better
 I need you to do better"

- 8) When you mix black and white
You get grey
- 9) I love nothing more than when you come to me
With an article about misogynoir in film
The first time you asked me about how hip hop
Can be culturally appropriated because you were
Curious and confused
I couldn't answer properly because I was thinking about taking your clothes off
But you can't be upset when you ask me about black masculinity
And I send you an article to read from Everyday Feminism
Or Black Girl Dangerous
Or a Kat Blaque or Chescaleigh Ramsey video to watch
Because I don't have the energy to have the conversation
It's 11:45 PM
I spent all day as a black queer
I'm tired
- 10) You'll never truly understand 100%
The battle
The war
The pain or joy
That comes with the social classification that was bestowed upon me
Nor will I understand
The fear
The anxiety
The fun
Or the safety
That comes with yours
- 11) Be really careful about
When you decide is a good time to take a selfie
Where are we? Do we have sun?
Lighting is important
- I don't wanna take this selfie
If I can't see how much I love you

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