The Othered Black Male: Images of Masculinity in African American Lesbian Erotic Fiction

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Abstract :

Constructions, reconstructions and deconstructions of African American males abound. In particular, discussions pertaining to their hyper-sexuality, unemployment, criminal inclinations and proclivity for violence have been discussed at great length. Additionally, researchers have explored ways in which African American men have contributed to notions of black womanhood in America. From the mammy to the jezebel, black men have had a voice regarding the images and roles of black women. Missing are considerations addressing African American women's attempts to define, or redefine, their male counterparts. This paper explores notions of black masculinity as constructed by one specific category of black women, African American lesbian authors. In their contemporary, internet fiction, some traditional (and stereotypical) images of black masculinity are embraced while others are ignored. Intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity and other perspectives pertaining to gendered socialization are considered in an attempt to explain these constructions of black masculinity.

Key Words : African American masculinity, Erotic fiction,

Ötekileştirilen Siyahi Erkek: Afro-Amerikan Lezbiyen Erotik Kurgularda Erkeklik İmajı

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Özet :

Afro-Amerikan erkeğin inşası, yeniden inşası ve yapı sökümüne dair argumanlar oldukça fazladır. Özellikle, hiperseksüelite, işsizlik, suça ve şiddete yatkınlıklarına dair tartışmalar uzun süredir devam etmektedir. Bununla beraber, araştırmacılar Afro-Amerikan erkeklerin Amerika'da siyahi kadınlık kavramlarına katkı yaptığı yolları araştırmaktalar. Siyahi erkekler, anne imajından kötü kadın imajına, siyahi kadınların rolleri ve imajlarına dair söz sahibi olmuşlardır. Fakat burada eksik olan şey, Afro-Amerikan kadınların erkek muadillerini tanımlama, veya yeniden tanımlamasına yönelik düşüncelerdir. Bu çalışma, siyahi kadınlığın bir kategorisi olan Afro-Amerikan lezbiyen yazarların inşa ettiği siyahi erkeklik kavramını araştırmaktadır. Bu yazarların modern dünyasında, internet kurgularında, siyahi erkeklerin bazı geleneksel (ve sterotipik) imajları ön plana çıkarılırken, diğerleri görmezden gelinmektedir. Bu çalışmada siyahi erkekliğin farklı inşalarını anlamak amacıyla kesişimsellik, hegemonik erkeklik ve cinsiyetlendirilmiş sosyalizasyona dair diğer perspektifler ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afro-Amerikan erkeklik, erotik kurgu, Afro-Amerikan kadınlık

Introduction

"If you show an image...enough to a group or person, then after a while that group or person will associate even implicit representations of that image" (Jackson 54). For this reason, Holmberg suggests studying media representations is absolutely essential because they potentially allow for a better understanding of broader cultural and social forces. Scholars have spent an inordinate amount of time examining how less powerful groups, based on race, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation, are represented in media. More specifically, studies abound about the harsh, abrasive ways in which African American men are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in popular culture.[i] Black men have been, and continue to be, pathologized, portrayed as savages, predators, Uncle Toms, buffoons, pimps, absent fathers and, for the most part, hypermasculine, homophobic, criminally inclined, sex-starved, shiftless, unemployed, unruly stray dogs governed by street culture (Anderson 177, Collins 2004: 186-87, Dines 287, hooks 1992: 91, Jackson 4-5, Quinn 118, Rose 1994: 173, West 26-27). Some scholars have also recognized a feminization of black males in public spaces that has persisted since slavery (Neal 93). For example, the NFL draft, like the slave auction, has become an important site where African American male bodies are deemed legitimate objects of a more powerful male gaze (Oates 74). Researchers have suggested that these representations of black males provide opportunities to continually subordinate them, keeping black males "in check" in various ways (hooks 1992: 91).

There have also been serious considerations of the representations of black women, and black femininity, in media. Seen through a similar lens, which typically allows for examinations of powerful groups' depictions of powerless members of society, much of this research has explored how women are defined and confined by a variety of stereotypical images, including the asexual mammy, the hypersexual jezebel or whore, the Hottentot Venus, the welfare mother/queen, and the ball-busting bitch (Collins 1990: 116, hooks

1992: 61, Magubane 824, Mayall and Russell 289, Rose 1994: 103-104). Scholars have also discussed the manner upon which black women, and men for that matter, have resisted these depictions. But much of the focus has been on 'defining' images and the various ways in which black women are governed by them.

Some academicians, like bell hooks, Tricia Rose and Cornel West, have considered the role of black men in helping to create and/or reinforce defining images of black women (and black femininity) in popular culture, especially in music. Black males seem to have contributed, in numerous ways, to the perpetuation of misogynistic and crude images of black women. However, few scholars have addressed efforts on the part of black women to define black men, or notions of black masculinity, in public spaces. This paper is an attempt to begin this research by examining the ways in which black women construct notions of black masculinity in contemporary internet erotic fiction.

Methodology

The sample of erotic fiction drawn for this textual analysis was randomly selected from a free website titled Kuma. According to McNay, textual analyses seek to consider the ways in which power and knowledge operate at a micro-social level to produce images whose representations can then be examined (McNay 76). More importantly, textual analyses provide tools to better understand how language used in public spaces are potential sites for political struggle and social (re)construction.

Kuma first appeared in 1998 (www.kuma2.net) and according to the webmaster, the site is "for…black lesbians, especially those who are closeted or do not live near a major metropolitan area [and] the stories and poetry affirm that [black lesbians] are not alone or an unnatural aberration." This site was updated monthly until 2009. In its heyday, the site received approximately 1,170 unique visits and 17,830 hits per day (http://kuma2.net/aboutkuma.htm).

The site "contain[s] over 1600 pieces of erotica [and] the literature archive is the largest online collection of black lesbian writing" (http://kuma2.net/aboutkuma.htm). Authors were not paid for their work and all stories were filtered through the webmaster. No changes were made to accepted stories. Personal communication with the webmaster over the course of two years revealed that stories including any type of excessive violence (e.g., murder) were typically rejected. Other themes (e.g., suicide) were also prohibited by the webmaster.

A random sample of 100 stories (approximately 20% of the stories on the website) was selected from the Kuma website for the purpose of this study. An effort was then made to contact every author from the sample drawn. While most of the stories provided some way to reach the author, some stories did not. Other contact information was outdated or invalid. As a result, the researcher was able to contact 64% of the authors. These authors were emailed a brief survey inquiring about their age, race, biological sex, educational background, and sexual orientation.[ii] There was a response rate of 65%. Each story written by a woman-born, self-identified lesbian was then coded, using an identical coding instrument, for the presence of at least one "masculine" character (typically referred to as a "stud" in the stories[iii]) and the exhibition of "masculine characteristics."[iv]

It is important to note that black lesbians are a unique subset of black women, multiply positioned and, in and of themselves, governed by varying ideologies, identities, social systems, and inequalities (Collins 1990: 231, Moore 7). However, together, these positions can potentially create a framework for understanding and articulating black women's construction of others (Moore 7). More specifically, these differing realities provide a place to begin the exploration of an othered group's constructions of black masculinity.

Findings

The methodological process resulted in the selection of 44 stories written by 25 self-identified lesbian African-American women.[v] The average age of the authors was 32. All of the authors were born in the United States and approximately half resided in the Southern region of the country. An overwhelming majority of the authors (81%) had completed at least "some college."

Most of the stories selected for this sample (68%) included at least one "masculinized character."[vi] These characters were often referred to as "studs." Obvious indicators that these characters adhered to masculine gender cues included, the use of masculinized or androgynous names (e.g., Dre, Shy, Tay, Te), adjectives used to describe these particular characters (e.g., stud, dyke, daddy, papi, hersband, studsband, boi), the type of clothing favored by these characters (e.g., jeans, hoodies, tee shirts, boxers, 'wife-beaters'), the large vehicles driven by these characters (e.g., Cadillac Escalades, Dodge Durangos, Hummers), the type of jobs occupied (e.g., electrician, drug dealer, rapper), hairstyle (e.g., shaved head, cornrows) and numerous references to their physical bodies as "muscular."[vii] These characters also engaged in various, stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors (e.g., opening doors for more feminine characters, displaying a certain cockiness when attempting to win the affection of more feminine characters, demonstrating confidence that they would succeed at a particular task). Finally, 50% of the 'studs' were perceived to be strong (e.g., able to lift/carry femmes, referred to as "strong" by more feminine characters) and 73% were unwilling or unable to express their emotions.

With respect to sexuality, most of the more masculine characters (58%) initiated sexual activity. However, this was not necessarily a clear indicator of masculinity in these stories considering 42% of the more masculine characters did not initiate sexual activity. Other, more obvious, indicators of a traditional male gender script included studs that were 'aggressive' sexually, desired to have a more feminine character beneath them during sex (i.e., missionary position) and had a

remarkable ability to please femmes in bed. As indicated by the number of orgasms and an amazing familiarity with the G-spot, the vast majority of the more masculinized characters (81%) were able to satisfy femmes sexually. A final indicator that these characters tended to follow more masculine notions of gender related to penetration. When penetration was included in a story, the vast majority of the studs (86%) were penetrators, not penetrated.

RESULTS
Public Displays of Black Masculinity

The stories rendered public displays of 'doing gender' an essential part of the masculinity script.[viii] Important signifiers were linked to gender identity and manifested in various ways. An excellent example is the use of particular names. Most of the masculinized characters insisted on shortened versions of their formal, sometimes more feminine, names. For example, in the story titled *Blind Love*, Andrea identified herself to a potential love interest as "Dre":

> "And who am I calling?" I asked…She took my hand, lifting it to her lips. After the gentle kiss that I could feel all the way to my toes, she winked at me. "Dre. Don't take too long to call me" (Glitter).

And in *Sweet Hellos and Goodbyes*, the stud introduced herself as Jacs, a shortened version of Jacqueline (Jai).

Other aspects of black masculinity deemed important by these female authors included posturing in public spaces (e.g., hanging with male friends, playing basketball), clothing style, gait, cars, language style and the use of drugs/alcohol (used by 57% of the more masculinized characters).

Public displays of one's gender, and notions of self-identity, were not the only ways in which characters exhibited masculinity. The recognition of gendered displays by others was also important. Studs

were sometimes clearly identified as such by outsiders who helped to uphold their status. In *Can You Stand The Rain*, when attempting to explain why she was socializing with another woman, Tay stated "its (*sic*) always a group. My niggas and [the] chicks just chillin and shit" (Lil AJ). In this statement, Tay clearly indicated she was part of a larger, masculine group that identified her as one of 'them.' And in *One Mic,* after Pandora informs her best friend that her love interest is moving in, he says, "damn, finally a woman in the house. That's gonna be some shit," humorously acknowledging he did not classify Pandora as a typical 'woman' (Alexandria).

Another critical aspect of masculinity reflected in the stories was the ability to treat more feminine characters like a 'lady.' Studs asked more feminine characters out on dates, held doors open for them, kissed the hands of more feminine characters, offered them a seat, and swept them off their feet in various ways. For example, in *Collision Unleashed*, Orion, the more masculinized character, gallantly carried Tisha's damaged bicycle and then opened her beer for her once they arrived at Orion's apartment (Cashazznjuice). And in *One Mic*, Pandora admitted "my priorities were clear...all I wanted to do was protect my woman the best way I could" (Alexandria). These indicators of masculinity appeared in 38% of the coded stories, suggesting that these female authors believed notions of chivalry, as it pertained to black masculinity, was not dead.

In this sample, black masculinity was defined by public displays that included strength, confidence, and chivalry. Additionally, 62% of the more masculinized characters were gainfully employed or had some type of sustainable income. Most of the more masculinized characters could "take care of themselves" with respect to violence and were willing to protect more feminine characters when necessary. For the most part, black female authors sanctioned these more traditional, hegemonic notions of masculine behavior.

Private Behaviors and Black Masculinity

While public demonstrations of traditional masculinity cues were deemed important, there was a shift in the script when examining private behaviors. In particular, studs in these stories needed to be comfortable enough with their masculinity to allow more feminine characters to initiate sexual activity behind closed doors. This trend was evident in 42% of the stories coded. More feminine characters in these stories were enthusiastic actors in the bedroom, not simple objects of affection. For example, in *Sex by Felicia 101*, Rashida (identified as a stud), does not discourage the femme character from assuming the role of sexual aggressor:

> I (femme character) slowly slid away from her, getting to my knees, facing Rashida. We both stared at each other for a moment, before I just grabbed her by the head, pulling her face to mine. As soon as our lips met, I could feel her shudder. It was such a strange experience for me, because normally I am so passive with studs, but something about Rashida just made me want to literally take over and turn her ass out. And that is exactly what I was doing. (Glitter; parenthesis added)

More masculine characters in these stories allowed femmes to assume a more dominant role sexually, at least initially, and there was little evidence that this variation in traditional behaviors emasculated said characters. In other words, more masculinized characters were still able to "do gender" appropriately after such encounters. In fact, many of the relationships that began with an aggressively sexual femme blossomed into long term, monogamous relationships in these narratives.

In most of the stories coded, it was also obvious that more feminine characters *wanted* to partake in sexual activity. This fact was coupled with the practice of more masculinized characters carefully soliciting consent from potential partners. For example, in

Discriminated, Keirstin, the more masculine character, actually paused during a sexual encounter to ask for consent:

> Although I knew I had to have her I wanted to be sure that this what she truly wanted. As I removed my lips from the sweetness of her mouth I [asked]. "Are you sure this is what you want?" (Taneigha)

In *I Always Get What I Want*, after pushing her partner onto the bed, Terez, a stud, asked, "can I have you" and waited for her femme partner to answer (Infamous Trece). And in *Live 2 Dream*, the more masculinized character hesitated until her partner clearly consented, saying "take it, it's yours" (EroticBrat).

Perhaps allowing more feminine characters to assume control, at least initially, and scripting undisguised petitions for consent, allowed black female authors to address concerns about sexual assault not easily addressed otherwise. Although the topic of rape was blaringly absent from the vast majority of the stories coded (97%), possibly because the webmaster rejected 'violent' stories, overtly discussing consent, and allowing femmes to lead the way sexually, suggested that these black female authors were concerned enough about sexual violence that they creatively circumvented the webmaster's restrictions. Instead of focusing on acts that would render the more feminine characters victims, they empowered these characters in a way that eliminated the need for sexual violence while consistently protecting notions of black masculinity.

Hypersexuality and Black Masculinity

However, allowing femmes to assume a more aggressive role was limited to the first sexual act between a more masculine character and a more feminine character. Adhering to a more traditional gender script, authors portrayed more masculinized characters as particularly interested in sex, barely able to control their sexual desire, always prepared for sex and experienced in the bedroom.

Most of the studs, 81%, eagerly accepted sexual invitations, were able to bring their sexual partners to orgasm multiple times and/or were able to easily locate the traditionally elusive G-spot.

For example, in *A Good Story And An Even Better Plot*, a masculinized tutor, referred to as a "dyke," simply could not resist having sex with two more feminine tutees in a public bathroom, "I am so naive...I can see that [my seduction] is a plot! But I just go along with it" (Northcoastgirl). In *Distant Lover*, the more feminine character declared about her more masculine sexual partner, "no one could touch me like she touched me" (Lil AJ). Monica, in *The Balcony and the Fireplace*, invited her "hersband" out onto the balcony for an impromptu sexual tryst (Mohanni). Her sexual partner just happened to come prepared with "Purple Passion," a sex toy Monica fondly referred to as her "baby's dick." And the femme in the story titled *Sunshine* declared, "that's it baby, you do remember. Ooh, that's my spot!" (InsatiableK). And moments later "her body tensed...as she screamed, 'It's yours Te, and I'm yours!'" (InsatiableK).

These few examples were representative of the stories in general, clearly indicating that black masculinized characters *should* be interested in sex, were habitually prepared to engage in sex and were able to sexually satisfy more feminine characters consistently. Very much like stereotypes about black men more broadly in American society, these masculinized characters were sexually uninhibited, sported large "dicks" and seemed to have an innate ability to drive more feminine characters, "nuts...[making her] beg and scream for it" (Jai).

Emotional Repression and Black Masculinity

Similar to broader masculinity scripts in the United States, characters demonstrating notions of black masculinity rarely expressed emotion. Seventy-three percent of the stories included more masculinized characters that had difficulty expressing, or refused to express, their feelings. In the remaining 27% of the stories, more

masculinized characters were willing to articulate their emotions only if their relationship was at risk.

For example, in *One Helluva Night,* Janelle, the more masculinized character, revealed her true feelings only after she was accused of cheating and her more feminine love interest was threatening to end the relationship:

> Listen to me damn it…You know I love you and I would never ever cheat on you. I love you too much for that. You are my life and my everything. No woman on this earth is worth losing you. No pussy is worth not having you in my life for the rest of my life…(Blaaze).

In *Blind Love,* Dre declared the following to her lover only to prevent her from leaving:

> You wanna hear me say it, Astoria? That I want you in my life? That I need you in my life? That as soon as I first lay eyes on you in that car, I saw how beautiful you were. And not just because you're attractive, but the person that you are. Baby, you got this way about you that just hypnotizes me. The way you look at me is like catching me in this web, and all I want to do is just hold you, be with you, and take care of you. I can't force you to be with me, but I want you to. I've never wanted someone in my life like this before, and I do. And it's you (Glitter).

And in *Distant Lover*, Shy shared the following in an effort to win her love interest back, "Tyla I've been thinking about you so much [since] we broke up. I've wanted to get in contact with you so many times to say I was sorry and that I made a huge mistake. My whole life has been so empty [since] I left and...I...I miss you" (Lil AJ).

Stereotypes suggesting that males were calm, detached, resistant to sharing their emotions and/or unable to express their feelings went unchallenged by these black female authors. More masculinized characters were expected to be strong and emotionally withdrawn.

Maintaining a traditional image of masculinity at all costs seemed important with the exception of a last minute, heroic effort to repair a failing relationship.

Discussion/Conclusion

Kuma is a free internet website. Black women, although not exclusively, control the site, publish on the site and visit the site. The website attempted to provide a safe space for black women, particularly black lesbians, nationally and internationally. This study examined gendered and racialized images constructed by a sample of the self-identified black lesbians found in this public space.

With respect to these images, most notable is a strict adherence to Rich's notions of compulsory heterosexuality. Although these black lesbian authors could have (re)created and (re)defined relationships in a variety of ways, most of them embraced the ideals of heterosexuality, represented by aforementioned 'stud' and 'femme' characters. As noted by Moore, black lesbians, possibly influenced significantly by their upbringing, seemed committed to navigating intersecting identities and social locations in ways that allowed them to retain racial group commitments. In this instance, they appeared to have embraced traditional ways of defining black masculinity, instead of providing alternatives. These choices potentially reflected the importance of African American socialization processes.

There was also a willingness on the part of these African American female authors to embrace hegemonic definitions of black masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, in this instance, refers to masculinity as governed and/or defined by those with power (Rose 1994: 15-16). As discussed previously, studies of media depictions have revealed a preponderance of negative images with respect to black masculinity. The depictions discussed in this study reflected these real world attitudes and understandings of black masculinity. Simultaneously, they appeared to suggest an allegiance with black males

that black women may have felt obligated to uphold, refusing to seriously challenge aspects of their masculinity as black men continually struggle to redefine public images in more positive ways.

For example, one of the negative images often affiliated with black masculinity is aggressive posturing, or the 'Cool Pose.' The Cool Pose is an attempt on behalf of black males to present a controlled, composed self-image which includes notions of respect, controlled violence and indifference to problems, pain, and frustration (Majors and Billson 8). This image is a protective shield used, theoretically, to empower powerless black males (Anderson 163, Majors and Billson 8).

Stories selected for examination in this study appeared to recognize the importance of, and to some extent protect, the presentation of the Cool Pose. Characteristics affiliated with the Cool Pose were clearly delineated, including earning respect, demonstrations of strength, a willingness to protect the 'fairer' sex, control of one's emotions, contextualized violent behavior, minor violations of the law, and the use of alcohol/marijuana. When constructing masculinized characters, these black female authors were apparently reluctant to dismantle this aspect of black masculinity, an aspect that has been re-defined as potentially empowering for black males.

Another relatively negative image often linked to black masculinity that failed to be challenged by these authors was the stereotype of the 'black buck,' an image of hyper, uncontrolled sexuality used to potentially control black men in various ways (hooks 1981: 52). Kuma's authors perpetuated this image by scripting black masculinized characters that were always 'ready' for sex, barely capable of restraining their sexual needs, willing and able to please a femme, and had a desire to penetrate more feminine characters with their "girl dicks." The black buck was, therefore, another aspect of black masculinity these female authors seemed unwilling to deconstruct.

Overall, the maintenance of these negative images provided a lens through which one could consider the importance of race, as opposed to sexual orientation for example, when interpreting black women's

constructions of black masculinity. Race appeared to govern understandings of how gender, sexuality, social class, and other axes of power shaped the lives of black men according to these black female authors and, more importantly, allowed for the eroticization of a hegemonic perspective, embodied from a female standpoint, which appeared critical to the prevention of black women's possibility of claiming true agency (Collins 1990: 207, Jackson 69).

Conversely, Kuma's authors did not vilify black masculinized characters when they failed to occupy more traditional social positions (e.g., primary breadwinner). While black men have often been depicted as "lazy" and "shiftless," these authors refused to reinforce these negative images, instead constructing black masculinized characters as chivalrous, kind, considerate, and concerned about more feminized characters as well as willing to protect them. Black masculinized characters in these stories were interested in committing to long term relationships and practicing monogamy. And, when absolutely necessary, they expressed emotion and declared love. So, black female authors embraced some of the time-honored, hegemonic images of black masculinity, but they rendered others relatively invisible, potentially contributing to efforts to (re)define black masculinity in more positive ways.

In conclusion, more masculinized characters, as defined by this sample of black female authors, were encouraged to embrace some of the traditional images historically imposed on black males. However, these characters were able to render less important other stereotypical, controlling images. One could argue that this particular sample of black women compelled black masculinized characters to walk a fine line. On one side, the population was bound by compulsory heterosexuality and hegemony, a reflection of their existence in the United States. On the other, the characters were able to negotiate and renegotiate aspects of black masculinity in limited ways, challenging traditional scripts.

Ultimately, it appeared these black female authors scripted characters that attempted to create a balanced existence between

controlling hyper-masculine images (e.g., the Cool Pose) and images traditionally affiliated with notions of femininity (e.g., expressing emotions, committing to long-term relationships). These authors encouraged their more masculine characters to struggle continually to be "black" and traditionally "male," reflecting the realities of their historical and racialized roles in the United States, while simultaneously rising to newly established expectations of black masculinity, redefining and challenging previously limiting notions. Overall, these black female authors did not write as if in an idealized fantasy world that was completely governed by sexual orientation and ignorant of race. Instead, their social upbringing, their race, and possibly their sexual orientation, resulted in a complex (re)categorization of black masculinity that reflected an allegiance with, and an understanding of, their black male counterparts while simultaneously reflecting a type of semi-autonomy that allowed them to help (re)define this targeted and controlled population.

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[i] African American and black will be used interchangeably in this essay.

[ii] The most important category, for the purposes of this study, was "biological sex" because the author wanted to examine the ways in which black women, raised as females in the United States, constructed notions of masculinity. Therefore, the stories of any author failing to classify as "biological female" were rejected.

[iii] The terms "stud" and "femme" were used by numerous authors in the sample and will be used in this paper to capture notions of masculinity and femininity.

[iv] A mixed-age focus group helped to generate a list of American masculine characteristics used for this study.

[v] While sexual orientation certainly has an impact on one's understanding/construction of masculinity, for the purposes of this paper the role of sexual orientation was de-emphasized (but not entirely ignored). The author, instead, opted to explore how this group of female authors, generally socialized as girls and women in American society, more broadly constructed notions of black masculinity.

[vi] This term was created by the author to describe the characters in these lesbian stories that more closely adhered to broadly set expectations of masculinity. Based on these stories, it was clear that characters did not have to be biologically male to "do" masculinity. Additionally, lesbian relationships did not preclude the existence of masculinity scripts.

[vii] Again, while these characters were created by lesbians to be 'masculine' *lesbians*, this fact does not preclude an examination of masculine characteristics in and of themselves.

[viii] The term "scripting" is used to highlight the process by which individuals assign meaning to others "in an effort to structure their observations and reflections concerning difference" (Jackson 74).