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Immediate Pleasured Justice

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Immediate Pleasured Justice

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The Division of Social Studies
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by
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Introduction

Representations of black liberation always failed me. Growing up, I was bombarded with words and texts. Some texts written by the most empowering thinkers in the world. Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr, Fredrick Douglass, the list goes on. But for some reason, I was never left empowered. Frankly, I felt unmotivated. My fourth grade teacher noticed this one day after a lesson on the civil rights movement, so he took me out of the class to chat. He looked at me and said “Do you know how meaningful it is that we can read? Do you know what it means that people like us can read? Like us!”, he said as he pinched his own skin. My skin was black too, although, I didn’t really know what it meant. My parents had always told me that race was important because I had to work twice as hard as my white friends to get to the same place. They also told me that because I was black, I would have to be strong. These words, although valuable and true, never stuck with me. I was uninterested in proving my worth through a job. Was this abnormal? I thought, did my disinterest make me not black? I valued joy, pleasure, wellness. Did those facts make me any less black? Did that make me white? I didn’t know. This question bothered me as a kid. What exactly does it mean to be black and strong? Was I not strong or was I not black?

Black thinkers of the civil rights movement did so much to capture what it means to be a Black intellectual. Our culture has lingered on the ends of their sentences for decades. Their sentiments preached strength, resilience and called for a new form of nationalism. I recognize the intellectual labor and cultural knowledge that has been passed down to me from my parents. I am very grateful for this because I was raised by strong people who were raised by strong people. However, I defined strength differently. Even as a child, I admired when my father was patient

rather than when he was assertive. I understood that strength is found domestically and in relationships to others. But I could not find the words for this. But I could not find in any of those books where Blackness was associated with receptivity or with caution. I could not find in any of those books where Black strength was equated with embracing beauty and love. I did not see any idols of the sort. So, these words continued to fail me. I was lost, and did not know how to be proud of my values that were seemingly “feminine” or “gay”. Values such as patience, harmony, beauty. I felt that my culture was pushing me out of my comfort zone to live the words of my much more “masculine” Black forefathers. I felt lazy that I did not want to achieve a high-paying corporate job. I felt lazy that most of my life-goals were domestic. Goals such as having a clean house, having nice clothes, taking care of my skin, having a healthy body. I could not find my place in the movement. I gave up on words. I stopped reading as much. It felt like something was off.

Growing up as a Black man means very different things to different people. But for me, a queer Black man, it meant that I was always feeling displaced. This began to show itself more as I aged and was reading higher level literature. In my AP Literature class in high school, I began to feel the romanticism and pleasure that came with art. However, they were white authors. So I was again, displaced. I wanted the best of both worlds. I wanted to read and engage with art that acknowledged my history on a personal level, while also being able to experience harmony and be moved by art. What remains to be empowering to me is that Black queer poets and authors fight two battles in their heads and in their work. As if life is not hard enough, it is the job of Black queer people to both find beauty beyond racism, and combat the toxic Black masculinity that so often prevents people from being fulfilled. This battle is fought everyday as Black queer men are told to rely on strength, being pushed towards an unhealthy hyper-masculinity.

In my high school experience, I found very quickly that white people, particularly white cis women, were much more welcoming of me and my sensitivity. My friends often encouraged me to pursue activities in the arts, and to follow my heart. This made me feel a lot more complete. I felt supported. This kind of advice led me to further believe and live in alignment with my desires, which is such an important part of queerness. Even as an adult, I found it extremely difficult to grant myself the entitlement to pleasure and fulfilling my desires. This struggle of identities continues. I find many LGBTQ creative and wellness safe spaces to be run and filled with white people. For so long, I felt that I could not catch a break anywhere. And I found myself naturally choosing between my identities.

Due to social media and increased connectivity, there has been more communication and awareness raised about intersectionality. Intersectional spaces have been more highly valued, as the intersectional struggle redefines “human rights” with each passing day. There are a myriad of struggles that the intersectional Black and queer identity faces, and it is important for Black queer people to know and create what justice uniquely means to them. Justice is not about Black representation or gay legal marriage. Justice, to me, is about having the space to be creative, the resources to stand financially secure, the safe communities to care about my emotional and physical wellness. Justice, to me, is about demanding all of those things at once, and not settling for anything less than your fulfillment. Justice, to me, is about being able to educate yourself through Black queer writers, and not spending years reading texts that were written to coax white straight people out of the illusions of white heteronormativity. All of these things are justice, and it’s interesting because on both ends of the Black queer identity, there is resistance against these ideals. Black nationalists argue that racism ended with Obama, and with *Blackish*. White queer people find justice in elite gay spaces and clubs. It feels as if no one is making noise. So, it is the

burdening job of Black queer people to continually unpack several forms of oppression they face. This is an extremely heavy burden to undertake, and in many ways, has forced activists to focus on more immediate, everyday justice. I want to look into how these everyday immediate simple pleasures are incredibly liberatory. I am interested in exploring how Black queer artists have portrayed “feminine” principles such as beauty, intimacy and pleasure.

My paper will start off with a framing of Adrienne Maree Brown’s work. She produces work on the radical imagination needed to liberate Black people. Brown’s work has changed my perception of revolution, and it is integral to my understanding of Black queer liberation. It is the job of queer people to utilize their imagination to create worlds around them that are suitable to their unique longings. Without this imaginative labor, it is hard to prepare and compel the world to meet the demands of the human rights we deserve. The artists I will look into are: Isaac Julien, Daniel Obasi and Clifford Prince King. Julien is a filmmaker, Obasi is a fashion photographer/stylist, and King is a photographer. Each of these artists flesh out Adrienne Maree Brown’s points to their own suiting, creating their individual and unique picture of Black queer justice.

Adrienne Maree Brown's *Pleasure Activism*

Adrienne Maree Brown is a practicing doula, healer, poet, writer and activist. Most of Brown's work focuses on restructuring our approach to liberation. She highlights the value of utilizing pleasure, joy and the imagination, and how these tools can be used as radical resistance against white supremacy. Brown does most of this work through facilitation. Her facilitation work aims to create spaces for people to explore revolution. As Brown builds on Black Feminist Tradition idea, she takes mainly from thinkers such as Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. She re-signifies that pleasure can enhance our lives, and explains that organizing for social justice is about marginalized groups defining their pleasing desires and building our worlds. *Pleasure Activism*, by Adrienne Maree Brown, is about reclaiming fulfillment in the bodies that have collected generations of shame and scarcity. This, to me, is a beneficial framework to continue in the development of truth and abundance and healing for marginalized communities.

I've collected some of my favorite quotes of hers that demonstrate the central themes of her work: First though, I want to include a quote that provides a foundation on which Brown's work can be supported: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"¹ This Audre Lorde quote serves to prioritize all things related to self-care in liberation. This includes both of Brown's political values: pleasure and abundance. Brown states in the first quote: "Pleasure activists seek to understand and learn from the politics and power dynamics inside of everything that makes us feel good. This includes sex and the erotic, drugs, fashion, humor, passion work, connection, reading, cooking and/or eating, music and other arts, and so much more. Pleasure activists believe that by tapping into the potential

¹ Lorde, Audre. *A Burst of Light: and Other Essays*. Dover Publications, Inc., 2017.

goodness in each of us we can generate justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists. Pleasure activism acts from an analysis that pleasure is a natural, safe, and liberated part of life- and that we can offer each other tools and education to make sure sex, desire, drugs, connection, and other pleasures aren't life-threatening or harming but life enriching."² Here, Brown defines what it means to be a "pleasure activist." A "pleasure activist" is someone who centers pleasure as an avenue towards justice. Brown talks earlier in the book about how pleasure is a measure of freedom. This can be seen in the freedom to express sexuality. In using the term "queer" as meaning "different" or "other", queer sexual acts serve as the first step to breaking away from normalcy to experience genuine contentment, and thus, freedom. Spaces of free sexuality and pleasure are the first place that queer people begin to demand the right to experience authentic pleasure. With this being the foundation to a process of liberation, it is important to take Brown's word to manifest this into our daily lives. The pursuit of pleasure can start with an attainment of authentic sexual preferences, but it also expands to all areas of life. Brown defines pleasure as a power to tap into, stating that it is ever increasing. I find this sense of abundance is important for justice because many marginalized groups experience a feeling of scarcity throughout their lives. This scarcity comes in many forms: scarcity of support, scarcity of pleasure, scarcity of visibility, scarcity of validation, scarcity of material resources, scarcity of safety, scarcity of individuality, the list goes on. The relationship between abundance and scarcity is one that accurately marks the more immediate forms of justice, those that are domestic and internal. Many Black straight male activists have failed to recognize that justice takes many forms. Justice definitely can look like representation and job opportunity. But justice can also look like fulfillment, joy and thus, abundance. Brown does a great job of focusing on the latter.

² Brown, Adrienne M. *Pleasure Activism: the Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press, 2019.

Adrienne Maree Brown says in the second foundational quote: “I think because most of us are so repressed, our fantasies go to extremes to counterbalance all that contained longing. Pleasure activism is about learning what it means to be satisfiable, to generate, from within and from between us, an abundance from which we can all have enough. Part of the reason so few of us have a healthy relationship with pleasure is because a small minority of our species hoards the excess of resources, creating a false scarcity and then trying to sell us joy, sell us back to ourselves. Some think it belongs to them, that it is their inheritance.”³ This passage is impactful because she explains that all people are entitled to abundance, and that people only experience a lack of abundance due to colonial and racist history. In a racial-capitalist society, marginalized groups are hyperaware of scarcity, and it leads to what she calls “extremes”. It is unclear what exactly Brown means by “extremes”, but I interpreted it as meaning a never-ending psychological need for more. This can be seen in some Black music communities as a hyper-obsession with wealth and status. Also, in some queer communities as a hyper-fixation with physical and bodily appearance. Brown is here to remind us that pleasure is always ours, and our “fantasies” can always be achieved, if we direct them. It is also important to note that these fantasies are not solely self-interested. The feeling of abundance is good for community as a whole. She touches on this in one of her earlier “Pleasure Principles”: “when I am happy it is good for the world”.⁴ Brown frames pleasure and abundance as a goal that is not only beneficial to yourself but everyone around you. Pleasure abundance is cyclical.

In Adrienne Maree Brown’s other book *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, she elaborates that many creatives achieve the “fantasy” of healing abundance through a process called world-building: “Whenever we try to envision a world

³ Brown, Adrienne M. *Pleasure Activism: the Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press, 2019.

⁴ Brown, Adrienne M. *Pleasure Activism: the Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press, 2019.

without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is speculative fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds- so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories?"⁵ This concept is beneficial in defining exactly what rights need to be demanded for justice. So often, oppressed people are depicted only in their oppression and defined by their constant struggle for livelihood. This is emotionally exhausting and creates a limited view of self-identity. In Brown's definition of world-building, she emphasizes that is important, again, for oppressed people to experience fulfillment, even if it has to be in the fantasy realm. This practice also connects people with their desires and provides them agency to manifest these desires. Brown also says: "And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.... They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being."⁶ If our rights were born from the radical imagination of future, then it is that which will propel us further. This process takes courage, but, in giving voice to your oppressed and repressed longings, generational pain is healed and unique personal justice is achieved.

One example of a way that put this into daily motion for myself is the constant reminder that beauty is highly valuable for Black queer people. It should not be associated for high-class activity and should not seen as luxury. It is very important for Black queer people to fulfill their desires and pleasure. This work is imagining revolution and ultimately very fulfilling, and it is amazing that abundance and pleasure can take place in many ways, we just need to prioritize it. If

⁵ Imarisha, Walidah, et al. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press, 2015.

⁶ Imarisha, Walidah, et al. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press, 2015.

Black queer people are to prioritize pleasure for all that is it worth, we must first decolonize our thinking around the pursuit and experience of pleasure and abundance. Only in doing so can we begin to favor representations of Black queerness in the media that display pleasure, desire, abundance and imagination.

Isaac Julien

Isaac Julien is a filmmaker and installation artist who deals with topics of Black queer pleasure. He rose to prominence in the film community after the release of his 1989 fantasy documentary film, *Looking For Langston*. This quickly became a central piece to the understanding of Black queer desire in the film world. *Looking For Langston* is a performative documentary ⁷ following the sexual life of Langston Hughes through a combination of archival newsreel footage of Harlem and scripted scenes shot by Julien.⁸ Hughes was a prominent figure during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, but never came out as gay. Isaac Julien wanted to explore the private and unrevealed narrative of Langston Hughes' sexual history and does so through multiple dream sequences and tableaux. In creating this world of Black gay desire during the Harlem Renaissance, Julien's goal was to build a visual language of Black queerness that is abundant in desire, joy and pleasure.⁹ By creating images of Langston Hughes engaging in homosexual desire, Julien aimed to expose the truth of these "erotic histories", so that other Black queer artists can build from this foundation of what Black queer pleasure visually looks like.¹⁰ This process is a "culturally empowering reclamation of the past."¹¹

This film is often categorized under an film movement called the: New Queer Cinema, a movement coined by B. Ruby Rich in 1992 to describe a rise of queer topics in the early 1990s

⁷ Aaron, Michele. *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

⁸ Glover, Alexander. "Isaac Julien: 'I Dream a World' Looking for Langston." *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture*, www.studiointernational.com/index.php/isaac-julien-i-dream-a-world-looking-for-langston-review-victoria-miro-london.

⁹ Als, Hilton. "Looking for Langston: Isaac Julien in Conversation with Hilton Als." *Vimeo*, 2017, vimeo.com/223592891. Accessed 2020.

¹⁰ Als, Hilton. "Looking for Langston: Isaac Julien in Conversation with Hilton Als." *Vimeo*, 2017, vimeo.com/223592891. Accessed 2020.

¹¹ Glover, Alexander. "Isaac Julien: 'I Dream a World' Looking for Langston." *Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture*, www.studiointernational.com/index.php/isaac-julien-i-dream-a-world-looking-for-langston-review-victoria-miro-london.

independent filmmaking scene.¹² The films in this movement often featured themes of anti-heteronormativity and the creation of identity for queer people. Louise Wallenberg, a cinematic scholar and professor at Stockholm University, writes extensively on the topics of queer filmmaking in her critical reader titled *New Queer Cinema*. She emphasizes that queer filmmakers use their creative agency to more closely control how they are portrayed, and further, shed more light on the revolutionary aspects of the queer identity. Isaac Julien found this creative approach especially helpful because he was then able to more accurately specific himself into a subgroup of Queer Black Cinema. Julien, along with director Marlon Riggs, valued that filmmaking is increasingly a process of challenging and creating new forms of imaginations to explore the complexities of our intersectional identities. Both of these filmmakers recognized that their uniqueness as Black queer people nurtured their creativity and allowed them to create alternate visuals for justice.¹³ In Louise Wallenberg's chapter on New Black Queer Cinema, she states that this multitude of approach creates a "plurality of identity."¹⁴

Before thinking critically about Julien's portrayal of queer identity, it is first important to address the context under which the Black male body has historically been viewed, and what relationship to pleasure it was given. In Bell Hooks' *Visual Politics*, she contributes to the topics of body politics and the representation of Black maleness in the media. She first establishes that the Black male body has been portrayed under a colonial lens and its relationship to coloniality cannot be separated. Hooks explains that a relationship to your personal body is a humanizing force and life-giving force, and that true dehumanization comes from a detachment to one's own pleasures. Here, Hooks observes the same form of justice that Adrienne Maree Brown focuses

¹² B. Ruby Rich. "New Queer Cinema": *Sight & Sound*, Volume 2, Issue 5 (September 1992)

¹³ Als, Hilton. "Looking for Langston: Isaac Julien in Conversation with Hilton Als." *Vimeo*, 2017, vimeo.com/223592891. Accessed 2020.

¹⁴ Aaron, Michele. *New Queer Cinema: a Critical Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

on: a positive relationship to your body being liberatory. Hooks states: “For black bodies, the fear has not been losing touch with our carnality and physicality but how to be in touch with our bodies in a way that is liberatory.”¹⁵ Due to the colonial lens under which the Black male body has been presented in the media, Hooks emphasizes that it is critically important to educate yourself about the social positionalities that shape visual culture. Black male bodies have been given validation only as keepers of a kind of “transgressive pleasure”¹⁶ to white colonial viewers, and in order for Black male viewers to reclaim agency over their bodies and their pleasures, they must rely on their imagination to create visuals of beauty that honors their own authentic desires and pleasures. Hooks ends this passage with an emphasis that art is a decolonial process and reclaiming process. Julien’s work has been noted by other scholars as portraying the body as a powerful and subversive site for deconstructing the complexity of this colonial legacy.¹⁷ Isaac Julien’s *Looking For Langston* aligns its artistic and creative motives with those of Bell Hooks’ and Adrienne Maree Brown’s liberatory process.

Julien’s depiction of the imaginary relationship between Langston Hughes and his lover is revolutionary in reframing Black men’s connection to pleasure and their bodies. Isaac Julien’s choice to set this story on the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance was a very intentional one. Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance were very aware of the racist depictions of the Black male body. They countered these dangerous narratives by collectively making an effort to intellectualize the Black man and separate him from his body to promote “racial uplift.”¹⁸ Isaac Julien’s approach is also trying to counter these racist depictions of the Black male body, but his

¹⁵ Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press, 1998.

¹⁶ Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press, 1998.

¹⁷ Shin, Chi-Yun. “Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in ‘Looking for Langston.’” *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

¹⁸ Shin, Chi-Yun. “Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in ‘Looking for Langston.’” *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

approach embodies a different kind of justice, he chooses to deny intellectualization and refocus on the body as an object of desire. This is his reclaiming of the Black queer male body. With this choice, he infers that justice is not in the intellectualization of Black men but in their own relationship to their own bodies and each others. The intellectualization of the Black man during the Harlem Renaissance was very reactionary, whereas Isaac Julien's response is to choose his own definition of justice. Julien often expresses that Black queer filmmaking is creating justice for your own audience, and not for the oppressor.¹⁹ Instead of being consumed with defending livelihood, Julien takes no part in the battle, and simply validates his beauty. Julien includes music by Blackberri in the film, with the lyrics: "You're such a beautiful black man who somehow has been made to feel that your beauty's not real."²⁰

Another way that Julien re-discovers this beauty is in the setting of the imaginary Harlem Renaissance nightclub scenes. These scenes are where men, including Langston Hughes, are shown interacting and dancing with other men. Julien's cinematography focuses mainly in these scenes on the act of looking.²¹ The first shot is Hughes sitting at the bar observing the men around him. (Figure 1) His eye quickly catches another Black man who is sitting and engaging in conversation with a white man. The camera emphasizes here that the sitting Black man is the object of desire. After they exchange some looks, the white man begins to notice their gazes and re-positions himself to separate their attention from each other. The following scene is a dream sequence of Langston Hughes running through the fields to meet his lover, named Beauty. Langston is wearing a full suit and Beauty, his object of desire and gaze, is completely naked.

¹⁹ Shin, Chi-Yun. "Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in 'Looking for Langston.'" *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

²⁰ Shin, Chi-Yun. "Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in 'Looking for Langston.'" *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

²¹ Shin, Chi-Yun. "Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in 'Looking for Langston.'" *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

The camera is angled so that Beauty's rear end is the focus of the shot. Quickly behind we see Langston staring directly at his genital area. After Langston meets Beauty, the next camera shots are mostly of their lips and intimate facial features, emphasizing the focal points of their interaction. The two then kiss each other, with the camera showing this moment of embrace close-up. The second dream sequence is of Beauty and Langston in bed with one another. Their bodies are wrapped into each other as they sleep. (Figure 2) The camera pans horizontally to show them fully naked and embracing. Julien holds this shot for a second, accentuating the sensual and soft nature of the Black queer embrace and bodily relationship to one another. This moment is meant to be tender, innocent and vulnerable. This scene specifically has been noted by Isaac Julien to disrupt the viewer's prior conceptions of Black men. Julien prides himself on creating an image that is so "antithetical to the way black maleness is represented in this culture"²² The scene ends with the narration: "He could feel Beauty's body close against his... his hot, tense and soft."

Not only does Isaac Julien choose to directly confront the intimacy of the Black male body, he always makes an intentional choice to set the body as the center of the gaze. Julien depicts the body as a source of pleasure, but not under the context of its commodification or fetishization.²³ The black body is seen as in relationship to the white colonial lens only in the scene where a white man is shown laying on the bed and paying a black man. Here, Julien is commenting on the intersectionality of desire and the importance of acknowledging racial consciousness in situations of desire. Julien wants to make it clear that white gay men's

²² Hooks, Bell, and Isaac Julien. "States of Desire." *Indiana University Press on Behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University*, 1991.

²³ Shin, Chi-Yun. "Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and the 'Racial' Mountain in 'Looking for Langston.'" *Edinburgh University Press*, 2003.

relationship to Black male bodies is not liberatory in the same sense that Black gay desire is reclaimed for themselves.

There is a strong relationship between desire and despair, as noted by Kobena Mercer in his writings about *Looking For Langston: Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film*. *Looking For Langston* is often evaluated alongside *Tongues Untied*, a film by Marlon Riggs that rose to prominence at a similar time. Mercer notes in his writing that although in the same canon, the two films have crucial differences in the depiction of the Black gay identity. While *Tongues United* and *Looking For Langston* both cover themes of representation and identity, *Tongues United* is considered documentary realism. Julien's creative approach is much more aligned with the depiction and value of desire and pleasure. *Looking For Langston* is intentionally fantasy-oriented. Julien's intentional decision to reappropriate history under the lens of a fantasy of desire is core to his sense of justice that he finds appropriate. This obviously comes before Adrienne Maree Brown's scholarship on body activism, but Julien's correlates strongly. Mercer notes that throughout the film there is a constant search for pleasure and fulfillment, that is often met with feelings of frustration. There are moments of fulfillment experienced in the characters of the film, but this fulfillment is never sustained as the scenes filled with despair are also dispersed in the film. The story jumps through time with narration from Black queer writers mourning their friends who have died from the AIDS crisis in the early nineties. The visual footage stays in the time of the Harlem Renaissance, and shows Black gay men meeting in darkness to engage in sexual activity. One narrator recites: "Love is a dangerous world, and those who find it die, and those who have it, keep it and protect it" Another narrator soon after recites: "What if this nut kills me?" Being as these grievances about love and loss are nearing the end of the story, Julien is trying to infer that this search for desire and love always

ends in loss for Black gay men. These grievances accompanied with scenes of Black men hiding in darkness to have sex indicates that there is always going to be scarcity and stigmatization of desire in the Black gay community.

This is interesting to view under the lens of Adrienne Maree Brown's concepts of pleasure abundance vs. pleasure scarcity. Brown asserts early on in *Pleasure Activism* that marginalized communities have an unhealthy relationship to pleasure due to desirability and body politics. Julien tries to accentuate and visually portray an environment of abundant desire, while also acknowledging the reasons why Black queer men experience a state of pleasure scarcity. Isaac Julien's approach to social change mimic Adrienne Maree Brown's resources for justice. Those being: experience of pleasure and a reclamation of the body. *Looking For Langston* ends with a police raid of the imaginary nightclub, once the police finally enter the main room, all of the dancers are gone. The meaning of this ending varies from scholar to scholar, but I interpreted it to mean that Black queer desire will always be hidden and mobilized to alternate spaces if need be. These desires for abundant justice will continue moving and hidden until they are fulfilled. In historicizing Black queer desire, Julien brings an abundance of Black queer history to light.

Daniel Obasi

Daniel Obasi is a Nigerian-born art director, stylist and photographer. He works mainly out of Lagos. Obasi's work is mainly focused on changing the narratives about Africa. He draws a lot of inspiration from the city of Lagos itself, and produces art as an ode to his home.²⁴ He started off studying at the University of Lagos, where he began working as a freelance artist and writer for Fashion Buisness Africa. After his introduction to the fashion world, he became increasingly interested in fashion photography and fashion filmmaking. Obasi has said: "I embraced photography out of necessity -- because there weren't a lot of photographers in Lagos who could shoot the way I wanted to present an image. Same with filmmaking. I always liked the idea of experimentation and I also noticed that the kind of visuals I was trying to create weren't really popular. It wasn't something I could explain to a director and they won't get it, so I was like fuck it, I'll direct it myself."²⁵ Obasi finds that he has a special artistic responsibility. Visual and artistic agency is at the center of his practice. He finds that he must define his own identity on his own terms. This kind of art is a process of self-discovery and takes experimentation. Obasi has also said: "When it comes to world-building, I always like the idea of existing in a time loop where you're drawing inspiration from the past, present and future -- something that some people may refer to as Afrofuturism. We live in a society that's toxic, evil, very judgemental. The worlds I am imagining touch upon these problems but come from a place of no judgement -- it's a place where one can reflect on politics without being afraid of speaking

²⁴ Rasool, Amira. "Daniel Obasi's Fashion Film Explores Being 'Alien' in Nigeria." *I*, 6 Feb. 2018, [i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/59kp8n/daniel-obasi-fashion-film-explores-being-alien-in-nigeria](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59kp8n/daniel-obasi-fashion-film-explores-being-alien-in-nigeria).

²⁵ Rasool, Amira. "Daniel Obasi's Fashion Film Explores Being 'Alien' in Nigeria." *I*, 6 Feb. 2018, [i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/59kp8n/daniel-obasi-fashion-film-explores-being-alien-in-nigeria](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59kp8n/daniel-obasi-fashion-film-explores-being-alien-in-nigeria)

up; a place you can reflect on sexuality without being afraid of being judged; a place you can talk about gender roles without conforming; a place women are powerful and men can be vulnerable. I try to elevate the position of the oppressed and create the visual scape that allows you to be free to exist.”²⁶ Obasi is more concerned with the idea of fantasy to enact change, which is why he creates these spaces that lack time and context. Obasi has done shot portraits for The New York Times, Billboard Magazine, Dazed Magazine and styled fashion editorials for Vogue Portugal.²⁷ Obasi was also scouted to work on Beyonce’s visual album *Black is King*. The visual album was styled to accenuate and bring out the beauty of Black ancenstry. Obasi was scouted because of the creative vision to create an Afrofuturist world in which Blackness is supreme. Afrofuturism is one of Obasi’s specialities. He works primarily with both Afrofuturism and old cinema.²⁸ He focuses mainly on themes of masculinity and sexuality. Obasi’s avenue for justice is an art practice that is mostly undiscovered and under-rated: fashion filmography.²⁹ Obasi has made three major fashion films: *Embers of Bloom*, *Illegal* and *Alien in Town*. These films use striking visuals to create other worlds. Obasi’s practice in the artistic directing of these projects is similar to Adrienne Maree Brown’s approach to social change. Both thinker’s work under the framework of creating a world that is pleasing and acceptable to oneself.

An Alien in Town is Daniel Obasi’s 2018 Afrofuturist film. The film was shortlisted for Fashion Film Festival Milano, Bucharest Fashion Film Festival and shown at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. Obasi’s film was made as an homage to old African cinematic aesthetic.³⁰ Obasi achieved this look through a

²⁶ Rasool, Amira. “Daniel Obasi’s Fashion Film Explores Being ‘Alien’ in Nigeria.” *J*, 6 Feb. 2018, i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/59kp8n/daniel-obasis-fashion-film-explores-being-alien-in-nigeria

²⁷ Alleyne, Allyssia. “How Beyoncé-Approved Stylist Daniel Obasi Is Using Fashion to Create Limitless Futures.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 Sept. 2020, www.cnn.com/style/article/daniel-obasi-nigerian-stylist-wcs/index.html.

²⁸ “Home.” *Daniel Obasi*, www.danielobasi.com/.

²⁹ Afrosartorialism. *Afrosartorialism*, 27 Nov. 2018, www.afrosartorialism.net/tag/daniel-obasi/.

³⁰ “Daniel Obasi.” *ZeitZ MOCAA*, zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/daniel-obasi/.

collaboration with the fashion brand Vlisco&Co. The film opens with broad African natural landscapes. The landscape is mostly a highly saturated orange desert, with some occasional trees. It seems to be a desert. The camera soon catches the eye of a well-dressed couple riding a motorcycle through the rugged terrain. Then the film's third character takes the screen, with a wide-angled shot zooming into a completely blue covered figure turning its body towards the camera. As soon as the figure appears on the screen, a still of a galaxy is flashed before the screen. These juxtaposed stills of the galaxy are placed in to signify that the figure is an alien. Obasi then gets closer showing a silhouetted figure. Suddenly, it is now darker. Signifying a change of time, without a change of location. The couple on the motorcycle approaches the blue figure. Here, Obasi begins to use short clips to signify rapid time movement. Suddenly, the blue figure is on the ground, and the couple is concerned, trying their best to see if the alien is alive. The scene cuts to an argument between the couple in a home, with the blue alien waking up and rising out of a bed. The alien is curious about its own hands, and becomes more curious as it explores objects around the house, such as books and television. It is still unclear where the alien actually is. The next scene shows the alien getting a wig applied to its head in a hair salon. It appears that the couple has taken the alien to this hair salon, and then, the couple takes the alien to dinner.

At dinner, the couple teaches the alien how to eat properly. The next scene features the three characters standing in the city casually. The couple is arguing, and the alien sneaks off due to interest in a mannequin body. The alien poses similarly next to the mannequin body and turns towards the camera. The next scene shows the woman from the couple sewing a garment, and then, the alien wearing said garment while the man takes photographs. It is a seemingly professional event as the alien is posed in front of a backdrop and the man uses a stylistic

camera. Here, Obasi focuses his shots on the man directing the alien to move and turn certain ways for the camera. The alien follows directions. The alien switches from making direct eye contact with the man's camera and Obasi's camera. The next scene shows a dark room, with red light. A figure seems to be developing the previously taken photographs. It is unclear who this new figure is. The figure begins to stare into the camera. The next scene shows a sequence of photographs being taken by different models. The alien is one of two other figures who are being photographed. The two other figures appeared suddenly as well, having no introduction. Then, the camera cuts to the same scene we saw in the beginning of the film where the alien stands in the desert landscape. After seeing the story unfold, it is now clear that full blue outfit signifies that the alien is supposed to be naked. The alien stares into the camera again as the shot zooms slowly into the character's face. The film ends.

Daniel Obasi takes his own twist on the concept of Afrofuturism with his film *An Alien In Town*. The term afrofuturism is originally used to define a sector of African-American science fiction. Today this term can be also used to define categories of literature, music, and visual art. This category includes a recreation of the African-American identity under a futuristic context. The central figures of afrofuturism are usually considered Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany and Sun Ra. All of their work includes Black people living in futuristic worlds, or portrayed with futuristic abilities. This genre's social justice initiative is to convey Black people as inherently magical and powerful. Obasi builds on this genre with the alien character. The alien character is initially dressed in an all blue body-suit, with a bald head and blue socks. The alien wears some kind of wired futuristic headwear to signify that it is from elsewhere. Throughout the film, there is no dialogue. Obasi uses fashion in this film to express identity, as the couple wears looks by Nigerian designers Tokyo James and Abiola Olusola. The alien initially appears genderless, until

the alien becomes a fashion model. However, after the alien wears the fashionable garments, Obasi chooses still to place the alien in gender-less clothes.

With the concept of an alien, Obasi tells the story of how the Black queer unique creative process finds light and expression in the world. The alien starts off in the film being very confused by its surroundings, signifying how Black queerness can feel as if you are an outsider to everything around you. The alien begins to adjust slowly to the world of the couple, following the rules. Then, the alien begins to truly thrive and step into its power when it finds the mannequin and looks into the camera. The alien spent most of the film's time beforehand being very disoriented from its surroundings, but at this moment, the alien is very self-assured. It is the first time the alien stares directly into the camera. From this point, the alien finds its "true calling". The scene directly after shows the alien sporting high fashion Nigerian garments. The alien is also very confident looking into both cameras at the point, the photographer's camera and the film's camera. Obasi uses this story to comment on the power that the Black queer creative vision has, and that the uniqueness that is felt on the day-to-day basis can be utilized to imagine difference. This is very similar to the definition of a Pleasure Activist. The alien finds the most pleasing experience and facet of life to fulfill themselves, and eventually ends up being able to perform difference to other people through being broadcasted by the fashion magazine. The alien finds its home where it is. At the end of the film, the alien returns to the initial space in which the film opens, the desert. Obasi includes this short clip to signify that the alien's fulfillment toward a creative and pleasurable purpose has not changed its nature. The alien is still exactly who they are. This aligns itself very well with Adrienne Maree Brown's idea of abundant pleasure.³¹ Adrienne Maree Brown would say that Obasi's story is one of chasing the

³¹ Brown, Adrienne M. *Pleasure Activism: the Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press, 2019.

deepest Black queer pleasure that lies within oneself, and not sacrificing any part of that pleasure for anything. Only in this process can the prospect of difference be seriously re-imagined.

Daniel Obasi is working under the context of his Nigerian conception of sexuality and gender. In Nigeria, hyper-masculinity is praised and anything veering from that normalcy is frowned upon. In 2014, Nigeria's former president, Goodluck Jonathan, signed into law the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Bill, banning all same sex couples from getting married. The law does not stop at just married though. The Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Bill forbids any "cohabitation between same-sex sexual partners and bans any 'public shows of same sex amorous relationship'"³² The law also promises to enact a 10-year prison sentence on anyone who participates in queer organization or "supports" the activities of such organizations. It is safe to say that love, creativity, expression and ultimately, pleasure, are at odds for queer people in Nigeria.

There has been backlash against this oppression, including the Nasty Boy magazine, which provides a safe space for queer people to discuss anti-gay discrimination.³³ Obasi has said: "We live in a society that's toxic, evil, very judgemental. The worlds I am imagining touch upon these problems but come from a place of no judgement -- it's a place where one can reflect on politics without being afraid of speaking up; a place you can reflect on sexuality without being afraid of being judged; a place you can talk about gender roles without conforming; a place women are powerful and men can be vulnerable. I try to elevate the position of the oppressed and create the visual scape that allows you to be free to exist."³⁴ In the context of such a direct oppression against your own sexuality, the only tool many people have in order to organize is

³² "Tell Me Where I Can Be Safe." *Human Rights Watch*, 6 June 2017, www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/tell-me-where-i-can-be-safe/impact-nigerias-same-sex-marriage-prohibition-act.

³³ Akuson, Richard. "Nigeria Is a Cold-Blooded Country for Gay Men -- I Have the Scars to Prove It." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 17 Apr. 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/04/17/opinions/nigeria-opinion-lgbt-attack/index.html.

³⁴ Laketu, Adedayo. "Lagos Creative Daniel Obasi Is Becoming His Own Muse in Isolation." *I*, 14 May 2020, i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/9355qp/daniel-obasi-interview-lagos.

their imaginations. Artists like Obasi are taking the creative responsibility of manifesting a world in which their pleasure are completely fulfilled. This work is invaluable as it extends and inspires following generations to remember their sacred queer power. One way that Obasi manifests his pleasures as completely fulfilled is through seeing himself in the art. This is very much in line with Adrienne Maree Brown's idea of pleasure abundance. Brown states that a pleasure activist must completely indulge in the idea of this abundance being theirs. Obasi commented on this and his relationship to free time: "I guess the only positive thing would be that it has given me a little bit more time for myself. I have always enjoyed being a muse and with the past year spent on working on different projects got some free time to perform in front my camera."³⁵ Obasi has become his own muse in his free time. He uses his own body and identity to imagine himself in a free expressing and pleasing context. Obasi takes artistic agency to prevail and create a world in which Black queerness is pleased, satisfied, and safe.

³⁵ Laketu, Adedayo. "Lagos Creative Daniel Obasi Is Becoming His Own Muse in Isolation." *I*, 14 May 2020, i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/9355qp/daniel-obasi-interview-lagos.

Clifford Prince King

Clifford Prince King is a photographer based in Los Angeles who produces work on the themes of Black queer desire. He actually draws inspiration from artists like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Marlon Riggs. His two major exhibitions, *While Night Comes On* and *Colors So True*, allow King to express his relationship to his own pleasure and desire. King first became artistically inclined when he began organizing and archiving his family photos. From a young age, he was very interested in visuals, both in photography and film.³⁶ His intention, in creating images, is to present black queerness in a modern fashion with a taste from the past. His work has been described as exuding an “aesthetic of comfort.”³⁷ His subjects are shown in cozy spaces, engaging in intimate physical expression. Often, the subjects are also shirtless. King has said: “My photographs show Black people in an everyday setting, in the way we see ourselves”³⁸ The majority of his work shows black men being intimate with themselves and others. For King, this process is not only of capturing image, but collecting them.³⁹ In this process of archiving, King becomes liberated in abundance of representation, personal intimacy and personal comfort.

In *Colors So True*, King samples from a piece by Sydney Haliburton, a queer black writer based in Chicago. The introductory text speaks specifically to King’s creative process as an art of “archiving”. This process of archiving is in the collection of photographs to ultimately create a visual diary of desire. King aims to answer visual questions that Black queer men have about

³⁶ Gifford, Ashley. “Clifford Prince King.” *Art & About*, Art & About, 13 July 2018, www.artandaboutpdx.com/blog/artist-interview-clifford-prince-king.

³⁷ “Clifford Prince King: Want 2 Love U.” *The Editorial Magazine*, 18 June 2020, the-editorialmagazine.com/clifford-prince-king-want-2-love-u/.

³⁸ “Clifford Prince King: Want 2 Love U.” *The Editorial Magazine*, 18 June 2020, the-editorialmagazine.com/clifford-prince-king-want-2-love-u/.

³⁹ Bliss, Aidan. “Clifford Prince King - AINT-BAD.” *AINT*, 3 Mar. 2018, www.aint-bad.com/article/2018/03/03/clifford-prince-king/.

their own bodies and others, showing moments of intimacy that are usually hidden, and bringing them to the forefront. Also, he does the job of romanticizing these relationships because they usually are not in the media. In this exhibition, black skin is contrasted with white milk, notions of fatherhood are made very tender and vulnerable and there is no sense of shame or insecurity in the images. King does the work of creating a unveiling a beautiful reality in which Black queer men are able to exist in an emotionally gratifying, intense and comfortable way. Hailburton states: “It is in the layering of spaces that King’s work is not simply an act of archiving; it is a part of a collective world making, of sustaining and imagining black queer existence defined by the lived experience of those who are black and queer.” This notion of world-making is one that is quite frequent in queer activists of late, and takes multiple forms in Adrienne Maree Brown’s work as well.

In *While Night Comes On*, the photographs follow similar themes. They reframe the stereotypes found in black queer communities. King does this by creating beautiful images that are found within his own experiences. King has said: “I’ve had my chance to anatomise and live deeply in this work. It’s time to share, pass along, and give the opportunity for the images to mean something for someone else.”⁴⁰ This process produces a pleasure abundance not only for King, but for all of those who encounter his work. Aperture Magazine featured King’s most notable work in a piece titled “Clifford Prince King’s Intimate Photographs of Black Queer Men”. “Safe Space” is a piece from June 2020 that was included at the forefront of the issue. The photograph shows three black men in bed. One is sitting off of the bed reading and getting his hair twisted. Another subject is braiding his hair, leaning over slightly to smoke from the third subject’s hand, who is sprawled out on the bed. All of the subjects are shirtless, only wearing

⁴⁰ Dazed. “Clifford Prince King Photographs the Highs and Lows of Black Male Desire.” *Dazed*, 25 Sept. 2020, www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/50534/1/clifford-prince-king-photographs-when-night-comes-on-gen-tly-black-male-desire.

pants. The subject doing the hairbraiding is wearing a hat. They all appear focused on their task, while still fully present with one another. This implies a sense of comfort and casualty, suggesting that this intimate moment happens often. The hair supplies on the floor are also a marker of the Black community. The hairdressers are using Eco Gel, iconically known for laying edges. The intimacy of this photograph is tangible because of their very physical closeness with one another. The intersection of action is similar to that of symbiotic relationships found in nature. There is action, but the mellow experience of the photograph implies that this moment is wordless.⁴¹ Aperture Magazine also states that: “His photography becomes about communion and belonging, rather than something forced. ‘Obviously I want people to feel good about themselves if they’re photographed, but the point isn’t body or beauty, it’s more just about the presence of them being their real selves.’ Settings aren’t necessarily pristine.”⁴² This photograph is about comfort and belonging in community with others. The viewer is left with a very tangible feeling of wholeness.

Run Along Home (2020) was also featured in Aperture Magazine. *Run Along Home* features two subjects who seem to be holding hands running down the street towards the sun. The sun seems to be setting. One subject is holding grocery bag in their hand and the other is holding a water bottle. The photograph is set in Los Angeles, so although both subjects seem to be wearing coats, their gleeful manner still comes across clearly in the photograph. It seems as if this moment is one of escape or freedom. Under the context of King’s other work, it is safe to assume that this couple is either escaping homophobia or finding freedom to express their love to one another. The magazine feature stated: “You can’t attach a particular historical moment to

⁴¹ “Clifford Prince King's Intimate Photographs of Black Queer Men.” *Aperture*, 11 Sept. 2020, aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/.

⁴² “Clifford Prince King's Intimate Photographs of Black Queer Men.” *Aperture*, 11 Sept. 2020, aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/.

Run Along Home(2020), an image of mad abandon, one that evokes not only the Southern adage of getting home before the ‘streetlights turn on,’ but also the joy of escaping to one’s home and being alone with a lover.”⁴³ King’s work is meant to have an everlasting effect. King finds power in these gleeful universal moments, which is the reason he chooses to capture this moment. It is an intentional choice to convey freedom and not confinement. This photograph adds to the abundance of satisfaction that King’s work enhances. King has been noted in doing this in conjunction with artists like: Deana Lawson, D’Angelo Lovell Williams, Paul Mpagi Sepuya.⁴⁴ This photograph does the work of changing the visual collection of Black queer images, making their representation not about their struggle, but about their satisfaction.

King’s work of archiving and collected images serves as a safe space in which he can find an abundant resource of visibility and pleasure. With portrayals of white heteronormative love being very rampant, it is important to find home base in which you feel that you are seen and heard. This process that King undergoes is one that leads to an eventual healing abundance.

⁴³ “Clifford Prince King's Intimate Photographs of Black Queer Men.” *Aperture*, 11 Sept. 2020, [aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/](https://www.aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/).

⁴⁴ “Clifford Prince King's Intimate Photographs of Black Queer Men.” *Aperture*, 11 Sept. 2020, [aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/](https://www.aperture.org/featured/clifford-prince-kings-intimate-photographs-black-queer-men/).

Conclusion

What does this mean for human rights? The work of these three artists is a work of internal and immediate empowerment that can be experienced by Black queer people in the daily lives. This approach to justice, very much in line with Adrienne Maree Brown's, creates greater self-empowerment, whether or not basic human rights are being met. In doing so, Black queer people are defined not by their struggle, but by their moments of positive affirmation of fulfillment. In historicizing Black queer desire, Isaac Julien brought an abundance of Black queer history to light. This history, Julien notes in his film, is abundantly and perpetually present. Obasi takes artistic agency to prevail and create a world in which Black queerness is pleased, satisfied, and safe. The manifestation of such a world is in itself, inspiring to activists and other Black queer people. So often Black queer people are defined by their struggle, and Obasi gives light to the positive forms of uniqueness, giving way to progress and allowing for human rights to be defined differently. For Obasi, human rights would be abundance of safe space and abundance of individuality. King's work of archiving and collected images serves as a safe space in which he can find an abundant resource of visibility and pleasure. These collections can be shared and exchanged in communities. With portrayals of white heteronormative love being very rampant, it is important to find home base in which you feel that you are seen and heard. This process that King undergoes is one that leads to an eventual healing abundance. This form of activism occurs within relationships and inside the home. Reclamation of identity and self does not have to take the form of conflict. Black queer people do not have to fight if they are tired. Black queer people deserve to live outside of their oppression.

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Stills



Figure 1: Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*



Figure 2: Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*