Playing it Cool: Black Masculinity Performance

An essay by Heriberto "Eddie" Palacio III

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People are drawn to the power of the cool black male because he epitomizes control, strength, and pride. He presents a mysterious challenge. He is charismatic, suave, debonair, and entertaining (Majors and Billson 2).

African American men are famous for our award-winning performances from powerful acting by Lakeith Stanfield, hilarious comedic star specials from Eddie Murphy, to the spiritually uplifting lyrics of Kendrick Lamar; Black men famously demonstrate our ability to perform, entertain, and solidify ourselves into the fame of American society. On a more commonly experienced scale, the average African American man wakes up every morning and prepares for the performance of his life–it, literally, is his life. Black men star in their own live theatre drama and the stage is set "as a Black performer leaves his house in the morning, he is 'on' and cannot ever completely relax" (Majors and Billson 4). The performance of being both Black and masculine identifying in America is a full-time job with ill-compensated overtime. It requires a complex skill-set and entangled elements of social cues, various attitudes, patterns of speech, and facial expressions to name an important few. An umbrella term houses these various elements—*cool pose*—which I argue is a major component of this complex behavior and is due its fair discourse that extends beyond Black masculine communities.

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Per scholars Richard Majors and Janet M. Billson—"Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control" (Majors and Billson 4). It is a defense mechanism (instilled from youth) utilized by African American men to render ourselves visible within American society and provide a sense of control to a population that is desperately clinging to social (and

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literal) survival. It is a social condition "constructed from the attitudes and actions that become firmly entrenched in the black male's psyche as he adopts a facade to ward off the anxiety of second-class status" (Majors and Billson 5). When the headlines focus on Black males "the message is usually that they have managed to stay stuck, that as a group they have not evolved with the times" (hooks ix). It is important to discuss the cool pose because this hardened persona of cool has stifled the social and emotional development of African American men. Black masculinity's central defensive policy of cool behaviors are to mask and protect Black masculine peoples from the harsh social environment of American cultural systems. However, this protection is also a prison. These masked defense mechanisms continually reinforce the status quo of white supremacy: "It is the ultimate drug that keeps black men addicted to the status quo and in their place" (hooks 153). African American men have struggled to overcome the conditions of the cool pose performance and it is bringing harm to ourselves and those around us. New expressions of Black masculinity must be allowed empathetic social space to be considered and allowed social space to develop and aid in healing the ongoing damage of this suicidal performance.

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African American Studies scholar Dr. Serie McDougal III specifically focuses in Black men's studies and defines Black men's studies as "the systemic, culturally and historically grounded study of the lives of Black men and boys for exploring, describing, explaining and advancing Black communities" (2020, p. xviii). He cautions scholars interested in studying Black males to be self-reflective and consider the following:

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(1) be prepared to explain how their research might benefit Black males and the Black community; (2) examine whether or not they are conducting research for money, status, or privilege, and how that might affect the validity of their research; (3) be aware of the intersectionality of race, class, sex, and gender in their research; (4) be aware of the history of research with African American men and their legitimate concerns, and; (5) identify their own preconceptions about Black males. (McDougal, 2020, p. xviii)

I share in Dr. McDougal's concerns of Black male research by echoing his self-reflective points and have written this paper with them in mind.

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For the sake of this essay, Black shall be used interchangeably with African American although it is understood that they're not inherently the same. This is to accommodate the view of African Americans through U.S. social standards that have been constructed to refer to a person of color in America as Black. It is my belief that Black masculinity is not limited to cis gendered men and is an energy that is also accessed by transmen, women of color, and non-binary peoples. Thus, I may also refer to Black men as Black masculine identifying peoples to demonstrate this inclusive belief. It must be made clear that when I state "Black masculinity" that this is not a blanket term that can be applied to all Black masculine peoples and does not account for the experienced nuance of their lives. I am identifying the intersection of both Blackness and masculinity in a U.S. context but, for the sake of coherence, I use Black masculinity as a shorthand term with this understanding in mind. The phrase American society is used as a reference to the complex systemic cultural beliefs, attitudes, economic, social, political, and structural ecosystems of the United States. "By examining the tensions between the fragments, we might be in a better position to transform the larger structures of oppression that continue to exploit our differences and diversity as sources of division and despondency" (Mercer 154). Doing this work is an inevitably messy endeavor and by no means can we come to a clear solution and defined understanding that is universally applicable. As a Black scholar, I lean heavily on Black feminist methods and Womanist ideologies which allow me to sit with the tensions of ambiguity and address complex subject matter without sacrificing intentional empathy towards communities impacted for the sake of more objective scholarship. Most of all, I lean on my own personal experience as a Black queer man in American society and have found validity in my own lived experiences as a driving force to take a critical lens to this subject matter. By properly examining the fragments of these cool pose behaviors, we (American society) put ourselves in an ideal position to make change. For how can we make change if we are not willing to dive beneath the surface into the mess.

Even though it's long-since abolished, the damaging values remaining from the colonial slave era have mended themselves into the modern-day aesthetic and continue to evolve as a complex social phenomenon that takes aim at African American men. Patriarchal masculinity is a social construct that bends itself to be in favor of power: "Social definitions of what it is to be a man [. . .] are not natural but are historically constructed, and this construction is culturally variable" (Mercer 136). This means that culture dictates the societal traits of the social construct. It is with this logic that it can be argued that elements of Black masculinity were (and are currently) socially constructed to bend itself in favor of white supremacist values carried over from the colonial era. This becomes even more complicated because of conflicting values and racist attitudes by American society at large to Black Americans.

Black masculinity has very limited momentum in the Eurocentric-American value system. The traditional value system of most African cultures emphasizes "humanity's oneness with nature, spirituality, and collectivism" (Majors and Billson 111). These values were forced into a state of survival and reformation when African peoples were abducted from their homelands and enslaved in North America: "By emphasizing individualism and materialism, Eurocentric values fit neither African history nor the black experience in America " (Majors and Billson 111). This Eurocentric-American value system is a complete challenge to the African value system that has since been palimpsest, only to survive in the form of African American expressions and attitudes which some aspects as such has cultivated into cool pose (Majors and Billson).

It would be presumptuous to say that patriarchal masculinity (represented mostly by white men) had essentially erased and replaced African values with its own. Rather, Black masculinity practices had to adapt and survive the harsh social conditions of American society. Racial inequality did not (and still doesn't) allow Black men to live up to the values championed in patriarchal masculinity. Black masculine peoples in America are put on the same playing field, with more systemic setbacks that put us at a complete disadvantage in the patriarchal masculinity system with overrepresentation in criminal statistics on homicide and suicide and misrepresented in media as the personification of drugs, disease, and crime.

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This suggests that black masculinity is not merely a social identity in crisis. It is also a key site of the ideological representation upon which the nation's crisis comes to be dramatized, demonized, and dealt with (Mercer 160).

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This is only the surface of obstacles that Black men in America face in the white supremacy's so-called "fair game." This leaves us, as a group, angry, bitter, ostracized, and powerless. Whereas patriarchal masculinity has evolved into its own self-defined status and grapples with a different set of issues. Taking this into consideration, the masculinity cool behaviors of African American men are both socially constructed/deconstructed by the colonial European-American example of patriarchal masculinity and reformed by Black communities as a form of survival preservation under those standards. This is not to skew the importance of masculinity needing to be addressed as a whole for ALL men, but it is imperative to understand that there are complex intersectional relationships of American Blackness and masculine energy that constantly are reshaping this social construct to maintain the status quo of white supremacy—which inevitably impacts and implicates all of us at some point. After centuries of being subjected to an opposing value system, physical abduction, slavery, war, and ongoing racism, it can be inferred that Black masculinity cool behaviors have formed in defense of the Black male, but is a double-edged sword. In this dire situation within American society, as Black men, we defend ourselves and play it cool.

As stated earlier, Cool pose is a behavioral and mental defense mechanism that developed as a survival tactic for African American men. It is understood to be "a creative strategy devised by African-American males to counter the negative forces in their lives" (Majors and Billson 104). The Black community has always found ways to cope with racial oppression in America by turning the harm of meanings or situations to our own favor (as best we could).. Black masculinity cool pose performance, like any performance, is constructed (more so) for the audience rather than the performer.

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"Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black male himself that he is strong and proud. He is somebody. He is a survivor, in spite of the systematic harm done by the legacy of slavery and the realities of racial oppression, in spite of the centuries of hardship and mistrust" (Majors and Billson 5). This defensive performance is award-winning, yet it yields no true reward. The facade of cool behaviors are the cause of great generational pain regarding Black masculine peoples social and emotional development. This cool pose performance has become so subconsciously conditioned by the performer and audience that we believe it to be genuine expressions of Black masculinity and not the defense of a deep trauma linked to racial oppression. Even though it turns on with ease, it almost never turns off in risk of estranged vulnerability and a complete mental collapse. Black men in America are forced to focus on our masculine performance as a means of survival in a society that continues to neglect and attempts to eliminate us.

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Cool pose in itself reflects the traits that Black men lack due to racial oppression and lack of access: "Cool pose furnishes the black male with a sense of control, inner strength, balance, stability, confidence, and security" (Ibid). Recontextualizing cool pose to fit the reality faced by Black men in American society, Cool "coping" clutters the Black masculine mind with a false sense of control, a facade of inner strength, ill-perceived balance, fragile stability, harmful arrogance, and faulty security. I identify cool pose (mostly) as a coping mechanism that is harmful to African American men but is not easily disposed of: "As long as they experience discrimination (or there is a perception of discrimination), there will always be the need for coolness[…]Their minds have been their primary line of defense"" (Majors and Billson 116). It's the only place left for us to hold our ground. With disparities in Black masculine people's mental health on a constant rise—this place too shall soon be of no refuge. There is a lot of obvious criticism regarding Black men's use of cool behaviors, but American society has offered no alternative to this coping mechanism developed to survive social and emotional annihilation: Between adopting cool behaviors or accepting societal (and literal) erasure, we've continually been shown through

American society's response to more progressive masculine behaviors that we have no other choice but to play it cool, or at least die trying.

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There are cultural shifts that are attempting to gain traction in American culture, specifically in the Black community, that are pushing for Black men to challenge the crystalized condition of cool behaviors and pave ways to iterations that are no longer hardened defense mechanisms, but fruitful social and emotional development experiences. We are "beginning to seek new images of Blackness and masculinity that support us in a return to feeling, aliveness, and a connection to nature, our bodies, our children, women and other men" (Kipnis 11). The importance of oneness with nature and community is inferred as a possible pathway of salvation towards healthier Black masculine attributes: "Healthy black males in our society do not fall for the patriarchal hype. They attain emotional well-being by learning to love themselves and others" (hooks 157). Learning not to over romanticize Eurocentric-American values, Black masculine peoples can develop the responsibility to seek emotional, social, and economic self-sufficiency without focusing on compulsive domination and materialistic power.

Attempting to forge healthy iterations of Black masculinity in the current climate (which currently ranges from microaggressions to blatant racism) in American society is extremely difficult: "Striving for masculinity presents dilemmas for the black male because it is so often grounded in masking strategies that rest on the denial and suppression of deep feelings" (Majors and Billson 2). Black men must start opening up more about deeper feelings that we constantly are repressing to maintain the performance of cool. Unpacking the generations of emotional denial and repression is going to take a lot of work by not just Black men, but American society as well. The larger structures of American society do not support African American male emotional and social development. If Black men were to allow ourselves to be vulnerable in the current social climate, we wouldn't survive.

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Reassessing the fragments of Blackness and masculine energy, it is still possible to salvage some parts of cool pose behaviors. Although formed long ago as a defense mechanism, cool pose behaviors, if

utilized healthily, can be a creative and expressive form of masculinity that needs to be reoriented and allowed space to grow. Instead of using it to mask ourselves, we should utilize cool pose behaviors to be more expressive and honest with ourselves and others: "Many of us are struggling with the rapid pace of change in our society, while attempting to heal wounds incurred in pursuit of some masculine ideal that often has little to do with how we really feel or experience ourselves as men" (Kipnis 11). There is some movement in American society, but there will not be significant results until more investment is made from, not only from African American activists and scholars, but also the larger American society: We need more than just individual role models of a progressive Black masculinity and social media think pieces. "If we as a nation are going to make any serious attempts to understand black males, we must generate and support more research in this area" (Majors and Billson 109).

Black men have been dying on the stage for too long. The stage lights burn our skin and blind our eyes to the dark crowd of the spectators. This research is important for American society at large because the effects go beyond the Black masculine experience. The conditions faced by Black men affect all aspects of life for us as a group and our engagement in society, thus shaping and impacting society at large as well. There is not enough empathetically critical discussion about this subject matter and few are taking it seriously even though we entertain an absurd amount of performances by Black men daily for entertainment purposes. American society must continue to confront itself and its implication in Black masculinity construction. Thoughtful scholarship (as well as practical action following) has the power to continue the investment into true Black men's studies and foster generational healing and societal recognition among African American men. Racial discrimination has taken a toll on American society and has pushed us into a state of purgatory when it comes to addressing Black male issues. It is easier to push the conversation from "Black male issues" to "Black males ARE the issue." This white supremacist thinking has seeped into all aspects of American society, including the Black community, but there are communities that have begun to advocate for this conversation. This essay joins this discourse in an attempt to reveal truths and seek harmony. I believe organizations such as this conference group to be a part of this progressive movement. We need to properly (and empathetically) aid Black masculine peoples

in forming healthier iterations of masculinity engagement to exponentially move us forward in American society. We must not stop at awareness as scholars and practitioners, we must also take informed action.

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On a final note, I must share that what I have stated here is only.a fragment of the complexities of Black masculine experiences and I am in no way diminishing this to a simple demonizing of cool pose behaviors. In fact, cool pose is still an important part of the assemblage experience of both blackness and masculine energy in America society. What I have done here was dive into the mess and recovered a fragment—not to rebuild it to a larger whole of what it used to be. But to reorient it in hopes that we can see both its faults and value simultaneously to build something new, together. When we make peace with the inevitable messiness of this work, we may begin to forge the pathways to true communal harmony and healing. For once you find yourself, guide others to the rainbow with your light, Thank you for listening.

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